

The Importance of Educational Research In the Teaching of History.

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Abstract

This article discusses the importance of teachers integrating new educational research into their classroom instruction. The mandatory grade 10 History course in Ontario is used as an example of how such integration leads to improved teacher instruction and therefore student learning.

Behind the classroom door the key factor in the success of a lesson, in determining whether the students actually learn something that matters, is the creative ability of the teachers — their ability to combine theory and practical classroom experience. Theory alone will not result in effective teaching. Nor will practice alone result in truly excellent teachers engaged in the learning process. Critical to this process is the teacher's knowledge of the subject content, and his/her ability to implement new strategies, to develop effective performance tasks, to design appropriate assessment tools, and to address the different student learning styles. Little of this can be accomplished if teachers are not knowledgeable of new research, and determined to implement it. Effective teaching therefore involves the practical application of new research/theory in a classroom environment. In this paper the mandatory grade 10 History course in Ontario, *Canadian History Since World War I*, is used as an example of how the implementation of new educational research improves both pedagogical practices and student learning. Special attention will be given to the transformation of one historical re-enactment from an entertaining classroom activity to an effective performance task.

For years I have used a popular re-enactment I call the "1920's Nightclub". For this activity the students completed research projects as well as organized the entire day with a complete meal, vaudeville acts, music and dance shows. All the students were in period costume. The students loved the activity, enjoyed history, and most importantly, many of them enrolled in the optional grade eleven History course! A simple "formula" was used to develop a vibrant history course: interesting content, student-centered activities, and research/essay skills. Despite the success of the activity the teachers in the department, me included, were unaware of some serious flaws in curriculum design. Indeed curriculum design was not even a

concern. No overall plan existed. No serious effort was made to connect what the students learned in the activity with the history of 20th century Canada beyond the 1920's. It did not even matter if the students remembered the content that they had researched. No serious thought was given to assessment. The projects were graded without any precise scoring system and extra marks were assigned to those students who either organized the day or participated in the various acts. A fun and engaging classroom activity remained only that - a fun activity!

Yet, with the benefit of recent research, this activity became much more. Critical here was a new model for curriculum design developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, "Understanding by Design", or as it is sometimes known as, "the backward design". Wiggins and McTighe emphasize that teachers must reverse what they have traditionally done: design daily lesson plans first, and only consider assessment at the end of a particular unit with little thought given to organizing an overall curriculum plan. Content is taught without any serious attempt at determining if all of the content deserves equal attention. The textbook is the guide. Instead, Wiggins and McTighe begin at what is traditionally tackled at the end: assessment and overall learning goals. Teachers need to know what content and skills are important enough to remember and to develop before they plan lessons and units of study. In terms of both skills and content, they must distinguish between what is worth being familiar with, important to know and do, and "enduring understandings" (Wiggins, Mctighe, p.14-15). The enduring understandings are what is essential, what the teachers want the students to know and do once the course is completed; once the students leave the classroom. Important assessment tasks should be connected to these understandings. Likewise the content should be organized according to specific understandings. The ministry expectations are then linked to the understandings as well. Key to this process is careful planning.

A major problem with the nightclub activity, then, was in connecting it to important content, to the enduring understandings of the course in other words. Fortunately, Wiggins and McTighe provide a method as to how to determine these understandings. Four "filters" are given as a means to determine what content is worth uncovering (i.e. conducting research) and understanding:

- Represent a big idea having enduring value beyond the classroom.
- Reside at the heart of the discipline (involve "doing" the subject).
- Require uncoverage (of abstract or often misunderstood ideas).
- Offer potential for engaging students.

(Wiggins and McTighe, p. 23)

For the course "Canadian History Since World War I", ten enduring understandings were therefore developed following Wiggins and McTighe's model. Each of these understandings is accompanied by a list of statements indicating how the understanding is linked to specific content or skills throughout the course. For example, the understanding dealing with the powerful dynamics of regionalism in Canada and the emergence of a new assertive Western Canada is further qualified by the following: The students will understand:

- The National Policy — its importance in terms of the economic development of Canada and the long term impact on Western Canada.

