

# Reshaping Canadian History Education in Support of Reconciliation

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## Abstract

Scholars disagree about the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for history educators and curriculum developers. Some scholars contend that responding to these Calls to Action requires rejecting the discipline of history and historical thinking approaches currently being implemented in history and social studies curricula in several Canadian jurisdictions because they are derived from an ethnocentric Western epistemology. In this article, we propose three significant and important changes to Canadian history education in support of reconciliation, some of which are already underway, albeit imperfectly, and each of which can be implemented without radical epistemological restructuring.

*Keywords:* truth and reconciliation, historical thinking, history teaching and learning, epistemology, history education, curriculum reform, curriculum theory

## Résumé

Le point de vue des chercheurs diverge concernant les implications, pour les professeurs d'histoire et les responsables de développement de programmes, des Appels à l'action émis par la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada. Certains chercheurs soutiennent que répondre à ces Appels à l'action demande de rejeter le programme d'histoire et les approches de pensées historiques actuellement implantés dans les programmes d'études sociales et d'histoire de plusieurs provinces et territoires canadiens, puisque ceux-ci découlent plutôt d'une épistémologie ethnocentrique occidentale. Cet article propose trois changements importants et significatifs à apporter dans l'éducation à l'histoire canadienne afin de soutenir la réconciliation, certains d'entre eux, bien qu'imparfaits, étant déjà en cours de réalisation, et chacun d'eux pouvant être mis en œuvre sans restructuration épistémologique radicale.

*Mots-clés* : vérité et réconciliation, pensée historique, enseignement et apprentissage de l'histoire, épistémologie, réforme de programme d'études, théorie des programmes

## Introduction

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) presents history educators in Canada with a significant challenge. Its final report identifies education as “the key to reconciliation” and calls for changes in order to “remedy the gaps in historical knowledge that perpetuate ignorance and racism” (TRC, 2015, p. 234). It urges making curriculum about residential schools part of a broader history education that integrates First Nations, Inuit, and Métis voices, perspectives, and experiences; builds common ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples;<sup>1</sup> rejects the racism embedded in colonial systems of education; and treats Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect (p. 239).

What specifically the TRC’s Calls to Action require of history educators and curriculum developers is disputed. Some scholars have suggested that integrating Indigenous perspectives and treating Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect require rejecting the discipline of history as currently understood because it is derived from an ethnocentric Western epistemology. Michael Marker (2011) reports that Indigenous scholars “have emerged over the past twenty years to challenge the assumptions of Western epistemologies” (p. 98). Samantha Cutrara (2018) argues that historical thinking, which she characterizes as the most recent version of a disciplinary approach to history education (p. 255), “imposes a settler grammar over the study of the past,” which widens the gulf between Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems and thereby reduces the possibilities for reconciliation (p. 254). Despite recognizing that historical thinking is not currently implemented in most history classrooms in Canada, Cutrara contends that the more that historical thinking is taken up, “the further we will get from answering the TRC’s Calls to Action” (p. 254).

Our contention is that the significant and important changes that history educators must undertake to address the TRC’s Calls to Action can be implemented without radical epistemological restructuring of the discipline of history, as some would suggest. More

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1 Indigenous is a term that includes both local and international First Peoples that have an Indigenous language, culture, laws, and traditional territory/land base, and are influenced by processes of colonization. In Canada, the term Aboriginal is also used to refer to Indian (First Nations), Métis, and Inuit Peoples as noted in the Canadian Constitution (section 35[1]). In this article, we use the term Indigenous as a general term for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada, and use the term “Aboriginal” only when it is used in the literature we are referencing.

specifically, we believe that the legitimate opposition to Eurocentric dominance of the history curriculum can be redressed without the wholesale dismissal of the discipline of history and its methods. In addition, historical thinking, which is the most widely discussed current interpretation of a disciplinary approach to history education in Canada, can usefully advance the reforms called for by the TRC. In this article, we make a case for changes in three areas of educational practice, some of which are already underway, albeit imperfectly, in many Canadian jurisdictions:

- Educators must strengthen the representation and centrality of Indigenous Peoples in Canadian history courses. This challenge goes beyond sprinkling more Indigenous historical content into a predominantly Euro-Canadian curriculum. It requires bringing Indigenous histories, perspectives, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies from the margins to a more central place in the history we teach. As Tim Stanley (2000) explains, this requires engaging with meanings, voices, and sources from historically marginalized groups' perspectives rather than simply viewing those on the margins from Euro-Canadian perspectives.
- Educators need to alter the way history has traditionally been taught as an established body of conclusions about the past that students are expected to accept. Not only are many of these "accepted" conclusions increasingly recognized as products of ethnocentric thinking, but the very notion of history as a settled body of conclusions distorts the nature of the discipline. Instead, students must be taught to think historically by interpreting historical evidence, challenging problematic assumptions, and identifying the perspectives inherent in the historical narratives they encounter. This is especially important for overcoming the discriminatory views about Indigenous Peoples that students have encountered in school, society, and the media.
- Curriculum developers in each province and territory should establish one or more integrated, multidisciplinary courses in Indigenous studies dedicated to teaching about Indigenous historical and contemporary worldviews. This kind of course, already available in some jurisdictions, directly parallels integrated humanities courses that foster understanding of Western worldviews.

However, the purposes of establishing this kind of course will be undermined if the educators who teach it have limited understanding of Indigenous history, thinking, and beliefs. Building a cadre of teachers who have the knowledge and sensitivity to teach a dedicated course on Indigenous history and worldviews acknowledges the limits of what can realistically be expected from survey history and social studies courses taught by teachers who do not have extensive grounding in Indigenous history, culture, language, and worldviews.

