Social Education 61(1), 1997, pp. 22-27

Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance

Peter Seixas

What makes an event or character historically significant? Years ago, both historical monographs and school textbooks carried the message, implicitly, that historical significance lay with powerful white men and their decisions and activities. Today, answering the question is highly problematic.

Over the past thirty years, historians pursuing "the new history" have consciously undertaken a program of "redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance."[1] The activities of women, workers, the poor, and ethnic minorities, previously largely ignored by historians, now collectively command a major share of academic journal space and monograph publications. In part as a result of these developments, the concept of historical significance appears to be shifting and politically contested. Standards of significance apparently inhere not in the past itself, but in the interpretive frames and values of those who study it–ourselves.

Students confront their history classes with their own frameworks of historical understanding, gleaned from family stories, historical films, television fiction, commemorations, and, last and probably not least, their earlier school history experiences.[2] Students do not swallow whole what this year's teachers and textbooks tell them is historically significant. Rather, they filter and sift and remember and forget, adding to, modifying, and reconstructing their frameworks of understanding, through their own often unarticulated values, ideas, and dispositions. The outcome of this process may be seen as expressions of their own frameworks of historical significance.

This study represents a preliminary mapping of the terrain of students' understandings of historical significance. It addresses the following questions:

- Are there important differences in the ways that high school students approach the question of historical significance?
- Are some of their approaches better than others, and if so, by what criteria?
- How might such differences have implications for curriculum and instruction?

This research begins with the premise that we can neither dismiss nor ignore any student's framework of historical signficance. Rather, part of the pedagogical task is to help students expose their often partially submerged frameworks for orienting themselves in historical time. Our own understandings of their understandings can then become a starting point for history instruction.

The Research Exercise

The sample selected for this exploratory study included 82 students who volunteered from four Grade 11 social studies classes in four schools in an urban area in British Columbia, Canada. (Although I called for volunteers, in fact, no students present in school on the day of the research exercise declined to participate.) Classes were selected from schools offering strong contrasts with respect to social background.

The first public school, which I have called Wellington Secondary School, draws students from ethnically heterogeneous working class backgrounds. A private school (herein The Yarborough School for Girls) is for girls who pass a set of entrance examinations; tuition and fees run approximately $7,300 Canadian (or $5,600 U.S.) per year. The third school, called Triumph Alternative Program, is for students at risk of dropping out. The fourth, here called Chatford Secondary School, is a public school drawing students from predominantly middle and upper middle class neighbourhoods, and whose student body is predominantly of Chinese origin.

The British Columbia curriculum is set for all schools by the Provincial Ministry of Education. Of course, teaching practices and specific curricular foci vary from classroom to classroom. Grade 11 social studies is divided into three parts: Canadian government, global problems, and 20th century Canadian history.[3] All four classes were working on the history section of the course at the time of the study. The last extended, formal study of world history that these students had was in Grades 8 and one half of Grade 9, a chronological survey concentrating on Europe from the fall of Rome through the nineteenth century.

The design of this study prohibits any broad claims about how much of the Grade 11 students' frameworks resulted directly or indirectly from their school history experiences. Grade 11 was selected so that recent formal study of world history would not exercise a predominant impact on student responses. Rather, only those aspects of formal study which had been thoroughly integrated into the students' broader framework of historical understanding would be expressed in their responses.

The researcher administered a two-part questionnaire within the regular one-hour social studies class (see Box 1). The key section of Part I was a largely blank piece of paper on which students were to draw a diagram of the history of the world, choosing the most significant events, and ordering them "in a way which makes sense to you." At the bottom of the page, students responded to the prompts: "This is why I chose these events," and, "This is why I organized

Two-Part Student Questionnaire

Part I

On this page, create a diagram of the history of the world. Choose the most significant events. If there are important trends, developments or themes which extend over a number of years, also include them. Arrange these events, trends, developments and themes on the page in a way which makes sense to you. Where one event is connected to another event, or a theme or trend, draw lines or arrows showing the connection or influence.

[A blank page follows.]