- The reasons for the emergence of protest parties, beginning with the Progressive Party.
- The significant role of federal parties in both exacerbating regional tensions and in accommodating regional demands in their party platforms.
- The importance of the discovery of oil in Alberta and the subsequent emergence of Alberta as an economically and politically powerful province.
- The reasons why the Maritimes have lagged behind the rest of Canada in terms of economic development.

Using Wiggins and McTighe's model as a guide, the content of the course is organized according to specific understandings. In doing so, an important decision was made: the teacher determined which content was important enough to be examined in more detail — which content was connected to a "big idea" that demanded more research and was worth knowing once the students completed the course.

New research also makes it clear that with this approach students are more likely to remember the significance of the content. This is an extremely important point. Many teachers contend that the students remember little actual content. The focus is therefore on the skills. New convincing research indicates however that this is not the case. Furthermore, this research indicates that the 'understanding by design' approach is effective. According to Robert J. Marzano in *What Works In Schools. Translating Research into Action*, multiple exposures to content is critical if the students are to commit the information to their permanent memory (Marzano, p.112). With Wiggins and McTighe's approach the students are aware of significant "big ideas" to which the content of the course is connected. Consequently, the important content of the course is revisited, re-examined, and placed in a meaningful context for the students. They, in turn, will understand and remember this content.

Further research into how the brain works supports Marzano's contention. Eric Jensen, in *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, argues that "it's not more content that students want, its meaning. One of the things that good schools do is understand the importance of meaning-making and provide the environment that includes the elements necessary for making meaning." (Jensen, p.98) Patricia Wolfe in *Brain Matters. Translating Research into Classroom Practice*, states, "It is essential that we take advantage of the brain's natural proclivity to attend to what is meaningful." She continues with "one of the most effective ways to make information meaningful is to associate or compare the new concept with a known concept, to hook the unfamiliar with something familiar" (Wolfe, 104). The "Understanding by Design" model is one of these "effective ways". Marilee Sprenger, in *Learning and Memory. The Brain in Action*, supports this point (Sprenger, p.50-51). What is even more fascinating is the role of emotion. According to Sprenger, the brain contains five memory "lanes" located in specific areas. Of the five — semantic, episodic, procedural, automatic, and emotional — emotional is the most powerful (Sprenger, 72-76). Other studies reach the same conclusion (Given, p. 74; Jensen, p.72; Wolfe, p.106). One of the most effective teaching techniques in terms of memory retention involves celebrations and role-playing (Sprenger, p.76). The new research is clear: meaningful content should be presented in an appealing fashion that engages the students' emotions.

The nightclub activity was therefore restructured in light of this new research. No longer referred to as a nightclub, the new performance task is entitled "The Diamond Jubilee of Confederation". More aligned with significant content in the History of twentieth century Canada, the year 1927 was selected since it was the 60th anniversary of Confederation. At this time Canadians were immensely proud of Canada's accomplishments during the Great War and of Canada's new status in the British Commonwealth of Nations. The students are

asked to organize an exposition of Canadian achievement with the following instructions:

The Liberal government of Mackenzie King has decided to celebrate the success of Canada as a newly recognized country on the international scene. This celebration will take the form of an exposition the purpose of which will be both to educate and to entertain. You have been selected to be a member of the organizing committee. Your task is two-fold: to prepare a visual display and a brochure highlighting the accomplishments of Canada; and to organize different forms of entertainment.

Instead of simply researching different unrelated topics, the students examine specific themes:

- The development of Western Canada as an important region of Canada in terms of political, economic, and cultural change.
- The cultural accomplishments of Canadians in film, music, art, sports, and other areas of endeavour — in particular those which reflect Canada's new sense of national identity and nationhood.
- The role of government in defending and promoting Canadian cultural and political independence.
- The changing role and status of women in Canadian society — examining the extent to which actual meaningful change occurred.
- The military success of the Canadian army in the Great War — especially the importance of remembering those who sacrificed their lives for Canada.

All of these themes are connected with the stated enduring understandings of the course as well as with several ministry expectations.

