

ACTIVIST TEACHING AND THE ORGANIZATION OF HISTORICAL IDEAS

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What should "activist teaching" mean to the history teacher? At first thought the answer seems simple enough. He must involve his students in the work of the history course in such a way that they become interested, active participants, real "self-starters" eager to extend their knowledge, rather than passive spectators in the game of learning. The art of involving students, however, is not an easy one, and the methods by which the ultimate goal may be reached are many. For some teachers a solution lies in the provision of more and better historical materials, and in the wider use of audio-visual aids. This is all to the good. But in an age where television and moving pictures have become commonplace, in a society rich in published historical sources, (often obtainable in relatively inexpensive paperback editions), the availability of materials creates almost as many problems as it solves. The average student, given a little time, will be just as readily bored by an indiscriminate use of filmstrips, if they promote random thinking, as by a series of more formal lectures. The study of documents, if the study seems to lead nowhere, can confuse as well as enlighten, even though the novelty of the work may lend appeal. In such cases the involvement of the pupil is much more apparent than real. Clearly, "activist teaching" must not be confused with the mere manipulation of materials.

The major premise of this article may now be stated: a student is truly involved in the study of history to the degree that he perceives those patterns of related historical ideas which give to the discipline form and meaning.¹ The minor premise follows in direct consequence of the major: the most important activity of the history teacher, the very focus of his "activist teaching," is the process by which he organizes and communicates coherent patterns of historical ideas. In passing, it is not intended that these propositions be understood either as a recommendation for a return to the lecture method of teaching history in the schools, or as an argument against the extended use of materials and audio-visual aids. What is often overlooked, however, is that the history teacher's approach to a course in terms of organization of ideas can, in

itself, result in a re-vitalization of history. Once the idea-pattern has been well worked out, the materials and techniques essential to student comprehension almost suggest themselves. Yet the materials remain the servant of the ideas, and are never introduced merely because they happen to be readily available.

The general argument advanced above is re-inforced by a consideration of what happens when a topical approach² to the teaching of Canadian history is attempted by a well-prepared teacher. By "topical approach" we mean the organization of historical ideas into categories or themes (for example, "Geographical Influences on Canadian History," "Native Peoples," "Immigration, Settlement, and Economic Growth," "The Development of Canadian Government") which are then worked through from beginning to end in such a way that they cut across the normal line of chronology. In the process the student is brought many times into contact with the present which this form of organization helps make meaningful to him. The "native peoples" no longer vanish mysteriously somewhere about page 80 in the textbook, but are discussed as a continuing aspect of Canadian life. The concept of a changing Canadian constitution, with the nature and extent of the change related to the historical factors which helped shape it, is given a deeper meaning. At the same time, teaching method responds to the stimulus of the new organization of ideas. Intensive work in immigration and settlement, suggests, if not requires, a field trip to Upper or Lower Canada Village in order to confirm on the ground what has been apprehended only partially in reading and discussion. Furthermore, it is now easier to plan such outings in advance to coincide exactly with the appropriate part of the syllabus. A wise teacher collects in separate files the documents, graphs, statistics, anecdotes, maps, pictures, and other materials which illustrate the development of the topical idea. Most important, the attachment to the single textbook, which has so often marred the teaching of Canadian history in the past, is completely broken. Reference to a wide variety of primary and secondary sources is ordained by the nature of the work and necessitated by the lack to date of any suitable school texts arranged topically. Thus the teacher grows professionally as a consequence of an imaginative organization (or re-organization) of the Canadian history course.

In practice, however, many teachers hesitate to commit themselves irrevocably to a topical form of organization. When they are not really specialized in history, they may feel insecure in the face of the heavier demands made upon a limited fund of time and knowledge. Or they may simply wish to become familiar with the more conventional chronological arrangement of work before coming to grips with the unknown. Under these circumstances, the textbook is accepted as the focus of organization in the course, and the teacher's main function is discharged in "covering" a daily allotment of pages. But herein lies a danger. Not only does method suffer, for the temptation now is to avoid thought and rely more and more on rote, but the student, striving to see some orderly pattern in a welter of detail, becomes at first vaguely dissatisfied, later restless, and finally learns to hate his subject with all the intensity he should bring to the mastering of it.

At this point we contend that it is not only possible, but extremely desirable, for a teacher to think in terms of patterns of organized historical ideas rather than in terms of pages to be "covered," even when the textbook is being used as the major focus of organization.³ A simple example will suffice to make our meaning clear. Faced with a section of the text expounding the course of the French and Indian Wars 1689-1755, it is possible for a teacher to proceed in one or other of the following ways:

Part A — *BY CHRONOLOGICAL HEADINGS*

I King William's War (The War of the Grand Alliance) 1689-1755

—Causes —Events —Results

II Queen Anne's War (The War of the Spanish Succession) 1701-1714

—Causes —Events —Results

III King George's War (The War of the Austrian Succession) 1740-1748

—Causes —Events —Results
and so on.

