

Preparing for a future with many pasts

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Students have always brought to the classroom a collection of historical accounts that may not correspond to the accounts taught in school. However as the student population grows more diverse, so too do these accounts. Young citizens are increasingly called upon to understand multiple accounts of past events (Banks, 2008; Seixas, 2004; Takaki, 1993), and without an understanding of why two historical accounts – even carefully researched, honestly reported ones – may disagree, they may come to hold either a cynical view that history is written by the victors, or an “anything goes” conception wherein all accounts are equally valid. Such views are clearly inconsistent with participation in a pluralistic, democratic society.

Students’ understandings of differing accounts are part of a larger set of “metahistorical” conceptions (including historical significance, causes and consequences, constancy and change) that scholars agree are important to understanding historical complexity (Lee, 2004; Seixas, 2006; Wineburg, 2001). However, it is challenging for even skilled teachers to address metahistorical conceptions in a packed curriculum driven by mandated testing. Below we discuss a unit recently developed and tested to help students approach a more sophisticated understanding of differing historical accounts, without sacrificing curriculum coverage. The architecture of the unit lends itself readily to the substitution of different historical material, so it can be adapted to fit curriculum requirements in different states and provinces.

Data from pre and post assessments suggest that students’ ideas about why historical accounts may differ grew more sophisticated over the unit. We discuss preliminary results from our research.

Learning to Think About Conflicting Accounts

Students in today's diverse urban communities may enter the classroom with stories about their current home country and the countries of their or their parents' origins, which may conflict both with those taught in school, and with the stories of their peers. This places demand on the metahistorical ideas that students have to understand and appreciate the existence of conflicting accounts. History is about who we think we are. How can we live tolerantly in a pluralistic, democratic society and engage in significant debate with others if we either believe they are all wrong, or that history is just a matter of what we want to believe?

Based on interviews with students in the UK, Denis Shemilt (1987, 2000) suggests the following elements of a mature understanding of differing historical accounts:

- History does not speak with a single voice. Knowledgeable storytellers disagree.
- It takes more than bias to explain the differences between stories.
- Historical knowledge can never be absolutely certain.
- A good historical account is a likely and believable reconstruction of events, based on evidence that is never complete.
- Accounts are shaped by both the evidence available, and the questions asked. So, it is possible to have several equally defensible accounts of the same events.

Working with experienced Social Studies teachers, and inspired by Shemilt's theory, we developed a unit that we hoped would lead 11th grade students to more mature conceptions about why historical accounts differ. The unit, which came to be called

“Compassionate Canada?” invited students to interrogate Canada’s popular image as a Dudley Doright do-gooder to the world. Implementation took a total of 9 hours of instructional time, spread over two weeks.

Because our goal was to help students overcome naïve conceptions about history (such as the conception that there is always one true story about a past event), we informed our work with research on conceptual change (diSessa, 2002; Vosniadou, 2007). Educational psychologists have proposed that in order to change longstanding conceptions, learners must experience dissatisfaction with their existing understanding of a phenomenon (Posner, Strike, Hewson & Gertzog, 1982). To this end, our design orchestrated constructive conflict between groups of students, and within students’ own minds (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), to unsettle their existing conceptions about historical accounts.

Students pursued the question “Has Canada become a more compassionate country over the last 100 years?” Each group was assigned one of seven historical cases of the 20th century, about which we had assembled an online archive of primary and secondary sources. Some of the cases were chosen to illustrate the compassion of Canada’s government or its people towards those in need (e.g. Canada’s response to Tamil refugees in the 1980s), while others call that compassion into question (e.g. the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II).