Another recent study was also used in this restructuring, Larry Lewis and Betty Jean Shoemaker's *Great Performances. Creating Classroom Based Assessment Tasks*. Using this work as a guide, the nightclub activity evolved into a more effective performance task better connected to the entire course and to appropriate assessment requirements. According to Lewin and Shoemaker, a performance task has five key characteristics:

- Students have some choice in selecting or shaping the task.
- The task requires both the elaboration of core knowledge content and the use of key processes.
- The task has an explicit scoring system.
- The task is designed for an audience larger than the teacher, that is, others outside the classroom who would find value in the work.
- The task is carefully crafted to measure what it purports to measure.

(Lewin and Shoemaker, p. 4-5)

Of these characteristics, the nightclub activity possessed only two out of five: student choice and the use of key processes (e.g. research skills). Using Lewin and Shoemaker as a guide, some choice was integrated into the task, especially with the first and the third themes. The

class was organized into co-operative groups. Often it is difficult to determine the appropriate size, so again new research was critical. In *Classroom Instruction That Works. Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, 3 to 4 students is considered as the most effective size of a co-operative group (Marzano, Pickering, Pollock, p. 88). Both the visual displays and the brochures were arranged according to the themes. Teachers, parents, and senior students formed the audience, circulating and asking the students questions concerning their displays. After this portion of the Jubilee was completed, the students participated in the various activities that they had organized. "Explicit scoring systems", in the form of rubrics, were used to assess the students' visual displays, brochures, and performances. Students provided much of the leadership as different committees were established to prepare the various activities and to organize the entire day. These committees were separate from the co-operative groups. A steering committee was established to coordinate the different activities and to provide overall leadership. The role of the teacher was also crucial in terms of over all planning of the performance task and classroom instruction.

Here is another excellent example of the significance of taking advantage of new educational research when organizing lessons in the classroom. Recently, it has been common practice to consider the teacher as a coach, a facilitator. The focus is on the student alone. Traditional teacher-centered lessons are frowned upon. This tendency is especially strong among advocates of co-operative learning. Some new research, however, reasserts the need for more traditional teaching strategies such as the Socratic method. Even new theories of education such as constructivism can be used inappropriately if care is not taken. R.J. Marzano asserts that these theories should be used "...with caution and not overly applied in lieu of time-honored and well researched practices" (Marzano, 107). According to recent research in cognitive psychology, the constructivist claim that learning must be an "active process" is accurate, but at times this principle is taken too far to mean that "...teachers should rarely (if ever) teach content to students (Marzano, p. 108). With Diamond Jubilee the students were therefore taught some of the more challenging content. For example, the Chanak Affair of 1922 occurred, as the British became embroiled in a dispute with Turkey over control of the Dardanelles, a major international trade route. Without teacher instruction the students would have experienced difficulty in understanding this complex international crisis. The determining factor for teacher instruction is the degree of complexity and the necessity of avoiding student misunderstanding of significant content.

Recent research has even further influenced the nature of this performance task, the unit, and the overall course. For instance, Richard W. Strong, in *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement*, emphasizes the importance of establishing rigour throughout the curriculum. Rigour is defined as "...the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging" (Strong, p.7). Referring to another study, David Perkins' *Smart Schools: Better Thinking & Learning For Every Child*, Strong states that "all students need schools to provide both rigorous content and direct instruction in the skills needed to manage that content (e.g., note taking, summarizing, glossing a text)" (Strong, p.7). Strong contends as well that rigour can be maintained in history courses by the analysis of primary documents. Such analysis has usually been reserved for senior students, yet, following Strong's advice, the students analyzed primary documents relating to the themes of the Diamond Jubilee. For example, in terms of the changing status of women, students examined documents that highlight the contrast between the newly achieved "political independence" of women and their social and economic status. The students realized that the theme of the changing status of women is more complex than they had thought. Recent research has therefore been used to enhance the quality of this performance task, and to

prevent the students from simplifying some complex content.