This is why I chose these events:

This is why I organized them on the page in this way:

Part II

A. Put an X next to the events listed here that you have heard of before.

- ☐ Writing of the Bible
- ☐ Gupta dynasty in India
- ☐ Writing of the Koran
- ☐ The invention of movable type
- ☐ European exploration of the Americas
- ☐ Industrial revolution
- ☐ *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine
- ☐ French Revolution
- ☐ The end of slavery in the British Empire
- ☐ Development of the germ theory of disease
- ☐ The beginning of free public schools
- ☐ Canadian Confederation
- ☐ End of Manchu dynasty in China
- ☐ World War I
- ☐ World War II
- ☐ The dropping of the atomic bomb
- ☐ Widespread use of birth control
- ☐ Development of rock music
- ☐ Murder of John F. Kennedy
- ☐ The end of the Soviet Union

B. Of the ones you have marked with an X, which is most significant?

C. Why do you say it is most significant?

D. Of the ones you have marked with an X, which is least significant?

E. Why do you say it is least significant?

F. If someone wanted to argue that your answer to D is really the most significant, how might they do so?

G. How would you respond to their argument?

H. Is there an event which is not on this list which you think is very significant for world history? If so, what is it, and why do you think it should be on the list?

Box 1. Two-Part Student Questionnaire

them on the page in this way." By posing the question of historical significance in extremely broad and open terms, students had to make choices from their entire knowledge of world history. After completing this diagram, students handed it in and were given Part II, which included questions about a fixed list of events. Responses to Part II provided an opportunity for comparison with the open-ended question of Part I.[4]

Student Frameworks of Historical Significance

I began the analysis of students' diagrams by using the criteria of regional (or geographic) scope, temporal scope, thematic scope, and overall coherence. While these criteria provided an initial description of the diagrams, they also uncovered a far more potent theoretical concern: how students integrated their "personal" interests with the broad sweep of world history. It is possible to distinguish between those students whose expressions of personal interests dominate, and those whose expressions of personal interests and particular social location apparently disappear in their assessments of world historical significance. In a cautious (and not entirely lexically correct) way, we might call the former a "subjectivist" orientation and the latter "objectivist."[5] Within each orientation, there are more and less sophisticated variations. There was, moreover, a small group of students whose responses transcended this dichotomy.

Marco

Marco, a student at Wellington, was born in Canada to Italian-born parents. His diagram showed a linear sequence of ten major events and eras, from "dinosaurs" through World War II. He chose these events because, "to the best of my knowledge these are the most memorable events that I learned through Grades 6-11." He thus explicitly limited the events that he chose to the school curriculum history and organized them "just in chronological order." His matter-of-fact rationale suggested that he saw few alternatives and made few conscious choices in the events he recorded.

In his response to the omissions from the fixed list in Part II, Marco suggested that the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Grand Trunk Railway (Canada) should have been included because the railroad "brought economic prosperity and was used in the war for transporting people." Both railways figure largely in the curriculum to which he was exposed in the previous year. While they had considerable importance in Canadian history, they would need a more elaborate rationale to be included as among the most significant events in world history.