Part B — *BY ORGANIZED IDEAS*

The basic cause of the struggle for supremacy in North America lay in the tensions deriving from the relative geographical and political position of England and France in North America.

- (a) By 1700 the French penetration of the Mississippi meant the virtual encirclement of the Thirteen Colonies.
- (b) Two fortified areas of extreme political "tenderness" were the Ohio Valley and Acadia.
- (c) The use of Indian allies by both sides meant "dirty" warfare and lasting bitterness.
- (d) The shape of the British and French empires was being "blocked out" in such intermediary settlements as the Treaty of Utrecht, 1713.
- (e) One peculiar thing about the struggle was that it was inclined to take its own form, apart from events in Europe, as in the important year 1755.
- (f) All the time the struggle was going on, the Thirteen Colonies were learning how to co-operate with each other in political and military matters.

In the first case (Part A), the arrangement of material discourages the adoption of that investigative attitude which generates intellectual excitement. Where the "headings" and the pages in the textbook correspond closely, as they often do, the student feels that he has been plodding resolutely across a bleak and featureless historical landscape unrelieved by any peaks of meaning. Good teaching may improve the situation, of course, but by and large, such an arrangement militates against good teaching. Organization by "headings" usually fails to produce excellence in teaching because it infers that the main function of the teacher is to dispense bundles of appropriately labelled facts, which may be safely passed back by the student at examination time. ⁴

The organization of a section of work into a pattern of inter-related ideas (Part B) makes possible quite a different result. The relatedness of the ideas to one another, and to a single central concept, helps the student to comprehend in terms of larger rather than smaller entities. Clearly perceived ideas also constitute the intellectual hooks and eyes which make it easy to fasten one section of work to another. In addition, each idea suggests an appropriate method. The ideas

lettered (a) and (b) in Part B above, cry out for the use of maps, number (c) for the narration and interpretation, through discussion of the stark tragedy of the Schenectady and Deerfield massacres, of the truly incredible tales of Tom Quick and Captain Robert Rodgers. Nor need the method be entirely dominated by the teacher. Each historical idea can be conceived of as a kind of hypothesis, an end or aim which the student must strive to explore and test for validity at the same time. The main task of the teacher is to involve the student with historical materials in such a way that he comes to "see" the idea with all its supporting evidence. Facts still continue to be of great importance, but now they have been rallied in the cause of a larger meaning and make more "sense" to the learner than they might in Part A.

Until now, we have been concerned with Canadian history only, but perhaps the best demonstration of the connection between the organization of historical ideas and imaginative teaching is most evident in world history, particularly modern world history. Here the vast expanses of time and space, the multiplicity and diversity of historical events, makes it imperative that the student possess some guide lines to understanding. Fortunately the narrative of world history is studded with certain key ideas which are most useful here: revolution, nationalism, conservatism, liberalism, imperialism, socialism, totalitarianism. By specific reference to two of these organizing ideas, the first and the last, it is possible to extend our original argument into a wider and more complex subject area.

The work of Crane Brinton,⁵ the American historian, suggests the usefulness of the idea of "revolution" as an organizing device. Selected political revolutions (for example, English, American, French, or Russian) are compared within a common framework which provides for a beginning in some kind of Old Régime, a "move to the Left" in "stages" varying from moderate to extreme, and finally, a consolidation in a Thermidorian reaction to chaotic conditions or an excessive use of terror. In the process, considerable change occurs in most of the important forms of social relations.

This basic idea can first be explored with pupils in the abstract. Perhaps the teacher may diagram the pendulum swing from Right to Left and then the counterswing back to the Right. At the same time he may discuss the theoretical

stages, drawing his examples from a wide variety of revolutionary activity. Armed with this basic idea, the student can do a great deal of work on his own. He can be required to divide the course of a specific revolution, let us say the French Revolution, into appropriate "stages," and gather together for each "stage" those facts which seem to support his choice of arrangement. He may also be asked to discuss the forces which tended to impel the revolution to extremes, and so on. With the student involved in this kind of elementary historical problem-solving, one of the basic requisites of activist teaching, a kind of self-propelled investigative attitude, is being gradually encouraged.

The teacher must, however, be very careful not to grip the minds of his students in a rigid intellectual vise. Concepts such as "revolution" must always have about them more of hypothesis than of historical "law." It does not follow, for example, that a general idea of "revolution" will be applicable to *all* revolutions without serious modification. Attention to the differences as well as the similarities in comparative situations should help make this point clear.