We elaborate on and justify these three changes, and attempt to explain how they address the challenges presented by the TRC's Calls to Action without radically altering the basis for determining and assessing historical knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

### **Strengthen the Centrality and Representation of Indigenous Peoples**

From the 1890s to the present, history education in both anglophone Canada and francophone Quebec has been dominated by an authoritative, colonial, nation-building narrative intended to instil nationalistic identity and patriotism (Osborne, 2011). Indigenous Peoples and their histories have been omitted or marginalized, or have been expressed through settler perspectives (Regan, 2010; St. Denis, 2011; Tupper, 2012, 2014). The pervasiveness of these dominant narratives in Canadian media, curricula, textbooks, and classrooms (Clark, Lévesque, & Sandwell, 2015; Di Mascio, 2014; Osborne, 2011; Stanley, 2006) presents a daunting, yet long overdue challenge.

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2 We recognize the limitations of two non-Indigenous scholars writing an article about reshaping history education in support of reconciliation. In trying to better understand these issues, we have sought input from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and educators, including Marie Battiste, Dwayne Donald, Jason Ellis, Duane Jackson, Diane Lander, Michael Marker, Heather McGregor, Mark Selman, and Peter Seixas. Although this article is now published, we consider the issues unresolved and the article unfinished as there is much work to be done. We invite others to share their thoughts about the issues we raise.

## Responses to Six Historic Failings

Implementing the TRC's recommendations requires additional concerted efforts to dislodge what can be seen as at least six prominent historic failings in the positioning and representation of Indigenous Peoples in Canadian history education.

***Introduce significant Indigenous events, developments, and people.*** Events, people, and developments in Canadian history that have significance for Indigenous people have often been ignored or treated as sidebars in the curriculum and textbooks (Clark, 2007; Francis, 2011; Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, 1973; St. Denis, 2011). Most notable is the exclusion, until very recently, of the history of residential schools and their long-term impact on Indigenous Peoples' individual, social, linguistic, and cultural well-being. Other instances of sanctioned or tolerated abuse and neglect also need to be added to the national history. Learning about the history of treaties and landmark court cases, and official non-compliance with their terms, is essential if we are to expose myths about rightful entitlement to the land (Tupper, 2012). Beyond these historic injustices are a myriad of other gaps in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit history that need to be filled, including the contributions of notable Indigenous leaders to their own communities and the shaping of Canada; the developing circumstances and fortunes of Indigenous Peoples interrelated with the evolving profiles of pioneers, settlers, labourers, entrepreneurs, and other groups whose stories fill our history books; and the successes, conflicts, and other events that materially impacted Indigenous Peoples.

***Problematize ideology-laden terms.*** As Paige Raibmon (2018) notes, "Words carry their history with them." Educators must be mindful of the colonial connotations that seemingly neutral terms often perpetuate. This is evident in references to traditional Aboriginal people's homeland as a wilderness (Raibmon, 2018), and the use of "settler" to describe people who did not stay long, and who contributed to the rapid depopulation of areas where Aboriginal people had lived continuously for hundreds if not thousands of years (Stanley, 2000, p. 101; Guzman, 2018). Abandoning all use of these labels may not be realistic, but at the very least students need to be aware of the ideological assumptions that many taken-for-granted words carry, to appreciate why the connotations attached to many terms are not neutral, and to understand how they perpetuate culturally specific

assumptions that are often at odds with their meanings for Indigenous people (Raibmon, 2018).

***Present nuanced portrayals of Indigenous people.*** Stereotypical, one-dimensional, and homogenous portrayals in curricula and resources have often characterized Indigenous people as primitive, violent, and noble savages, or as misguided, passive, and submissive victims (Clark, 2007; St. Denis, 2011). In order to challenge over-generalizations about Indigenous perspectives more effort is needed to develop curricula and learning materials that highlight the diversity of interests, views, and circumstances of Indigenous people past and present. Donald (2012) explains that one of the central curricular and pedagogical challenges of decolonizing Canadian education involves situating the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous people in Canada as part of the tapestry of Canadian histories while contesting the assumption that they are their own separate cultural preoccupations (p. 92). In addition, while we must guard against romanticization and misrepresentation, the curriculum and accompanying resources must counter popular stereotypes with nuanced examples, identified by Indigenous people, of Indigenous successes, resilience, and sophistication. Because of the significant diversity among Indigenous groups and their experiences, any generalizations should be viewed cautiously.

***Embed multiple interpretations.*** Many historical accounts found in textbooks, teachers' lectures, and the media represent only the dominant colonial perspective (Francis, 2011; King, 2012). Overcoming this failing goes beyond introducing additional events that are historically significant from an Indigenous point of view. It requires opening up the discussion of events and people currently present in the curriculum to include alternative Indigenous perspectives. For example, it is no longer acceptable for history textbooks to describe the Vancouver Island Treaties or the Numbered Treaties (1871–1877) as straightforward land transfers or peace agreements. These treaties have contested meanings and significance for different groups and individuals. Students must encounter these conflicting cultural understandings and, in so doing, raise ethical and legal questions about the nature and legitimacy of these treaties. Marker (2011) talks about the importance of the local in Indigenous worldviews. This means that topics such as residential schools should not be framed exclusively at the national, provincial, or territorial level. It is essential to embed local stories and perspectives in history and social studies

curricula, which speaks to the need for locally assembled learning resources and mechanisms for connecting teachers with members of local Indigenous communities.

**Frame inclusive narratives.** Prior to changes in Canadian historiography in the 1970s, many Canadian historians were unaware of or indifferent to the extent to which their overarching sense making of history was framed largely from a Euro-Canadian perspective (Conrad, 2011). Famous among these are such narratives as “the march of civilization,” the “settlement of the West,” and “the conquering of a foreign and hostile land.” We now recognize the biased nature of these mono-perspectival, ethnocentric accounts. More inclusive and explicitly anti-racist interpretations that incorporate Indigenous perspectives and present alternative perspectives must be the basis for constructing overarching historical narratives about Canada’s past. Or they may mean, as many have suggested, replacing sweeping national narratives with less “grand,” more regionally contextualized narratives.