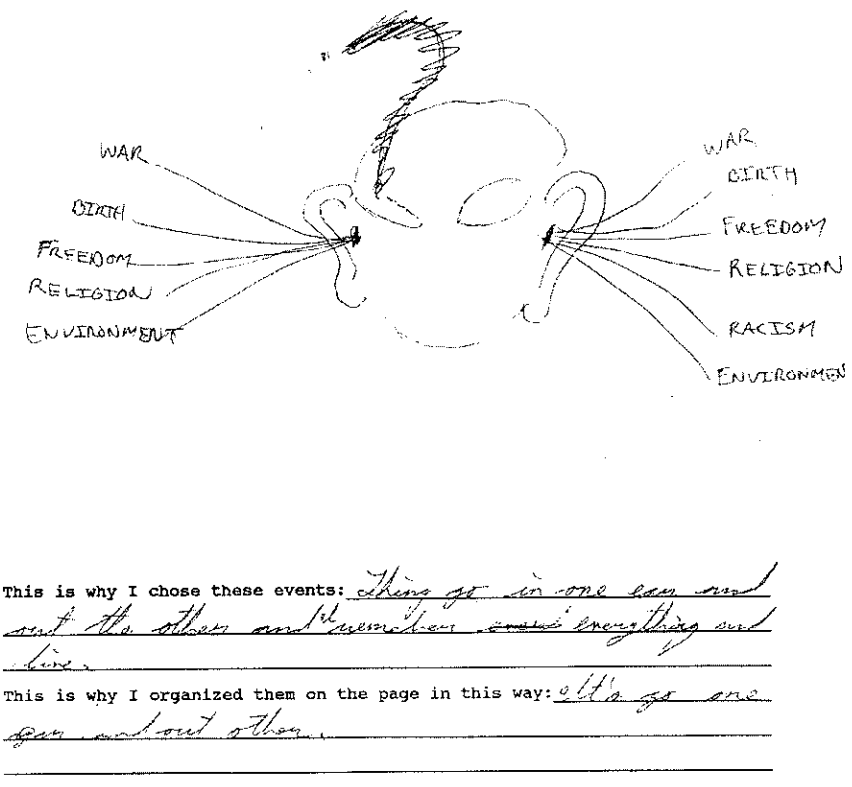
A strong religious current ran through his other answers. A biblical interpretation of the past might have posed a challenge to what he encountered in school history, but not apparently for him. The writing of the Bible was "the most significant" from the fixed list: "I choose this because all my life I was taught to respect the Bible and I even learned from the Bible. It is the only communication to God." In fact, the way he reasoned about the historical significance of the Bible, and the way he wrote about historical significance from the school curriculum, had a lot in common. In both realms, the assignment of historical significance comes straight from authorities saying what is significant.

Marco's responses are typical of those students who see "official" history unproblematically as the significant history. Significance is defined by authoritative others (teachers, textbooks, historians), and historical knowledge is received. Why, this student might ask, would a teacher try to teach me insignificant history? Students who know too little about the past to choose more and less significant events responded similarly. When asked for their reasons, these students offered variations of "this is the way it happened," "this is all I remember," "this is what I learned." Though someone must make an active choice in assigning historical significance, they take their cues from outside authorities. This is the basic "objectivist" position.

Richie

Triumph's Richie was born in France to a Canadian mother and French father. His parents separated and maintain two households. From the fixed list, he chose the development of rock music as the most significant. His reason for choosing it was "because without it I would not be what I want to be. It is the expression of your feelings into music." He made no effort to relate the development of rock music to people other than himself, much less other world-historical issues. Consistent with this radical subjectivism, he argued for the inclusion of his own birth on the list of the most significant events because "things that I have done or going to do is going to have a significant way in which someone thinks and does things [sic]."

Richie's open diagram (see Box 2) was a head with the words "war, birth, freedom, religion and environment" joined by lines to one ear, and the same terms, with the addition of "racism," attached to the other ear. His explanation: "thing [sic] go in one ear and out the other and I remember everything and live." While he chose some larger issues here, his own head was located at the center of the diagram and provided the self-conscious filter for all of the concepts, none of which was shown in relation to chronological development or world-



Box 2. Richie's Open Diagram

historical events. Each item was related only to him, the sole knower, consistent with his radical subjectivism.

Generalizing from Richie's stance, we can see other students whose responses tend toward an uncritical conflation of personal interest and signficance. Anything which interests the student is significant. In this most basic "subjectivist" approach to historical significance, the student might see the history of hockey as significant because he likes sports. The history of religion is not significant because she is not interested in it.

Despite their problems, both Marco's and Richie's approaches might provide the foundations for more advanced historical understandings. While Marco's exaggerated trust in historical authorities is problematic, some reliance on authority is necessary in order to learn about history. And while personal interest is inadequate for defining historical significance, the attempt to relate one's own situation to what one understands of the past is a crucial first step in constructing historical meaning.

Cindy

Cindy was born in Canada to Canadian parents and attended Yarborough. Her answers were deliberative and qualified. Unlike Marco, she used the impact of particular events to guide an assessment of historical significance, rather than rely on the assignment of significance by authorities. From the fixed list, she chose the invention of movable type and commented:

> I wouldn't ordinarily pick an invention from a list of things as a significant cultural thing in terms of all of history, I would ordinarily site [sic] the emergence of a new religion or something, but I can't choose one religion over another, and moveable type has entirely revolutionized the speed, range, efficiency with which we are able to communicate. It has changed the world. So many more things are possible with increased communication.