Many more examples could be provided as to how classroom practice and new research in education theory can be effectively combined. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory is a case in point. Thomas Armstrong, in *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, explains how the different intelligences — linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal — can be integrated into the curriculum. His study has proven invaluable in designing the performance task, the Diamond Jubilee, and the entire course. For every lesson the targeted intelligence(s) is highlighted along with the targeted understanding. Another guide in terms of curriculum design is Carol Ann Tomlinson's *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. In an intriguing comparison between the traditional classroom and the differentiated classroom, she provides an excellent guideline for teachers so that they may establish the appropriate learning environment for all students (Tomlinson, p. 16). In short, effective teaching must take into consideration student differences; the instruction must be differentiated. With the multiple intelligences approach, this is exactly what happens. And with the Diamond Jubilee Project students were given the opportunity to differentiate their own learning depending on their choice of topic and activity.

Many studies also indicate that students need an opportunity to reflect on their learning, and to examine their own learning over a long period of time. Assessment should involve an appraisal of student growth. Portfolios have proven to be effective tools in facilitating student learning and thereby improving teachers' assessment and evaluation practices (Tomlinson, p.93; Sprenger: p. 82-83, Torff, p67-107; O'Connor, p.6-7; and Marzano, p.98-99). Emphasis is now placed on student improvement. I have adopted a portfolio system for the mandatory grade 10 History course with a particular focus on essay skills. Students are given the opportunity to correct their own work and to track their own improvement. For certain topics students also record their own feelings. For the Diamond Jubilee the students reflected on both the treatment of women and immigrants during this period. Throughout the course the students are given similar opportunities to reflect on significant content.

One last example should suffice in order to demonstrate the importance of using new educational research to improve classroom instruction. Richard Strong provides some "quick tips" as to how to increase rigour in the classroom. He suggests that a department should be a "club for readers" in which teachers read and discuss non-pedagogical books pertinent to their subject. This is an interesting point. Without this "tip" the Diamond Jubilee re-enactment would never have been developed since, following Strong's advice, I came upon some intriguing information after further reading on Canada in the 1920's: Mackenzie King's plan for a major national celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of Confederation in 1927. Local committees were established in villages, towns, and cities across Canada. This is why the "nightclub" became the "Diamond Jubilee". Without Strong's advice I would never have learned about the Jubilee since it is not even mentioned in most textbooks.

The "Diamond Jubilee" Project gave my students an excellent opportunity to "experience" History. The local libraries and archives provided substantial information about the Jubilee. In *The Daily Intelligencer*, our local Belleville, Ontario newspaper students found several articles about the Jubilee. Students also discovered that at all of the local celebrations the war veterans were honoured and the war dead remembered. Like all newspapers across the country *The Tweed Advocate* supplied its readers with critical information about July 3rd 1927, a day of Canadian National Thanksgiving. The National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee provided a detailed script for the ceremony with an Order of

Proceedings and a series of prayers such as "A Prayer for Divine Guidance in the Government of our Land". Students came to realize the important role religion still played in the lives of Canadians. For their own Diamond Jubilee the students recited some of these prayers and re-enacted a commemorative ceremony for the war dead. As reported in the *Belleville Intelligencer*, November 11, 2005, the students enjoyed the re-enactment. One student commented, "It helps you learn better. It's pretty neat. You find out what it was like to live in the 1920s." Another student appreciated the commemorative ceremony: "It was really nice and respectful." For one day History came alive for these students. They were able to re-enact an event of local and national scope.

Without exaggeration it may be stated that this re-enactment would never have been designed if not for the educational research now available. My classroom instruction has also improved because of this research. My delivery of the entire course, Canadian History Since World War II, is much more effective since I began to integrate new approaches and ideas from recent educational research. Student learning has also improved. My students are able to focus on the significant skills and content that they need to master because of the way the course is now organized. The students also benefit in another important way: teacher enthusiasm. I have learned that instead of teaching the same content with the same strategies year after year, teachers need to be challenged, to learn new strategies and new content. After more than twenty years of teaching, I remain enthusiastic, eager to organize more performance tasks and to teach once again the compulsory grade 10 History course.

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