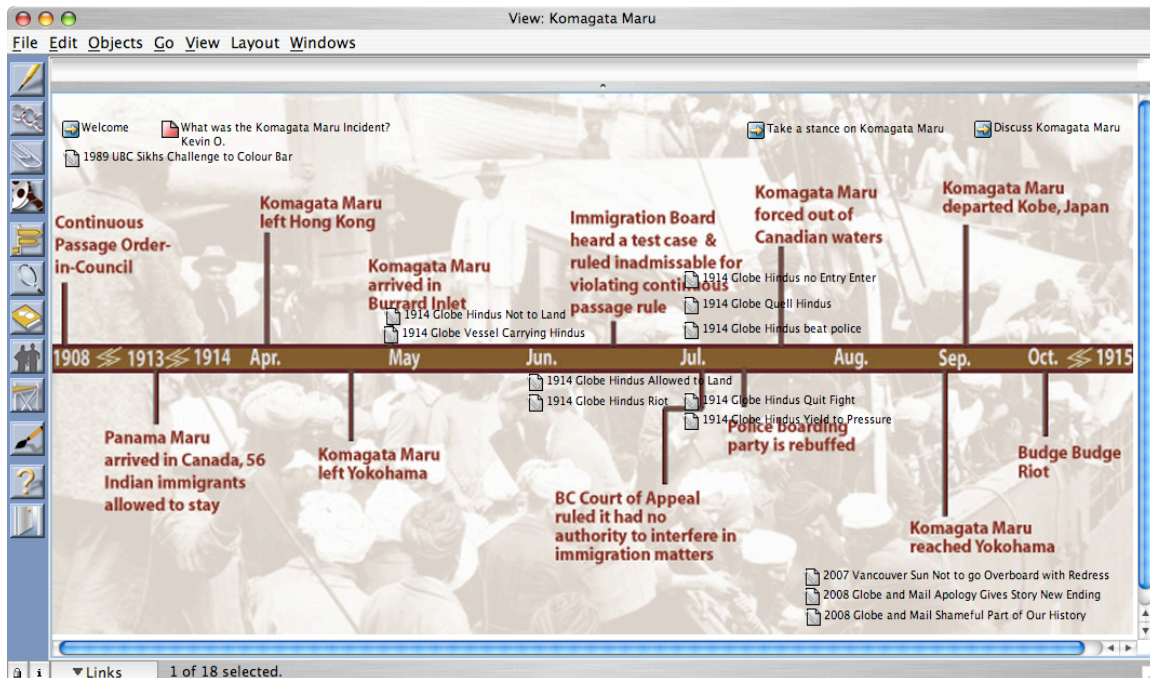


Figure 1: A timeline view for one case in *Knowledge Forum*, with source documents attached

For example, the case of the Komagata Maru occurred in Vancouver in 1914. The Japanese steam liner carried 376 passengers, the majority of whom were Sikhs originally from Punjab. Canadian authorities refused to allow most passengers to land, despite the fact that they were British citizens with passports. After several weeks of legal battles, the ship was forced to return to Calcutta, where a number of the passengers were shot and killed, and over two hundred were jailed. The government of Canada made its apologies over this incident in 2008.

After each group of students had used its assigned case to develop a stance on the major question of the unit (*Has Canada become a more compassionate country over the last 100 years?*), students were brought together in a horseshoe debate. This culminating activity was meant to problematize naïve ideas about the nature of historical accounts by confronting students not only with differing positions on the question of the unit, but differing bodies of relevant evidence.

Telementoring

Partly to help students cope with the conflict they would encounter in the unit, we assigned each group a history graduate student as an online mentor². Our volunteer mentors were provided access to the students' online environment³ and could read and post messages to them. This approach, which has come to be called “telementoring” or “e-mentoring” has been pursued for a number of years, but rarely in social studies classrooms (Harris & Jones, 1999; Kochan & Pascarelli, 2005; Single & Single, 2005).

Our approach to telementoring is based on the premise that the organizing concepts of a discipline are embedded in the discourse of its practitioners (Bazerman, 1988; Myers, 1990). In *Compassionate Canada*, telementoring enabled students to consult directly with a trained historian about the problems of understanding that emerged for them as they pursued a historical question. We expected our volunteer mentors to serve as a responsive, critical audience for students' developing work, probing them about their interpretations of the evidence provided, and helping them question their assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge.

Testing “Compassionate Canada?”

Our field trial of *Compassionate Canada* took place in 2009 with almost ninety students from Hanover Secondary⁴, a public school in Metro Vancouver. Hanover serves 500 students whose families speak an immense diversity of heritage languages. Students

² Mentors were recruited, screened and trained by the researchers. Each volunteer submitted to a criminal records check and supplied two personal references.

³ We used Knowledge Forum, an online group workspace produced by Learning in Motion (www.knowledgeforum.com) (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996)

⁴ Student, school and teacher names are pseudonyms.

participating in our trial came from three sections of Mr. George's 11th-grade social studies class. Mr. George has over 15 years of experience teaching history and social studies.

Two members of the design team were in the classroom each day of the implementation: one to take field notes, another to assist Mr. George as required. At the conclusion of the unit we also carried out focus groups with each participating class about how they thought the unit worked, and we interviewed several students. To gauge the success of the unit in improving students' metahistorical conceptions, pre-and-post survey measures were collected both from Mr. George's students and a demographically-matched comparison group that did not participate in *Compassionate Canada*. This survey, based on Shemilt's developmental model (Authors, 2010), included questions such as:

- What makes somebody a historian?
- How do historians know what caused an event?
- Why do historians write new books about events that were already written about before?
- If a historian is learning about the events of a period and finds two stories about them that disagree, what should she do?

In response to each question, students rated their agreement with four statements written to address more and less mature metahistorical ideas described in Shemilt's theory. Forty-one students involved in *Compassionate Canada* provided research consent forms and completed the survey. An additional twenty-six students made up the

comparison group. In addition to their metahistorical conceptions, students were surveyed about their grades in school, their parents' education, their plans for the future, and the degree to which they had received different types of advice and guidance from their online mentors.