**Showcase Indigenous sources of historical evidence.** Traditionally, Western academic discourse has privileged written sources over oral traditions. In recent decades, historians have increasingly accepted oral histories as legitimate and valuable additions to the historical record (Carlson, Fagan, & Khanenko-Friesen, 2011; Perks & Thomson, 2006). This recognition is also evident in Supreme Court of Canada decisions; see, for example, *Simon v. The Queen*, [1985] 2 S.C.R. 387, and *R. v. Marshall*, [1999] 3 S.C.R. 456. Stó:lō historian Naxaxahtls’i explains that “the academic world and the oral history process both share an important common principle: They contribute to knowledge by building upon what is known and remembering that learning is a life-long quest” (as cited in Miller, 2007, p. 82). Beyond the exclusion of oral testimony, written sources from Indigenous perspectives have traditionally not received the same attention and weight as Western sources. Either they were not included in archives, were not written in English or French and therefore could not be read until translations were available, or they were simply considered less authoritative. Unfortunately, many textbooks and classrooms have yet to adequately incorporate Indigenous oral and written accounts into the body of historical evidence that students are invited to consult.

## Anticipating Potential Objections

We expect that many educators would likely agree on the value of extending and intensifying efforts along the lines outlined above. However, others may contend that these attempts ignore deep-rooted epistemological tensions between Euro-Canadian and Indigenous knowledge systems. The two most commonly cited tensions are that these systems represent divergent epistemologies that produce competing and irreconcilable truths, and that the Western academic discipline of history is inherently and irredeemably biased against Indigenous ways of knowing.

*Irreconcilable, competing truths.* Some scholars suggest that certain truths accepted within the Western world and those within Indigenous communities are irreconcilable. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) explains, the sense of history conveyed by Indigenous approaches “is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other” (p. 30). To understand this objection, we must be clearer about the conditions under which irreconcilable truths raise deep epistemological tensions. Consider contested claims about the intent and meaning of the Numbered Treaties. For the federal government the Numbered Treaties were a final and once-for-all agreement that extinguished First Nations’ land rights and opened their lands for settlement and development, whereas for First Nations<sup>3</sup> the treaties recognized and safeguarded their rights in perpetuity and were not considered permanent but could be renegotiated and renewed should conditions change (Dickason & McNab, 2009). In one sense, this situation is an example of irreconcilable “truths”—each side has interpreted the situation and attached meaning or assigned value in entrenched, deeply different ways. However, this is not an instance of epistemological irreconcilability unless the core facts of the case or the raw historical records accepted by each side are contradictory.<sup>4</sup> It is not enough that each side draws selectively from largely accepted facts to defend their position—the underly-

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3 We use First Nations here because the Numbered Treaties were not signed with Métis or Inuit people.

4 We wonder whether some of the disputes in the literature stem from differing understandings of what constitutes epistemological tension. Some writers appear to imply that contesting whether or not a particular statement is true necessarily raises epistemological issues. This seems to be an expansive use of the term beyond what it has widely been accepted to mean. For the purposes of this article, epistemological issues are not first-order disagreements but second-order challenges to the very nature of knowledge and the basis of justification, especially with regard to methods and criteria for validity.

ing factual basis must be substantially challenged for there to be irreconcilable epistemological differences.

Michael Marker (2011) offers an apparent illustration of this tension when describing a “defining moment” for an Indigenous student presented with seemingly irreconcilable truths in a history classroom. While explaining the early origins of Indigenous people in Canada, her history teacher stated that the Bering land bridge provided the means for early “Aboriginal immigrants” to reach North America. This account contradicted teachings from the student’s Elders, who explained that her people had come *from* the land, not *to* the land. When the Indigenous student disputed the “truth” of the teacher’s explanation, the teacher reviewed the scientific evidence that showed the “reality of the past” (p. 99). Because she persisted in questioning the teacher’s interpretation, the student was sent to stand in the corner of the classroom. This incident was obviously deeply disturbing for the student and insensitively handled by the teacher. But Marker offers it as an example of irreconcilable Indigenous and Euro-Canadian historical interpretations. Does this incident involving two historical interpretations about the origins of Indigenous people in North America actually raise deep epistemological tensions?

From our perspective, the teacher’s use of “immigrant” to refer to Indigenous people’s arrival in North America misconstrues historical and archaeological evidence. Unfortunately, this is a lingering and common representation, as evidenced by Governor General David Johnston’s comments during a 2017 television interview. He stated, “We’re a country based on immigration, going right back to our ‘Indigenous people’ who were immigrants as well, 10, 12, 14,000 years ago” (cited in “GG’s Comment that Indigenous People Are ‘Immigrants’ Sparks Social Media Outrage,” 2017). Significantly, after public uproar, Johnston apologized, acknowledging that Indigenous Peoples are “the original peoples of this land.” The arrival long ago of distant genetic relatives of Indigenous people to North America does not justify referring to Indigenous people as immigrants for two reasons: the remoteness of the time of their arrival before recorded history and their uniqueness as a people. Like MacEachern (2016, 2017), we do not see any contradiction in accepting the Bering land bridge theory as the most plausible explanation of how and when the distant ancestors of Indigenous people first arrived in the Americas, while also accepting the claim that Indigenous people are from this land.

Indigenous Peoples have occupied the land that became Canada since “time immemorial.” Their deep-time human migration to North America between 15,000 and

20,000 years ago cannot be compared with immigration to North America within the past 400 years. Paleo-archaeologists have shown that the earliest human presence in Canada usually took place in territory that was newly exposed by the retreat of the massive ice sheets (Flannery, 2001). Thus, first peoples were already in the Americas when the rivers began to flow, plant life rooted itself in the soil, herbivores began grazing, and carnivores mapped out their hunting territories (Moore, 2017). In other words, the first peoples did not “come into” the environment of what is now Canada as much as they witnessed and participated in its creation.