The organization of historical events around key ideas suggests the possibility of various forms of activist teaching. One of these is a simple variant of team teaching in which a key lesson or lessons is given by one teacher to a very large group of pupils, with subsequent follow-up work carried out in smaller groups. In this way the concept of "totalitarianism" can be developed at some length in the larger group, possibly with the overhead projector and tape recorder used to illustrate some of the more complex facets of the idea. What is "total" about "totalitarianism?" How does "totalitarianism" differ from ideas such as "despotism" and "dictatorship" with which the student is already familiar? Under what conditions does "totalitarianism" develop generally? What was the geographic extent of "totalitarianism" in the period between the two World Wars? Are there degrees of "totalitarianism" and, if so, what are the criteria for determining a totalitarian state from a state which is merely authoritarian? The overhead projector is ideal for presenting charts, maps, and cartoons. The tape recorder can knit together source readings into coherent verbal illustrations, usually developmental in nature. For example, it is possible to tape readings from the works of Marx and Engels, Lenin, and Stalin,

so as to show the progression from the Marxist idea of a dictatorship of the whole proletariat, through the Leninist concept of the dictatorship of the dedicated élite, to Stalin's manipulation of the party as an instrument of totalitarian control.

Once the key concept has been thoroughly explored in the larger group, smaller groups work out the implications of the general idea in specific cases. The construction of charts or tables of statistics will help the student see for himself whether the background conditions in the various countries adopting totalitarian forms of rule were similar or dissimilar. The rise to power of the more important totalitarian leaders can be compared, as can the different party structures. The content of a selected totalitarian ideology makes a fascinating documentary study. Finally, the work takes on another dimension with the use of fiction. Parts of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* may be read as a case study in "pure" totalitarianism; considerable amusement, and much instruction, can be culled from his treatment in *Animal Farm* of the conditions of aborted revolution, and the subsequent rise of the totalitarian state. Naturally, the type of work undertaken must vary widely with the circumstance of each particular small-group unit.

By and large, the approach to understanding world history through stress on key ideas is not incompatible with the conventional organization of the school history course. The key concepts are picked up, polished, and ploughed back into the material whenever possible in the ordinary progress of the work. The benefits, apart from that kind of built-in review which is almost automatic when there is comparison of one historical situation with another, derive largely from the *meaning* with which particular events are invested by the general idea. The general idea of "nationalism" makes intelligible historical events as varied as the composing of the French national anthem or Bismarck's handling of the Ems Dispatch. Also it is important to consider that the key concepts, explained, discussed, and returned to time and time again as the course unfolds, stay with the students long after the associated facts have faded from their memories. Thus, some conception of nationalism as an important agent in state-building survives when the details of the famous Telegram have long been forgotten. And surely this is the way we would have it.

This paper was inspired initially by the observation, confirmed over a fairly extensive period, that many student teachers of history encounter much difficulty in organizing historical ideas and communicating them clearly in classroom situations. That this difficulty is related to lack of experience, and in some cases to lack of knowledge of the subject, there can be little doubt. What is discouraging to the students, however, is that failure often takes place after much honest effort and considerable expenditure of time in the preparation of materials and visual aids. In an attempt to make a lesson "interesting" many student teachers fail to make it coherent. And there is every indication that this also holds true for some practising teachers in school systems.

The attempt to direct attention away from the use of materials *per se* to the consideration of the intellectual core which alone invests materials with meaning lies behind much of the argument advanced earlier in the paper. Perhaps this is just another way of suggesting that "activist teaching," at least where the teaching of history is concerned, infers activity of the mind, and has nothing to do with mere "busyness." With this summary position, few serious teachers of history would disagree.

Notes and References

1. The question of what constitutes *structure* in the history curriculum is an open one. Jerome Bruner in *The Process of Education* seems to equate structure with patterns of historical ideas. Neil Sutherland, in his article "Structure in the History Curriculum" reaches the conclusion that "structure in history cannot be found in an over-all systematized view of the past, or in revealed laws which govern the rise and fall of civilizations . . . Structure in history can be only partial structure, contained in its *nature* rather than its content." Both views of what constitutes structure have important implications for teaching method. Perhaps a synthesis is possible. In this case pupils would be involved in historical materials in such a way that they come to "see" an important historical idea with all its supporting evidence. The linkage of ideas provides direction and momentum in a course; the method by which the ideas are approached is essentially historical.
2. For the material on the topical approach to history teaching, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Alana Smith, Head of the History Department, Lindsay Place High School, and particularly to her recorded address "A Topical Approach to the Teaching of Canadian History," Audio-Visual Centre, Macdonald College.
3. For fuller treatment of this idea see my "Employing Concepts in the Teaching of History," *Macdonald Bulletin*, November 1964.
4. I am not suggesting here that topical outlines have no value for orientation and review. They do.
5. Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1957.