

Historical Hegemony or Warranted Adaptation? A Response to Smith

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In his article “Methodologically Historicizing Social Studies Education: Curricular Filtering and Historical Thinking as Social Studies Thinking,” Bryan Smith draws attention to limitations and confusions in the social studies thinking framework introduced by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME; 2013) in its latest Grade 1–8 social studies, geography, and history curriculum (pp. 58–60). Smith’s underlying concern is that the OME has employed a conception of historical thinking developed by Peter Seixas (2015) as the basis for a framework for thinking in social studies. Smith argues that minor linguistic changes to Seixas’s terminology mask the predominantly historical focus of OME’s framework. According to Smith (2017), the imposition of historical thinking concepts ignores the interdisciplinary nature of social studies by privileging historical methods of inquiry over the methodologies of other social studies disciplines (p. 1). These allegations

are topical and worthy of consideration since several other provinces have recently revised or are currently revising their social studies curricula by infusing historical thinking, geographical thinking, and other social studies thinking concepts.

We acknowledge that the OME's framework has flaws, but not because it was initially derived from research in historical thinking. On the contrary, we believe that the underlying conception of social studies thinking is sound, and the flaws introduced by OME are relatively minor. We will begin by presenting the framework for social studies thinking that The Critical Thinking Consortium (TC²) provided to the OME curriculum development team, which they modified and adapted without attribution when creating the OME framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 13). By comparing the two versions, we can better appreciate the soundness of the TC² framework for social studies thinking and recognize the unfortunate but not disqualifying flaws introduced by OME in its version.

Origins and Limitations of OME's Framework

In 2011, TC² developed a framework for thinking in social studies. While TC²'s framework grew out of Seixas's scholarship in history education, the six general concepts listed in the left-hand column of the chart in Table 1 apply to all social studies disciplines. For each underlying idea, TC² articulated disciplinary parallels or analogous questions that are not mere clones of history, they are customized to reflect differences in each of the other disciplines. For example, in history, the parallel for "Determining the topics and ideas worthy of study" is "Historical significance: Is this historic event or person significant?" In geography, the analogous concept is "Geographical importance: Is this region of geographic importance?"

Table 1. Portal concepts of disciplines within social studies

Underlying focus	History	Geography	Economics	Political science	Law	Archaeology
<i>Determining the topics and ideas worthy of study</i>	Historical significance: Is this historic event or person significant?	Geographic importance: Is this region of geographic importance?	Economic significance: How economically valuable is this activity or resource?	Political currency: Is this a politically important idea or event?	Legal importance: Is this an important legal development or concept?	Archaeological significance: Is this an important site or artefact?
<i>Assessing claims and their justifications</i>	Evidence and interpretation	Evidence (data) and interpretation	Evidence (data) and interpretation	Evidence and conclusion	Evidence (facts), reasons and conclusions	Evidence (material record) and interpretation
<i>Examining patterns and variations</i>	Continuity and change over time	Patterns and trends	Trend and variability: in markets	Stability and change—within and across power relations	Constancy and change	Similarities and differences
<i>Exploring causal relations</i>	Cause and consequence	Interactions and associations—mutual influences	Cause and effect	Cause and effect	Cause and consequence	Cause and effect
<i>Adopting the mindset of an insider</i>	Historical perspective taking—understanding the times	Geographic perspective taking—developing a sense of place	Economic mindset—developing a sense of value	Political mindset—understanding power and privilege from inside the system	Legal perspective—understanding the legal point of view	Archaeological perspective—developing a sense of time and place based on the material record
<i>Assessing the wisdom and ethics of actions and policies</i>	Ethical judgements [Do we owe First Nations people an apology for their treatment in residential schools?]	Geographic value judgements [What responsibilities do Canadians have to poor people in developing countries?]	Economic value judgements [Does wind power make economic sense?]	Judgements of political ethics [Is civil disobedience justifiable? Is proportional representation effective?]	Legal value judgements [Is this law fair? Should the gun registry be scrapped?]	Archaeological value judgements [What is the most responsible way to preserve and enhance this prehistoric site?]

Source: “Submission to the Social Studies, History and Geography Curriculum Review Committees, Ontario Ministry of Education.” © The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2011.

In modifying TC²'s framework, the OME made their version less clear and less complete. However, as we examine these flaws, we can see that they do not challenge the soundness of the underlying conception.

One flaw stems from the OME's decision to frame its social studies thinking concepts in language that closely mirrors Seixas's historical thinking concepts,¹ and not to use the more general language found in TC²'s version. This modification drives Smith's core concern that the concepts narrowly apply to historical thinking and not to other social studies disciplines. In TC²'s original framework, the deliberate use of more general terminology avoided this perception. The articulation of the six underlying ideas listed in the left-hand column of the TC² version provides a more transparently interdisciplinary framework that applies to all social studies disciplines. For example, the more general category "Exploring causal relations" is intended to cover "Cause and consequence" in history, "Interactions and associations" in geography, "Cause and effect" in economics, and so on.