A second reason for rejecting the immigrant label is because of Indigenous Peoples’ genetic uniqueness to Canada, unlike the common gene pool that more recent immigrants share with inhabitants from their home countries. This is analogous to recognizing certain species of plants or animals as being “native” to a region. Precursor genes may have originated elsewhere but the current inhabitants did not come to the region in their present form and they are unique to it.

As our analysis of this example suggests, profound differences in beliefs and convictions are not necessarily a sign of deep epistemological tension. However, each example of epistemological tension needs to be closely examined before drawing this conclusion.

***Inherent Eurocentric bias.*** A second criticism is that the discipline of history privileges Eurocentric interests and epistemologies. For example, Cutrara (2018) claims that historians have prejudicially subjected Indigenous narratives “to assessment and evaluation in ways that suit the demands of the colonizer more than the truths of the storyteller” (p. 29). Undeniably, men from industrialized and imperialistic European countries steeped in liberal intellectual traditions originally shaped the academic discipline of history. And it is the case that until recently the “Western epistemic dominance” of academic history has excluded Indigenous approaches to history because of its attachment to rational foundationalism and Enlightenment values (Brownlie, 2009). However, it is a different matter to claim, as critics such as Cutrara (2018) do, that the discipline of history is inherently and inescapably a “colonial epistemological tradition” that “sets the rules for a written and static record of an authority’s singular recounting of a series of events” (p. 266). We will consider two versions of this alleged bias in the academic discipline of history.

*The discipline of history has historically been racist.* Academic disciplines are historically and culturally situated constructions that reflect the strengths and limitations of the people who work in these disciplines and contribute to their development (McGregor, 2017). There is no fixed, universal, or uncontested system for constructing knowledge in the discipline of history. While academic history was originally constructed from a Western Enlightenment epistemology this does not mean that the discipline of history has remained that way, or is incapable of change. The prior dominance of racist historical narratives such as Manifest Destiny and the colonial imperative does not mean that the discipline is inherently racist. As we have seen with responses to historiographical critiques such as the social and postmodern “turns” over the past 50 years, the discipline has a self-corrective capacity. Theories, questions, methods, and types of evidence utilized by historians today are considerably different from those in place when the formal discipline of history originated in the mid-nineteenth century (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Evans, 2000; Iggers, Wang, & Mukherjee, 2008; Woolf, 2011). The advent of Marxist history; environmental history; ethnohistory; world history; feminist history; postcolonial and subaltern history; microhistory; cultural history; oral history; and memory studies is evidence of the discipline’s ability to challenge its received theories and methods. Cutrara (2018) overlooks the evolving nature of the discipline of history and assumes that it has remained unchanged from its “positivistic” roots.

*Western historical epistemology is inherently prejudicial.* Although racist narratives and perspectives have regularly been expunged from the discipline over the last few decades, this does not extinguish the contention that a fundamental commitment to rationality and logic biases the discipline of history against Indigenous knowledge. According to Cutrara (2018), formal academic history “was designed to organize the epistemological logic of progress and rationality into knowing, often as a way to counter that which was perceived as less organized, logical, or formal ways of knowing, such as those found in Indigenous societies” (p. 258). Consequently, she contends, historical thinking denies “the presence of Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate ways for understanding the past” (p. 257). Cutrara identifies two specific instances of apparent prejudice against Indigenous histories: the Western preferences for documentary sources over oral sources, and for linear conceptions of time over Indigenous conceptions of time as circular. Both

these claims inaccurately represent the current situation and apparent inherent features of the discipline.

Since the 1997 Supreme Court of Canada decision in the Delgamuukw land claims case (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, [1997] 3 S.C.R. 1010), traditional Indigenous stories have been formally recognized as legitimate sources of historical evidence, and are increasingly used as sources of historical knowledge within the discipline. Seixas (2012) points to recent accounts of residential schools in Canada as examples of Indigenous historical methods and Western scholarship reinforcing each other to produce histories that otherwise might have remained unknown to the general public. Significantly, the final TRC report is a product of both Indigenous and Western evidence and methods. Similarly, the once-popular narrative of progress may posit a linear progression, but there is nothing inherent in the discipline of history that dictates that the course of events is uni-directional and positive or that the past has a uniform metaphysical direction or shape. In fact, not only have linear progress narratives and Western constructions of linear time been widely challenged and discarded by historians (Koselleck, 2004; Lorenz & Bevernage, 2013), but histories of global climate change, environmental degradation, and educational ideas have often viewed these phenomena in non-linear terms.

One inherent feature of the academic discipline of history is a commitment to evidence-based reasoning. This has sometimes been referred to as Western rationality and logic, and linked to logical positivist views that are no longer widely accepted. Nevertheless, a critical examination of reasons and evidence is at the heart of any rigorous and disciplined study of history. Cutrara (2018) seems to contend that grounding beliefs in reasons and evidence are at odds with and prejudicial to traditional Indigenous ways of knowing. This is surprising, given that the Delgamuukw land claims case was heralded widely within Indigenous communities precisely because it provided long-overdue formal recognition of oral history as a credible form of evidence. Furthermore, as we explain later in this article, this commitment is not inconsistent with recognizing Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders as authoritative sources on Indigenous worldviews. Because of their position in the community, their testimony about Indigenous philosophies and ways of thinking is credible evidence. However, whenever a well-respected person within any community, including Indigenous Elders, offers scientific or historical claims about how the world actually operates, these views are appropriately subject to critical examination. This seems to resonate with Marie Battiste's (2002) observations:

Within any Indigenous nation or community people vary greatly in what they know. There are not only differences between ordinary folks and experts, such as experienced knowledge keepers, healers, hunters, or ceremonialists, there are also major differences of experience and professional opinion among the knowledge holders and workers, as we should expect of any living, dynamic knowledge system that is continually responding to new phenomena and fresh insights. (p. 12)