Judging rock music to be least significant, she again looked for broad historical impact: "I like it, but. . . I doubt it will have any longlasting effects on anything." On the question which asked her to add to the fixed list of significant items, she wrote:

> I think that the very first humans who developed ideas about life after death or spirits or gods or whatever was a monumental development in human history. I myself am not religious, but these concepts are what differentiate our minds from animals'. From these first rudimentary beliefs, all of the religions in the world were eventually developped and they have deffinately been very influential on the way the world developped. [spelling sic]

Continuing with the crude vocabulary of "objectivist" and "subjectivist," Cindy's position is a sophisticated "objectivist" position. Unlike Marco, her criterion for significance–the events which affect the most people over the longest period of time–put her in a position to make judgments herself about what is or is not significant, and to do so on a basis other than the *dicta* of authorities. Cindy and those who thought like her maintained conceptions of significance oriented around what Charles Tilly has called "big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons."[6] This conception represents a considerable advance over Marco's version of "objectivism," but provides no clear rationale for what big topics to study. Similarly, subaltern groups who have been excluded from making decisions affecting large numbers of people may remain (though not necessarily) in the margins in a history framed in this way.

Like most students in the sample, however, Cindy was not entirely consistent. Despite all of her "objective" reasoning on the questions on the fixed list, her response to the question on the open diagram conflated interest and significance much like Richie:

> I put in the things that most interest me. . . I'm just fascinated by things that happened then and why. . . I included all the things that most interest me. I am interested in how people organized their societies, how they lived, what they believed in, etc.

Such moves between "subjectivist" and "objectivist" orientations by one student confirm the difficulty of using any single response to categorize them. Nor should we imagine that various types of thinking about historical significance constitute fixed developmental levels.