In addition, OME's version is incomplete in that it omits two of the concepts ("Primary source evidence" and "The ethical dimension") included in Seixas's (2015) work and in TC²'s version.² According to Smith, the OME maintains that these two concepts are incorporated elsewhere in the curriculum. While the OME is entitled to address these two concepts differently from the other conceptions, it is unfortunate that these concepts were not left in OME's overall framework because both are key dimensions of thinking in social studies.

The OME version is confusing in that it treats four concepts as discreet ideas ("Cause and consequence," "Continuity and change," "Patterns and trends," and "Interrelationships"). In TC²'s version, these are not discreet, but two pairs of complementary concepts. "Cause and consequence" in history is the complement of "Interrelations" in geography (also called "Interactions and associations"), which seeks to answer the question: "How do human and natural factors and events connect with and influence each other?" (Sharpe, Bahbahani, & Huynh, 2016, p. 4). Similarly, "Patterns and trends" (concerning the variation and distribution of geographical phenomena over time and space) is the spatial analogue to the temporal concept of "Continuity and change" (which examines

1 As we discuss shortly, an exception is two concepts related to geographic thinking.

2 The parallel terms in TC²'s version are "Evidence and interpretation" and "Ethical judgements."

how lives and conditions are alike or different over periods of time). This parallelism is lost in the OME version.³ Rather than highlighting nuanced disciplinary parallels between complementary concepts, the OME version presents them as unrelated considerations.

The modifications discussed above are unfortunate but not entirely surprising given the political and educational compromises imposed on curriculum development teams. However, the ensuing shortcomings do not render the OME version conceptually invalid in the way and to the extent that Smith claims. We will now explain why the framework, even as conceptualized by the OME, provides a sound and workable structure to guide thinking across social studies disciplines.

The Case for the Framework

Despite being derived from scholarship in history education, the concepts in the framework are not owned by or unique to history. Smith wrongfully assumes that because OME's articulation of social studies thinking concepts is similar to Seixas's terminology, they are distinctly historical and cannot adequately accommodate other social studies disciplines. We believe they offer powerful and relevant lenses that accommodate both common considerations and nuanced differences across social studies. Let's briefly explore how the six core ideas outlined in TC²'s version apply to other disciplines:

1. *Determine the topics and ideas worthy of study (Significance)*: In history, this concept focuses on significant events or people in the past; in geography, it focuses on the important places or regions; in economics, it focuses on valuable activities or resources; in political science, it focuses on politically important ideas or events; in law, it focuses on important concepts or developments; and in archaeology, it focuses on the significance of archaeological sites and artefacts.
2. *Assess claims and their justifications (Evidence)*: Each social studies discipline involves methods and techniques for analyzing and assessing different

3 Although these disciplinary pairings are not apparent in its social studies framework, they are in OME's (2013) thinking frameworks for history (pp. 130–131) and geography (pp. 158–159).

types of evidence, including primary sources, data, documents, artefacts, and other aspects of the material record.

3. *Examine patterns and variations (Continuity and change)*: Each social studies discipline examines patterns and variations over different scales. In history, this involves identifying continuity and change over time; in geography, it focuses on patterns and trends on a spatial scale; in economics, it focuses on trends and variability in markets; and in politics, it focuses on stability and change within and across power relations.
4. *Explore causal relations (Cause and consequence)*: Each social studies discipline focuses on explaining why things happened and what the consequences of those events are. In history and most social studies disciplines, this involves identifying causes and consequences (or causes and effects). While in disciplines like geography, it involves examining how human and natural factors and events connect with and influence each other, and what the effects of those interactions are.
5. *Adopt the mindset of an insider (Perspective)*: An important part of each social studies discipline involves seeing the world through a unique disciplinary lens. In history, this involves understanding the worldviews, beliefs, and values that existed in different times; in geography, this involves developing a sense of place; in economics, this involves developing a sense of value; in law, this involves developing a legal point of view; and in archaeology, this involves developing an understanding of time and place based on the material record.
6. *Assess the wisdom and ethics of actions and policies (Ethical dimension)*: Making judgements about the ethics of actions and policies is central to all social studies disciplines. In history, this involves making ethical judgements about the actions or decisions in the past and what should be done in the present to address injustices or celebrate commendable actions from the past. In geography, this involves making geographic value judgements about the practices and outcomes associated with geographical actions and events; in economics, this focuses on economic value judgements; in political science, this involves judgements of political ethics; and in law, this involves legal value judgements about the fairness of laws or decisions.

It is instructive that TC² has published analogous conceptions of thinking in history (Stipp, Gibson, Denos, Case, & Miles, 2017), geography (Sharpe et al., 2016), and archaeology (Wearing, 2011) with the assistance of academics and professionals in each of these disciplines.⁴ A telling argument for the legitimacy of the six geographical thinking concepts is that they were co-published with the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. It is unlikely that this group would reduce thinking in its discipline to a conceptual clone of historical thinking.