In an ethnically and culturally diverse world, individuals and groups should be free in their private realm to draw their own conclusions and espouse their own beliefs. However, in public spheres such as school curricula, groups with divergent worldviews must come to agreement about what is and is not included in the history curriculum. This does not mean accepting a single authoritative conclusion, but it does mean that we can at least agree where we disagree and that sincere efforts are made to understand the warrants for differing points of view. Doing this requires an agreed-upon basis for negotiating shared beliefs that are least intrusive to all groups. The so-called “Western rationality” on which academic disciplines were based offers such a mechanism. Its core articles of faith are few and include assumptions that are generally acceptable to diverse groups. A commitment to rationality in history, at its most basic, requires accepting a few principles such as:

- There are patterns and order in the world (for example, the sun is likely to rise and set each day).
- Events typically have one or more causes or explanations (for example, plants grow in part because they draw nutrients from their environment).
- Conclusions are more warranted to the extent that they are based on a robust collection of evidence and scrutiny of reasons (even if what counts as good reasons will differ greatly across individuals and groups).

For all of its contingent flaws, the rigorous gathering and examination of evidence is the least prejudicial forum for enabling diverse groups to set out, debate, and reconcile the warrants for their conclusions about the past.

## Teaching Historical Thinking to Promote Reconciliation

Over the last decade several Canadian provinces and territories have revised their K–12 social studies and history curricula to include historical thinking concepts and inquiry-based pedagogies drawn from Peter Seixas’s (2017) framework (Clark et al., 2015). At its core, historical thinking eschews the teaching of a fixed grand narrative, and instead focuses on teaching students to assess and construct historical accounts and interpretations with increasing sophistication (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Despite broad interest in historical thinking, only a few scholars have explored the questions, challenges, and possibilities that exist when historical thinking and Indigenous ways of knowing are used to teach Canadian history (Cutrara, 2018; Marker, 2011; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018).

Dwayne Donald (2012) describes how educational institutions often disregard Aboriginal experience because of a “logic of naturalized separation based on the assumption of stark, and ultimately irreconcilable differences” (p. 91). Cutrara (2018), the harshest critic of historical thinking, claims that implementing historical thinking moves us further away from addressing the TRC’s Calls to Action. She argues that an “oxymoronic fit” between historical thinking and Indigenous epistemologies superimposes a “settler grammar” on the study of the past, which widens the gulf between Indigenous and Euro-Canadian epistemologies and lessens the space to develop the mutual respect and openness for truth needed for reconciliation (pp. 253–254). In our view, claims that historical thinking, in principle, is ineffective in addressing the TRC’s Calls to Action are misplaced. The more appropriate criticism—as discussed by McGregor (2017)—focuses, in general, on how effectively historical thinking is being implemented and taught in Canada, and, in particular, on how well teachers are using historical thinking pedagogy to support the goals of reconciliation. Given that many jurisdictions have multi-disciplinary K–12 social studies courses rather than specific history courses, historical thinking is often pushed to the margins rather than occupying a central place in the curriculum. Additionally, many teachers have little training or expertise in historical thinking and are unfamiliar with its pedagogical approaches. In this section we explain the nature of historical thinking as conceptualized by Seixas to illustrate how, if properly implemented with sufficient professional development and teaching resources, it can support reconciliation by changing how history is taught.

## **Distinguishing Historical Thinking from Traditional History Teaching**

Although the notion has been around for over a century (Osborne, 2011), current conceptualizations of historical thinking originated as the result of changes beginning in the 1960s and 1970s in cognitive psychology, curriculum theory, and the discipline of history (Bruner, 1960; Gardner, 1985; Hirst, 1965; Iggers, 1997; Schwab, 1962, 1978). During this time, history education researchers in the United Kingdom and North America challenged the “content-only” focus of traditional school history instruction because it provided students with a great deal of historical information, but little understanding of the structure of the discipline (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Booth, 1980, 1987; Dickinson, Lee, & Rogers, 1984; Halldén, 1986; Lee, 1983; Shemilt, 1980; Wineburg, 1991). For these scholars the primary purpose of teaching history is to develop students’ ability to “think historically,” to initiate students into history as a form of disciplined inquiry that not only deepens students’ understanding of the past but also empowers them to navigate a rapidly changing, fractured, globalizing, and diverse society (Seixas, 2006b).

Research on the structure and form of historical thinking has largely centered on “second-order historical concepts,” which Lee and Ashby (2000) define as ideas that shape our understanding of the discipline as a form of knowledge. In a historical thinking pedagogical approach, second-order concepts such as historical significance and cause and consequence are taught alongside first-order substantive concepts such as revolution and nation, as well as specific historical facts (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Second-order concepts are used in tandem with substantive content during historical inquiries to deepen students’ historical content knowledge while developing increasingly sophisticated understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed and conclusions arrived at. For Seixas (2017), second-order concepts reveal “problems, tensions, or difficulties that demand comprehension, negotiation and, ultimately, an accommodation that is never a complete solution” (p. 5).

In Canada, Seixas (2006a) conceptualized a historical thinking framework for the pan-Canadian Benchmarks of Historical Thinking project (renamed the Historical Thinking Project in 2012) that mobilized current research on teaching and learning history. Seixas has revised the framework slightly over time (see, for example, Seixas, 1996, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013) to its most recent version which is characterized by six second-order concepts: historical significance, primary source evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension.

Although this framework has been influential in provincial and territorial history and social studies curricula, historical thinking has been interpreted and applied differently across Canadian curricula.

## Using Historical Thinking to Respond to the Calls to Action

Adopting the reforms we proposed in the first section, including inserting additional topics into the curriculum and making the stories we teach more inclusive, are insufficient to develop meaningful historical understanding. According to Seixas (2012), we must also teach students

how to assess the significance of stories, relate micro-histories to larger pictures of historical development, and how to unearth stories' underlying structures and implicit ethical messages. Only with a populace able to read and share stories across borders, across difference, can we shape a future together. (p. 135)

While the Canadian historical thinking movement was not developed specifically for the purpose of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, we contend that a historical thinking pedagogy can help teachers respond to the TRC's Calls to Action in at least four ways:

- Problematize the study of history to enable more sensitive and complex investigation of Indigenous topics.
- Create space for alternative conclusions and interpretations, including room for Indigenous students to express their conclusions.
- Nurture examination of history from Indigenous perspectives.
- Invite ethical judgments about the historical treatment of Indigenous people.