We expected that some types of guidance would reduce naïve conceptions and increase mature ones. For example, if students reported that their mentors offered alternate interpretations of the source materials, this should reduce naïve conceptions and increase mature ones. On the other hand, we did not expect changes in metahistorical conceptions to correlate with reports that mentors had provided basic information about the historical cases that students were studying.

How it Worked

Students spent most of their time for the unit in one of the school's two computer labs, pouring over the digitized archival documents of the cases. The computers, while older, were adequate for our purposes; however the space was small, and we did not anticipate the difficulties that this would present for group work. In the narrow aisles, it was difficult for students to physically arrange themselves around a single computer screen so they could examine sources and share interpretations together. Several of the 4-person teams seated themselves along a row of the computer lab, where they could talk as conveniently as the space allowed. Other teams divided up their work and seated themselves far away from one another, speaking rarely.

We became aware that the class had not done any group work previously; so there were no established routines to rely on. Some divided the evidence, assigning each student to review a portion of the documents for the assigned case and report back.

Groups also divided major tasks, such as representing the group in the horseshoe debate, and writing questions to the telementor. While not what we expected, some students felt strongly about the sense of this arrangement. During one class session a student remarked “Why would I bother asking [my mentor] the same question that everyone else is asking? That’s just a waste of the mentor’s time.”

Seven volunteers from across Canada served as telementors. Most were completing PhDs in History. One telementor, Linda, wrote an introduction that read in part:

My name is Linda, and I am a PhD candidate. I am new to the west coast, having grown up on the prairies. Political history is not my only interest (but I really do love it!) ... For me what is most exciting about studying history is when I make that connection between historical events and my own life or in the lives of people I know (and this often happens when I least expect it).

Majunder, whose group was working on the Komagata Maru case, was his group’s liaison to Linda. Days before the end of the unit, he posted this note:

After going over the [newspaper] articles, my group and I have come to a collective agreement, that Canada has become more compassionate over the years. The incidents of the Komagata Maru were not compassionate, but we've reached a conclusion that Canada has followed a better path to make sure that incidents such as the Komagata Maru case don't happen again... Today, Canada has become a more compassionate country, because after all this country is composed of people who have immigrated here. These immigrants have

contributed to the building of such a great nation, and they have been recognized for all the hard work they've done in the past.

In response to this note, Linda did just what we wanted her to do – push Majunder and his teammates on questions of evidence:

Good work. Can you flesh out your argument with some more evidence? What has Canada done to ensure an incident like the K.M. doesn't happen again? Does the presence of immigrants in the country alone make Canada more compassionate? Or do we need to think about how these immigrants are treated? How do we recognize the work they have done?

Majunder responded:

Canada has given equal rights to every Canadian citizen no matter what race they belong to. In my opinion there's much more planning ahead of time for any laws that are being passed. Officials look at all aspects of the laws, who it benefits and who is disadvantaged, and they try to find just the right law. Canada's going through a great learning process, the presence of immigrants is not the only thing which makes Canada compassionate...there's much more today. Canada acts as a peacekeeping nation all around the world. We help out other nations when a natural disaster happens...Canada is compassionate today because we look after nations in need, we care for other countries and try to help our race, the 'human race'.

These notes were part of Majunder's team's preparation for the horseshoe debate in which each student team was expected to present its stance. In the run up to this event,

students developed their speaking notes by posting notes on an online horseshoe (see Figure 2).