Smith's Objections

Smith cites “human-environment relations” and “active citizenship” as two important social studies topics that are not adequately addressed by OME’s framework, which according to him is essentially history-focused. We contend that concepts in the OME’s framework adequately address both of these topics.

Smith (2017) claims that human-environment relations, which involve “recognizing and seeing the ways that humans engage with, shape, and are shaped by the environment” is inadequately addressed by the thinking framework (p. 18). Although he acknowledges that aspects of human-environment relations can be explored under the concept of “Patterns and trends,” he suggests that human-environment relations are reduced to a “subordinate” concept, whereas it should be treated as a focus of inquiry in its own right. What Smith fails to recognize is that the topic of human-environment relations is better addressed by the thinking concept of “Interrelationships,” not “Patterns and trends.” “Interrelationships” asks students to explore connections, “within and between natural and/or human systems, including how they adapt to and have an impact on one another” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 60). Clearly, “Interrelationships” is centrally and directly concerned with human-environment relations. We fail to see any subordination of the topic.

“Active citizenship” is Smith’s second example of a topic that is inadequately addressed by the OME framework. He is particularly concerned with “social and political change,” which Smith regards as a key aspect of citizenship education. Smith (2017)

4 Although comparable levels of work have not been done in other social studies disciplines, as illustrated above, we believe the parallels extend to other disciplines as well.

contends that the concepts of “Continuity and change” and “Cause and consequence” are inadequate in addressing this topic. For Smith, social and political change is about seeking to ameliorate injustices, questioning inequities and making society a more egalitarian place (p. 19). In short, notions of social and political continuity and change must have an obviously critical dimension (p. 20). We suggest that three different thinking concepts are useful in addressing Smith’s conception of social and political change. “Continuity and change” allows for critical examination of what has changed and what has stayed the same in regards to social and political concerns and inequities over time and space. Similarly, “Cause and consequence” invites students to identify “the factors that affect or lead to an event, situation, action, interaction occurring as well as its impact or effects” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 59). This easily accommodates consideration of the causes of inequities and injustice, and the role that individuals can and have played in ameliorating injustices and making society more egalitarian. Also relevant is the “Ethical dimension” (also called “Ethical judgement”), a concept included in TC²’s version, but not in OME’s version (although it was included in the OME’s citizenship framework). The “Ethical dimension” focuses on helping students make reasoned ethical judgements about whether past and present actions, decisions, and policies are right/wrong, fair/unfair, or just/unjust. In our view, these three thinking concepts collectively capture the full range of ideas that Smith ascribes to social and political change.

Possible Alternative Conception

Smith argues that an alternative framework, the five themes of geography adopted by the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers in 1984, is superior to the geographic thinking concepts outlined by Bob Sharpe, Kamilla Bahbahani and Niem Tu Huynh (2016) because they are more “geography-centred.” For Smith (2017), the five themes “address unique fundamental notions in geography, namely, the role of space and how humans adapt/use/move across it,” whereas the six geographic thinking concepts are not geographical because they mirror methods of historical thinking that emerged from the work of Peter Seixas (p. 12). In arguing for the five themes, Smith quotes Andrew Young (2013), who describes the five themes as an “organizational tool for social studies curricula” that helps students “comprehend complex information through the lens of geography” and notes that the themes have been

“widely adopted in provincial curricula across Canada and are a simple way to introduce geographic skills and content throughout all grade levels” (p. 48).

While the five themes framework has obvious value, we disagree with Smith that they offer an alternative conception of geographical thinking. In contrasting the five themes with the six thinking concepts, Sharpe et al. (2016, pp. 20–21) argue that each framework serves a different purpose. The five themes offer strands or standards for organizing the vast content knowledge in geography to ensure appropriate coverage of the many outcomes, but they do not focus on critical inquiries into geography. On the other hand, the six thinking concepts are not topics to cover but challenges or problems to resolve. For example, questions of significance are intended to make the study of geography problematic and open to debate, where students reach their own conclusions about spatial importance. Ironically, later in the same article that Smith cites favourably, Young (2013) outlines the power of TC²'s geographic thinking concepts in problematizing content. He states that they provide “a means for turning the factual content of geography into the subject of analysis for students” and “an excellent opportunity to examine social studies content through the lens of geography where students can begin to think like a geographer” (p. 51). Perhaps an even more telling indication that the five themes and six thinking concepts serve different purposes is that the book (Sharpe et al., 2016, pp. 19–21) that argues for distinguishing the two conceptions was co-published by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, the most prominent geography group in Canada.

Closing Remarks

Despite the flaws in OME's version, it nevertheless offers a generally sound and workable framework for structuring thinking within social studies. The power of the concepts lies in their robust focus on thinking by virtue of their ability to problematize content, their applicability across all social studies disciplines while still accommodating disciplinary nuances, and the elegance and usefulness of having six core concepts. A proliferation of thinking concepts where every social studies discipline has its own conceptual framework, as Smith would seem to invite, would make for an unwieldy curriculum.

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