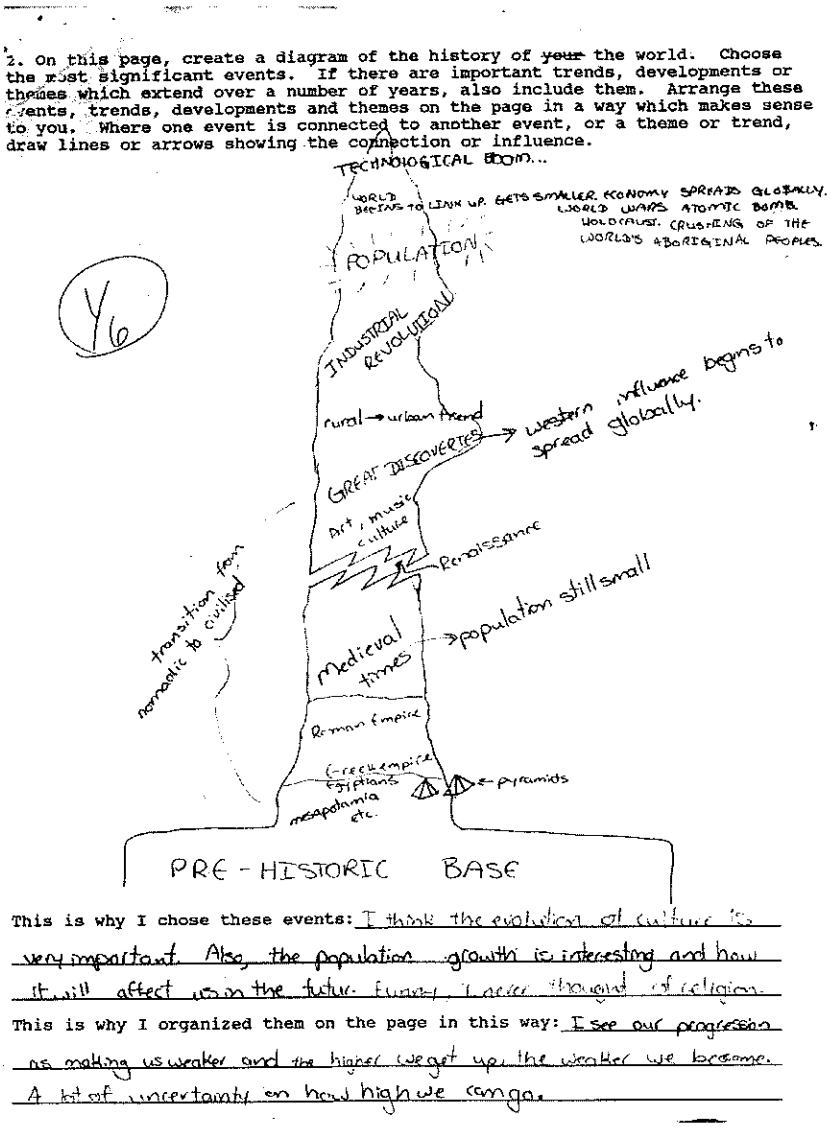
Helen

Helen, a Wellington student, was born in Macau of parents also born there. Her grandparents on both sides were born in China. Helen's open-ended diagram began with the Sino-Japanese War and ended with the Second World War. Though it included the Industrial Revolution and the two world wars, it had a distinctly Chinese focus. Her rationale for the open diagram stated, "I have organized them in this way according to their degree of importance they have on me." While she used the word "me," this diagram was not about personal interest of the kind expressed by Richie. Rather, it was about her people, her country of origin, and the impact of recent world events on them.

In response to the fixed list, Helen chose as most significant (consistent with her open diagram) the end of the Manchu dynasty in China: "a new government was established." Here, and in her suggestion for an addition to the fixed list, she took it for granted that China was the most significant country, or most significant for her people, failing even to offer an explanation or rationale.

Like Cindy, she switched orientations on one response. Rock music was least significant, she said, "because I do not like rock music at all." Were it not for her other answers, this response would almost indicate a total misunderstanding of the concept of historical significance. Again, it underscored the necessity of using a variety of questions to come to an understanding of students' grasp of historical significance. When she was asked how one might argue that rock music was the most significant, she noted deftly that ". . . rock music is also a way of cultural exchange," tying the phenomenon which she did not "like" to broad cultural developments.

Helen's more sophisticated subjectivist



Box 3. Nancy's Open Diagram

position can be contrasted both with Cindy's sophisticated objectivism and with Richie's less sophisticated subjectivism. Like Cindy, she judged historical significance on the basis of the impact of historical events and phenomena. However, instead of assessing the impact of historical events on the basis of a "universal" standard, she considered their impact on herself and her own group. This kind of understanding allows students to defend aspects of national, regional, ethnic, or gender histories as being most significant, with perhaps little disposition for tying personal interests to other frameworks of historical meaning.

Nancy

Yarborough's Nancy was born in Canada to Canadian parents. She arranged the history of humanity into a tower composed of historical periods built chronologically on a "pre-historic base," with explanatory and interpretive notes alongside the tower (see Box 3). What stood out here was not the selection of particular events, eras, or moral dilemmas, but the coherence of the elements on the page. Her eras were linked to each other to form an interpretive and explanatory framework, imbricated with concerns about historical progress and decline. Thus, the significance of "medieval times" arose from its place in the course of human development.

Nancy's open diagram covered a broad scope both temporally and regionally and linked events (industrial revolution, Renaissance), trends (population growth) and moral judgments ("crushing of the world's aboriginal peoples"). In her rationale, she said she constructed the diagram about the past in such a way as to demonstrate choices and uncertainties in the future:

> I think the evolution of culture is very important. Also, the population growth is interesting and how it will affect us in the future. Funny, I never thought of religion. . . I see our progression as making us weaker and the higher we get up, the weaker we become. A lot of uncertainty on how high we can go.

Nancy said that population growth was "interesting," but this is not simply personally interesting in Richie's sense. It should be "interesting" to everyone because it will affect all of us in relation to "how high we can go." Nancy successfully united subjective concerns and interests with historical trends and developments in a brief speculation on the future of humanity.

Her answers to the fixed list were consistent with this orientation. European exploration of the Americas was the most significant for her because:

> It spread our western culture throughout the world. It crushed and ravaged the natives all over the world. Set a world standard for civilization–what was civilized and what wasn't.

Reading this response in relation to her diagram, I interpreted it as a critical statement which implicitly showed the contingent and political nature of "civilized standards," suggesting at the same time the global scope of such hegemonic definitions.