It must be emphasized that these benefits will not materialize merely from embedding a historical thinking focus in the curriculum. The greater challenges lie in engaging and supporting teachers in bringing historical thinking to life in their classrooms.

***Problematize the study of history.*** Teachers can employ historical thinking concepts to raise provocative questions about a wide range of topics impacting or involving

Indigenous communities (Seixas, 2012, p. 132). Table 1 illustrates this potential by outlining inquiry questions about different topics in Indigenous history for each of the six concepts.

**Table 1.** Historical thinking inquiry questions

Historical Thinking Concepts	Questions
Historical significance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Royal Proclamation more historically significant today than it was in 1763?</li> <li>• What three historically significant events, people, or developments in Indigenous history should be added to the textbook chapter on life in the Northwest in the 19th century?</li> </ul>
Primary source evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent is Governor James Douglas's account of the Vancouver Island Treaties confirmed or refuted by Indigenous oral histories and other primary sources?</li> <li>• Is the textbook account of the Battle of Seven Oaks justifiable given evidence from various primary source accounts?</li> </ul>
Cause and consequence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the most plausible explanation for the disappearance of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians between 1535 and 1608?</li> <li>• What were the most impactful direct and indirect consequences of the near extinction of the bison for First Nations and Métis people living on the Plains?</li> </ul>
Continuity and change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the War of 1812 a turning point in Indigenous–European relations in North America?</li> <li>• What are the most important continuities and changes in daily life for the Inuit between 1900 and 2000?</li> </ul>
Historical perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What underlying beliefs, values, and motivations influenced the federal government decision to ban the potlatch, the Sun Dance, and other Indigenous ceremonies and traditions in 1885?</li> <li>• What beliefs, values, and motivations led many Indigenous men to voluntarily enlist to fight in the First World War?</li> </ul>
The ethical dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the Stone Fort Treaty (Treaty One) fairly negotiated?</li> <li>• Has the federal government faithfully followed the terms and agreements agreed to in the Numbered Treaties?</li> </ul>

**Create space for alternative interpretations.** At its heart, historical thinking is about interpreting and assessing the evidence from the past and the narratives that others have constructed from this evidence (Stipp, Gibson, Denos, Case, & Miles, 2017). Rather

than treating history as an informational subject in which historical concepts, facts, and narratives are presented to students to learn, historical thinking supports students in understanding history by thinking deeply and critically about it. In the process, students learn to distance themselves from interpretations of the past they may have absorbed uncritically. A historical thinking approach requires that teachers problematize history to engage students in genuine inquiry, assemble multiple primary and secondary sources reflecting a multiplicity of perspectives, and remain open to alternative interpretations and viewpoints put forward by students (Stipp et al., 2017, p. 12). In a historical thinking classroom, space is provided for all students, including Indigenous students, to contemplate and offer well-justified interpretations. Heather McGregor (2017) argues that a historical thinking approach can be beneficial for Indigenous students and communities, just as for other students, because it offers a vehicle for Indigenous students' increased participation in making meaning of the traces of our shared past (p. 12).

The focus on teaching to assess and construct historical accounts and interpretations can help students identify and reject the racism embedded in historical narratives. For example, drawing on a selection of Indigenous sources, students can be asked to analyze old textbooks to identify which events, people, and developments were included, and who or what was excluded or downplayed. These kinds of activities help students understand the nature of historical accounts and interpretations, while improving their ability to detect and deconstruct ethnocentrism and racism in the narratives they encounter in school and for the rest of their lives.

***Nurture examination from Indigenous perspectives.*** One of the more important TRC recommendations is the call to integrate First Nations, Inuit, and Métis voices, perspectives, and experiences in the curriculum. Teaching the concept of “historical perspectives” supports students in recognizing the differences between present and past worldviews, understanding the perspectives of diverse historical actors in their historical context, and inferring how people thought in the past (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Importantly, a deeper understanding of historical perspectives encourages teachers and students to avoid generalizing about *the* Indigenous perspective, and instead recognize a diversity of Indigenous viewpoints on events and issues in the past and present.

**Invite ethical judgment.** A key TRC recommendation is to “ensure that tomorrow’s citizens are both knowledgeable and caring about the injustices of the past, as these relate to their own futures” (TRC, 2015, p. 241). The ethical dimension expressly invites students to consider “the present legacies of past injustices and sacrifices” (Seixas, 2012, p. 135), including the formation of ethical judgments about actors and actions from the past, and about the memorial obligations that we in the present owe to those who made sacrifices from which we benefit (Seixas, 2017, p. 10). The TRC’s articulation of the ethical dimension of history in its final report mirrors Seixas and Morton’s (2013) guideposts for generating powerful understandings of the ethical dimension:

Students must be able to make ethical judgments about the actions of their ancestors while recognizing that the moral sensibilities of the past may be quite different from their own in present times. They must be able to make informed decisions about what responsibility today’s society has to address historical injustices. (TRC, 2015, p. 241)

Evidence from civics and social studies education research suggests that an open classroom climate where students are encouraged to express their views, examine issues from multiple perspectives, and make ethical judgments about historical topics has several benefits. These include improved knowledge of and engagement in social and political issues, and increased student confidence and capacity to engage in civil discourse (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Ho, McAvoy, Hess, & Gibbs, 2017; Saye, 2017; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2013).