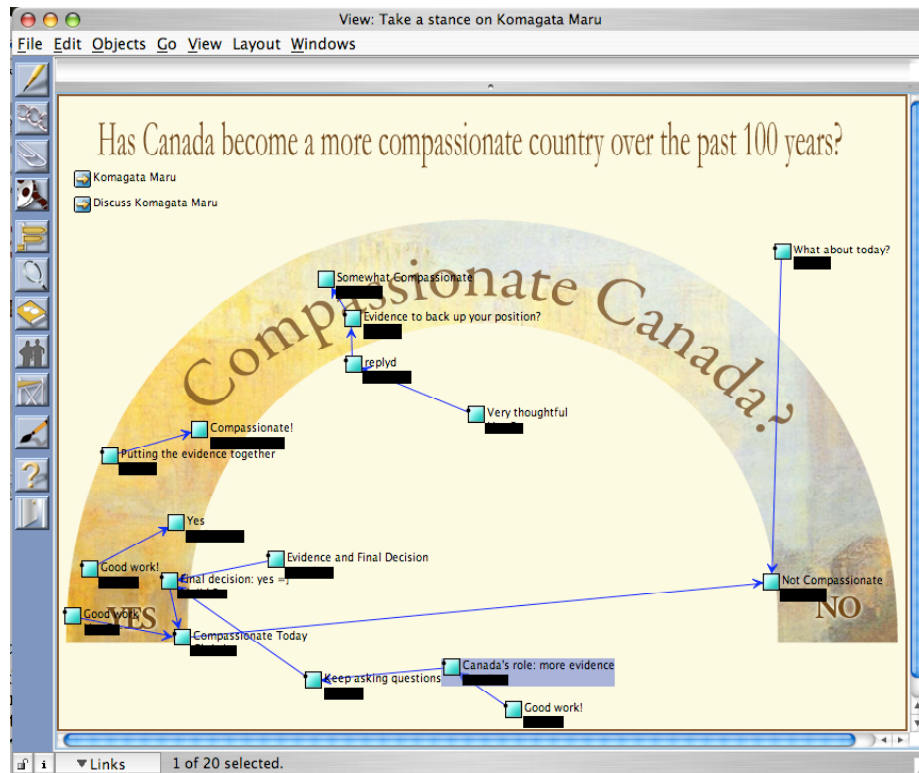


Figure 2: A “take a stance” view with student notes and mentor responses (usernames are obscured for participant anonymity)

Unexpectedly, students did not demonstrate as wide a range of positions in the face-to-face debate as they had in the online forum. Even students who had been assigned to the most unflattering cases usually stood at *YES* (Canada has become more compassionate), and expressed horror when a few of their peers stood for *NO*. This was a mystery to us until we carried out focus group discussions with the students at the completion of the unit.

Findings and Lessons Learned

Despite the surprising experience with the horseshoe debate, our pre-post learning measures showed some encouraging results.

We analyzed students' responses in terms of the strength with which they expressed belief in three ideas: That there should be one true story about any past event; that historical accounts are based on evidence; and that historical accounts represent educated guesses based on evidence that can never be entirely complete. Prior to the unit, Mr. George's students and the comparison group were not statistically different on any of these three scales. At pretest, both groups were strongly committed to the idea that there should be one true story (an average of about 5.3 on a scale of 7). Both groups were also strongly committed to the idea that historical accounts are based on evidence (an average of about 5.4 on a scale of 7). Students were more widely distributed on the "educated guess" scale, and got lower average scores (an average of about 4 on a scale of 7).

Looking at changes in students' positions on these scales between pre and post measures, we found a statistically significant change on the "educated guess" scale $t(32)=-2.157, p=.039$. The difference between the means was 0.44 in the positive direction, indicating that the unit, while short, had led to a modest increase in students' use of the "educated guess" explanation to understand differences in stories about past events.

Further analysis suggested that this change was not more likely for students who were already successful or in school, or whose parents were better educated. However, particular kinds of exchanges with our telementors did appear to influence students' learning. Correlational analysis revealed that a mentor's helpfulness in four particular ways predicted students' loss of faith in the idea of "one true story." As we expected, retreating from a belief in one true story correlated significantly with mentors offering alternative interpretations of source materials. Retreat from faith in one true story also

correlated with mentors suggesting library resources or web sites that students should examine – a move that implies a “one true story” is not evident. This is the sort of guidance that Linda offered to Majunder and his teammates.

These findings left open the mystery about why students demonstrated near unanimity in the live horseshoe debate. A few days after wrapping up the unit, Mr. George led a whole-class discussion in which students generated a list of things that worked for them, and didn’t work for them about the unit. When prompted about what didn’t work, some students told us they felt their answer to the question of the unit (has Canada become more compassionate) was predetermined as Yes, because the cases depicting a lack of compassion were not matched with similar current-day events. In their view, one had to assume that improvement had been made in 100 years!

Back in his office, Mr. George wondered aloud what his students knew about Canada’s contemporary environment. Did they know that a paralytic refugee claimant, Laibar Singh, had been deported from Canada recently after seeking sanctuary in a Vancouver-area Sikh temple? Did they know about the tasing death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekansky at the Vancouver airport in 2007? Apparently they did not, or did not bring this knowledge to bear in their work on the unit.

In a recent re-design of *Compassionate Canada* we constructed five “clusters” of cases, each of which contained one of the historical cases from our first implementation, plus an analogous current-day case. For example, one cluster invited students to compare Canada’s response to Tamil refugees in the 1980s and in the post-9/11 era. Analysis of the learning measures from this redesigned unit is ongoing; however the culminating

horseshoe discussion was much more vibrant, with students taking far more divergent stances and achieving greater success in persuading one another to their positions.

The Future

We hope to use the framework of the *Compassionate Canada* unit to construct curriculum for jurisdictions elsewhere in Canada and internationally (using appropriate case materials), and to further test our hypotheses about how students' conceptions regarding differing accounts can be improved while covering a cramped curriculum. To actively and tolerantly participate in a culturally diverse democratic society, young people must appreciate the multiplicity of pasts that inform their fellow citizens' views of the present.

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