Nancy organized world history into a convincing narrative line. In so doing, she transcended the "subjectivist"-"objectivist" split. With this strategy, any

historical phenomenon, even that which might be dismissed as simply of "personal interest," has the potential to achieve significance by being linked to a larger fabric of significant world history. When students with this orientation were asked why they chose the events they did in Part I, they responded with some variation of, "to show that. . ." This language revealed their consciousness of constructing significance by ordering individual events as part of an integrated narrative. They recognized that choices were not whimsical and personal, nor necessarily based on their own group identification. They offered at least some glimpse of the study of history as an engagement with moral issues involving decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

What does this variety of responses tell us? First, there are important differences in the ways that students approached the question of historical significance. Some, like Marco, began the task of orienting themselves in time through the history told to them by authorities (basic objectivist). Others, like Richie, started from a framework of their own personal interests and concerns (basic subjectivist).

Many students had moved beyond these basic positions to ones which were more intellectually legitimate, involving more developed criteria for assessing historical significance. Some, like Cindy, articulated criteria for significance involving impact on large numbers of people (advanced objectivist). Their criteria enabled them to challenge the pronouncements of authorities. Others, like Helen, assessed significance in terms of the impact on groups to which they belonged (advanced subjectivist). A fifth orientation (narrativist), Nancy's, most successfully united personal interests and concerns with broad historical trends and developments, constructing significance in history through the conscious selection of events which would tell a story. In these constructions, individual events became significant because of their place in a larger historical narrative.

Without a sound notion of historical significance, students confront history as an alienated body of facts that appear to have little to do with their own lives. The potential for history to orient them in time is lost. This study suggests a wide variety of approaches to the question of historical significance among upper high school students. This variety is not surprising.

The British Columbia social studies curriculum (like most others in North America) defines a set of topics, substantive concepts, and generic skills (such as problem-solving) which have no specific relationship to historical understanding. It offers no mention, let alone explicit sequence, of the development of historical reasoning and the use of such concepts as historical significance, agency, interpretation, or evidence.[7] Rather, students are most typically taught "the history" and left to make sense of it themselves. Not surprisingly, they follow different routes towards the construction of historical significance.

By design, each of the classes in this study contained a majority of students who would be marginalized in the traditional grand narratives of Western history. In different ways, each student risked a problematic choice: either building a significant past around his or her own particularistic concerns or adopting the authoritative grand narratives while relegating self and family to the margin outside of "really" significant history.[8]

The exercise described here might well be used in other history classrooms, with two benefits. First, it would raise the issue of historical significance as an explicit component of history instruction. Questions of curriculum selection, textbook construction, historical interpretation–the meaning of "history" itself–all hinge on the question of significance. Explicit discussion of historical significance, in the context of a substantive course in history, would provide students with a much needed conceptual tool to assist in their understanding of the past. Indeed, it seems remarkable that curriculum documents do not make teaching about the question of historical significance a central focus of history instruction.

Use of this exercise might also provide teachers with a means of assessing students' ideas on historical significance. Teachers could probably put this instrument, or one like it, to better use in their classrooms than can an outside researcher. They know their classes best, and are thus in the best position to utilize students' responses in the design of subsequent instruction. ■

Notes

1 J. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in *American Historical Review* 91, 5(1986), 1053-1075.

2 P. Seixas, "Historical Understanding among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting" in *Curriculum Inquiry* 23, 3(1993), 301-327; K. Barton, "Historical Understanding among Elementary Children," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1994.

3 British Columbia Ministry of Education, *Social Studies Curriculum Guide* (Victoria, BC: author, 1988).

4 D. Shemilt, *History 13-16 Evaluation Study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980).

5 R. J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

6 C. Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage, 1984).

7 British Columbia Ministry of Education, *Social Studies Curriculum Guide;* Peter Seixas, "Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding" in David Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *The Handbook of Education and Human Development* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

8 The problem is confronted directly by Terrie L. Epstein in "Makes No Difference If You're Black or White? African-American and European Working-class High School Students' Beliefs about Historical Significance and Historical Authority," paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 1994.

Peter Seixas is in the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.