Over the past few years controversies about commemorations of historical events and people have fuelled public discussion throughout Canada.<sup>5</sup> These debates have focused largely on buildings, statues, and institutions named after historical figures whose actions were unjust and harmful to Indigenous people. There have been impassioned arguments about the meaning and significance of Canada 150—the sesquicentennial anniversary of Canadian Confederation—and about the fate of buildings or statues celebrating figures such as Egerton Ryerson, Mathew Baillie Begbie, Edward Cornwallis, and Sir

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5 ActiveHistory.ca has created a specific page that features numerous articles focused on commemoration, monuments, and renaming debates and controversies in Canada. See <http://activehistory.ca/commemoration-monuments-and-naming/>

John A. Macdonald. Controversies about these commemorations are central to the ethical dimension and have the potential to engage students in studying events involving Indigenous Peoples and deepening their understanding of present obligations arising from past events.

### **Examining Critiques of Historical Thinking**

Various criticisms have been leveled against historical thinking as an approach to teaching history. Most of these are general critiques of the pedagogical merits of a historical thinking approach. Another concern focuses on the potential mismatch between historical thinking and Indigenous ways of thinking about the past.

*Addressing general concerns.* A general complaint against historical thinking is its inability to foster robust historical understanding. Kent den Heyer (2011) suggests that historical thinking procedures have been decontextualized and sterilized as though “extracted in labs from historians who lack hopes, fantasies, or racialized, gendered, classed, and desiring bodies and who also lack political intelligence” (p. 157). Similarly, Cutrara (2018) claims that historical thinking is focused on teaching students academic “skills” to think and do “like historians,” to develop a “methodological understanding of the historical method,” and to “dispassionately assess evidence to navigate towards truth” (p. 254). Here is not the place to address these assertions in detail, but we believe them to be mischaracterizations of the historical thinking framework. Numerous scholars have illustrated how historical thinking concepts can nurture powerful competencies or habits of mind that foster a deeper understanding of the past, rather than expect students to passively accept pre-packaged versions of history (Levstik & Barton, 2008; Metzger & McArthur Harris, 2018; Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2015; VanSledright & Limon, 2006; Wineburg, 1996).

*Reconciling Indigenous thinking and historical thinking.* Cutrara (2018) claims that because historical thinking arises out of a Western academic tradition it is inherently biased against Indigenous historical thinking. It is unclear whether her objection is anything other than the claim discussed earlier that the discipline of history has traditionally been biased against Indigenous ways of knowing and this bias is, supposedly, inherent to the discipline. We have already indicated how historians have become increasingly

sensitized and committed to correcting historical biases in their accounts of Indigenous Peoples.

Marker (2011) raises a more nuanced concern about potential tensions between Indigenous ways of thinking about the past and Western conceptions of historical thinking. He identifies four themes within Indigenous historical consciousness that are traditionally excluded from the ways history courses are constructed and taught. These include the circular nature of time, relationships with land and animals, the primacy of local knowledge over universal truths, and the complexities of colonization and decolonization. Clearly, there is much for non-Aboriginal educators to learn in order to integrate these themes. Seixas (2012) offers a series of “questions and puzzles” about the relationship between Indigenous ways of knowing and the six historical thinking concepts, which he believes are best “addressed in ongoing dialogue with Indigenous scholars” (p. 132). McGregor (2017) identifies similar kinds of questions and possibilities in her exploration of the relationship between efforts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in school programs and efforts to implement historical thinking.

We believe that the obstacles to reconciling these two “ways of thinking” are surmountable if we recognize that the six historical thinking concepts are second-order considerations, while the four themes that Marker mentions are first-order considerations. First-order considerations offer statements about how the world is and how it functions; for example, “the earth is round,” “animals and humans are interconnected,” or “the passage of time is circular.” Second-order considerations raise questions about first-order statements; for example, “What caused the world to be round?” or “What is the evidence for believing that the world is round?” or “Has the world always been round?” These three second-order questions match three of the historical thinking concepts—cause and consequence, evidence, and continuity and change. These concepts do not presume to offer substantive answers about, for example, whether time is circular or linear. They simply invite students to consider continuity and change over time in order to form their own conclusions about emerging patterns in human and natural affairs (linear or circular). Or, to put this point another way, when people speak about Indigenous ways of thinking about the past they may be describing particular beliefs within the Indigenous worldview about the past, whereas references to the historical thinking framework identify categories of questions to guide inquiries into the past. We do not see an irreconcilable tension between these two.

## Establish Integrated Courses on Indigenous Worldviews

In addition to strengthening the centrality and representation of Indigenous history and perspectives in discipline-focused courses in history, the remaining response we propose is to create a multidisciplinary course(s) on Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems. Vine Deloria explains how Indigenous and Western knowledge structures differ:

Unlike Western thinkers, for example, the Sioux did not separate their thoughts into categories and disciplines. Everything was practical, economic, political and religious all at once. Indeed, they had a word to describe this totality, *wounicage*, which simply meant “our way of doing things.” They accorded other people the right to have their own ways. (Cited in Marker, 2019, p. 193)

Cutrara (2018) concludes that treating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems with equal respect requires expanding the discipline of history to include the less delineated ways of knowing found within Indigenous communities. The alternative we propose is to acknowledge the limits of what disciplinary history courses can offer in terms of understanding Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, and recognize the need for a broader, integrated course on Indigenous ways of knowing. This more integrated course, comparable to interdisciplinary humanities courses, would create a better opportunity to teach about the unique values and modes of thinking that constitute Indigenous “mindscape,” to use Marker’s (2019) term. Teaching about these broader beliefs is a necessary aspect of reconciliation: “In our relationships of reconciliation, space for these truths—truths that may be different from what we traditionally have been able to hear or believe—must be central to the development of a decolonized and Indigenized Canada” (Marker, 2011, p. 110).

## Distinguishing the Study of History from the Study of Worldviews

History is one of the disciplines in the Western worldview and is clearly the basis for many insights, but by no means does it account for the range of truths found in Indigenous historical worldviews. Even though Indigenous Peoples did not establish the same distinctions as Western societies for generating and transmitting knowledge, if one were to map the range of thinking and insights within Indigenous worldviews, we would find

“interdisciplinary sources of knowledge” (Battiste, 2002, p. 7), which the Western mind would recognize as drawing from metaphysics, philosophy, law, literature, language, political science, ecology, history, anthropology, cosmology, religion, the visual and performing arts, and more. The question then arises: Does it make more sense to expand the scope of history courses to accommodate Indigenous historical worldviews, as Cutrara (2018) has suggested, or to retain a discipline-based study of history and establish an integrated course that recognizes the broader ways of knowing within Indigenous historical worldviews? The TRC calls for the treatment of Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect, which includes teaching about Indigenous insights, philosophies, and worldviews. As such, an integrated course in Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing, analogous to a humanities course in the Western tradition, would recognize the limits of disciplinary history courses in developing a comprehensive and holistic understanding of Indigenous thinking.

### **Justifying This Approach**

There are two pragmatic considerations and an important substantive reason for adding interdisciplinary courses in Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing alongside discipline-based history courses.

***Realistic to achieve.*** The alternatives advocated by some scholars radically alter the teaching of history as we know it. The changes to history courses that we propose in this article already represent demanding expectations for educators. Adding an integrated course on Indigenous worldviews achieves the desired goals without requiring a complete restructuring of the history curriculum.

***More holistic and adequate treatment.*** The history curriculum is already overcrowded, and there is very limited space to add significant, richly contextualized treatments of Indigenous worldviews to the history and social studies courses currently offered. Even if Indigenous history becomes part of mainstream history, attention to the broader dimensions of Indigenous worldviews will be piecemeal and inadequate. The depth of treatment needed for a deeper appreciation of the complexity of and diversity among Indigenous worldviews is more likely to be achieved in an integrated course(s) dedicated to this goal.

***Avoid an epistemological dilemma.*** Cutrara (2018) suggests that treating Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect requires accepting the historical truth of Indigenous oral traditions, stories, and beliefs on par with the truth of evidence-based historical claims (p. 262). This suggestion heightens the tension between two kinds of historical accounts: traditional teachings that must be accepted by virtue of the trusted position of Elders and knowledge holders within a community, and other historical claims that must be proven to be credible in light of the available historical evidence. If students are to be taught to think historically, Cutrara's suggestion would imply that students be encouraged to question the historical conclusions emerging from non-Indigenous people, but to accept without question the historical conclusions emerging from Indigenous knowledge holders.

As Battiste (2002) has argued, the suggestion that traditional stories be accepted as historical truth based on faith without any corroboration paradoxically has the effect of making Indigenous claims inferior in the eyes of those who are not members of Indigenous communities (p. 12). Non-Indigenous people can appreciate that Elders and traditional stories have authority within Indigenous communities, but it is a separate matter to require that non-Indigenous people adopt these stories as historical facts. In other words, treating Indigenous and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect should be taken to mean that Indigenous worldviews deserve equal respect among other worldviews, but it cannot require that all communities adopt Indigenous worldviews as their own. Yet, intentionally or not, this seems to be the implied result when non-Indigenous people are asked to accept *historical* claims from Indigenous Elders without evidence or scrutiny. Subjecting historical claims to critical scrutiny should not be confused with the justifiable recognition of Indigenous Elders' testimony as authoritative sources of truths about the worldviews within their communities. While Elders have much to contribute to our scientific and historical understanding, they are not indisputable authorities in these areas. As such, their historical claims are appropriately subject to scrutiny. In the spirit of reconciliation, this seems the fairest method for adjudicating among competing claims.

## Conclusion

We have argued that reforms to Canadian history education articulated in the TRC's Calls to Action can be achieved by modifying current educational practices in three ways: strengthening the representation and centrality of Indigenous histories and perspectives in current Canadian history and social studies curricula; teaching students to think historically so they are better prepared to interpret and question the ethnocentric and colonialist assumptions in the narratives they encounter; and developing at least one integrated, multidisciplinary course on Indigenous studies in each province and territory that focuses on teaching about Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing. Although aspects of these reforms are present in some Canadian jurisdictions, continued concerted effort to develop and implement policies, curricula, and learning resources is needed from many actors: provincial and territorial ministries of education; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Elders, knowledge holders, and educators; teacher education programs; school boards; teachers' unions; and K–12 schools.

The path we outline is neither straightforward nor easy. As Archibald (2008) explains, there are different narrative genres, purposes, protocols, and ways of making meaning in Indigenous stories about the past and, as a result, there is no one way to teach and learn Indigenous histories. Cutrara (2018) worries that history teachers have reached “a stalemate” integrating First Nations, Inuit, and Métis perspectives into their lessons, and claims that history teachers are teaching about residential schools, but “are not necessarily moving beyond simply telling these stories and toward a more complex exploration of colonialism in Canada” (p. 253). Marker (2019) cautions about the fallout to be expected if changes to curricula and teacher training

do not examine the ways that Indigenous people understood—and understand—the universe through advanced knowledge systems and deep ecological consciousness, the history of residential schooling may reveal only the darkness of racism and cultural genocide and fail to show the light of Indigenous wisdom that was devastated by the catastrophes of colonization. (pp. 17–18)

Clearly, the suggestions for reshaping history education in Canada described in this article will be of little value unless everyone in the education system receives significant opportunities and sustained support to learn about a past and a worldview that may

be different from their own (McGregor, 2017). Many have rightly expressed reservations about the extent to which non-Aboriginal teachers are knowledgeable and open-minded enough to sensitively teach about the complexities of Indigenous perspectives and interpretations of history. It will be counterproductive to increase representation of Indigenous history in curricula and learning resources if teachers are ill-prepared or unwilling to teach about it. In order to teach about Indigenous history effectively, teachers will need to be taught Indigenous cultural competency and sensitivity, and will need to connect with Aboriginal Elders and knowledge holders who may assist, mentor, and be sources of local history and practices.

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