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The Changing Structure of the High School History Curriculum

The time is January, 1956. We are observing a history teacher working with a grade IX class in a Montreal high school. Mr. A., a conscientious and competent specialist, steps briskly into the room. He spends the first few minutes of the lesson discussing the pivotal ideas of the previous one — the political deadlock between the Canadas in the 1860's and the forging of the "Great Coalition." During the discussion, he makes spot checks of pupils' notebooks, taking the names of those who have not done their homework for after-school detention. Mr. A. returns to the front of the room and gives a short, but dramatic, lecture on the Charlottetown and Quebec Conferences as steps on the road to Confederation. As the lecture proceeds, he writes a neat and logical outline on the blackboard, leaving a concise record of his fluent discourse. Occasionally, he answers questions, or directs questions to the class, but these do not interrupt the sequence of his smooth delivery. After twenty minutes, the pupils are assigned to read a section in George Brown's *Building the Canadian Nation*, and to make notes from the outline left on the blackboard. Those who do not finish in class time must complete the assignment at home. The next day, the implicit pattern of review, presentation and note-taking is systematically repeated.

Once a year Mr. A.'s class visits the Château de Ramezay Museum, views a film, reads a dramatization from Nathaniel Benson's *Three Plays for Patriots*, or engages in a special historical map or diorama project. These occasional activities are brief interludes, or interest projects, in learning the history of Canada, and no attempt is made to integrate them into the "real substance" of the course.

The scene now shifts to January, 1976. Mr. A. has retired and Ms. B. has taken his place. She has been teaching for five years. Ms. B. makes a much less conspicuous entry into her grade X classroom. Sometimes she teaches just like her predecessor, but she tends to think of herself not so much as a fount of knowledge, but more as a mistress of ceremonies, setting the stage for, and creating different kinds of learning activities in history. Today, the class is divided into groups, each representing key politicians for a British North American colony at the time of the Confederation debates. Each group is investigating the position of its colony on certain key issues of the day such as whether anything should be done about the threat of an American invasion, whether there should be an inter-colonial railroad, or whether they should work cooperatively with the other colonies to deal with common problems. To help them in their investigations, the pupils have several collections of speeches, letters and diary extracts in documentary collections such as Reid, McNaught and Crowe's *A Sourcebook of Canadian History*, Copp and Hamelin's *Confederation: 1867* and the Jackdaw Kit, *Confederation*.

Ms. B. moves from one cycle of activities to another. Sometimes she plans her unit as a problem study, sometimes along thematic lines, but whatever the unit design, she integrates varied activities such as spirited debates on controversial issues in history, the production of an historical newspaper, the reading of case studies or biographies, the writing of a critical essay, the construction of historical models, the viewing of films and filmstrips, or the close reading of comparative interpretations in textbooks. Ms. B. sees her role as that of one who mobilizes and organizes the class to begin each unit, as an animator and resource person, as one who helps to develop perspectives on each episode, and who provides the connecting links between each set of activities.

The educational styles of these two teachers, Mr. A. and Ms. B., help to express some of the changes that have taken place in the teaching of secondary history over the past twenty years. These teachers are not necessarily representative of typical teachers of their time; rather, they are presented as professionals who responded positively to the prevailing innovative thought of their respective decades. What has been the essence of that thought and how do we account for the changes that have occurred? The purpose of this essay is to document the kind of educational influences that have been brought to bear on the structure of the secondary history curriculum, to articulate what changes have occurred, and to offer some explanation of why these new structures have come about.

changes in the history curriculum

If we reflect upon Mr. A.'s style of teaching in the 1950's, it is apparent that the dominant aim was to pass on historical knowledge from one generation to the next. Other aims were, of course, enumerated in the teachers' handbook, aims such as "making judgements from given historical information," or "developing attitudes of tolerance to other religions, ideas, and nationalities," but these were taught within the limits of single secondary sources. The departmental examinations of the 1950's tended to require recall of historical information and not to test the wider set of objectives. Moreover, there was a certain lack of precision in identifying what level of knowledge was taught. But the objectives were relatively simple — to know the causes, events and results associated with certain happenings, the textbook being the single authority.

What stirred those involved in history teaching in 1960 was a fresh look at the school curriculum taken by Jerome Bruner. In his *Process of Education*,¹ Bruner expounded upon two ideas that were to have a profound effect upon the teaching of history. One was that the fundamental ideas or principles in a discipline could be used as the basis for planning school curricula. The other was that curricula should be devised to develop skills in intuitive and analytical thinking.

historical knowledge

The response of social science educators to the first of these ideas was to try to determine what kinds of epistemological structures underpinned the discipline of history. There emerged a great variety of answers to this question. Some believed that key concepts like nationalism, power, revolution and cultural change should be threaded through the curriculum and be treated year-by-year in different contexts and in increasing levels of depth and sophistication.² However, there was certainly no consensus about what the concepts should be. Other writers placed greater emphasis on the identification and teaching of broad generalizations from history. Generalizations were statements that showed relationships between concepts such as, "To the degree that a nation is under the influence of imperialist powers, its own sovereignty is limited."³ Others attempted to develop a synthesis of the two approaches, building curricula which recognized the interplay between concepts and generalizations.⁴

history skills

While these developments in identifying the structure of knowledge in the history curriculum were occurring, others took Bruner's idea concerning intuitive and analytical skills as being the prime rationale for structure. Among those Canadians who adopted this position was Neil Sutherland, who asserted that, "Structure in history can only be partial structure, contained in its nature rather than in its content," and "is best revealed through the historian's method."⁵ The method referred to, as it applied to secondary history, was the solving of simple historical problems by investigating primary sources such as diaries, letters, and newspapers, as means towards thinking one's way through to a conclusion or interpretation. Such a method emphasized the array of intellectual skills in thinking: developing a hypothesis, collecting historical data, critically analysing the data, and arriving at a conclusion about the hypothesis. As a result of the emphasis on working with data, the use of kits of archive materials and collections of original documents gained increasing popularity.⁶ (See Step 2 *Figure 1*).

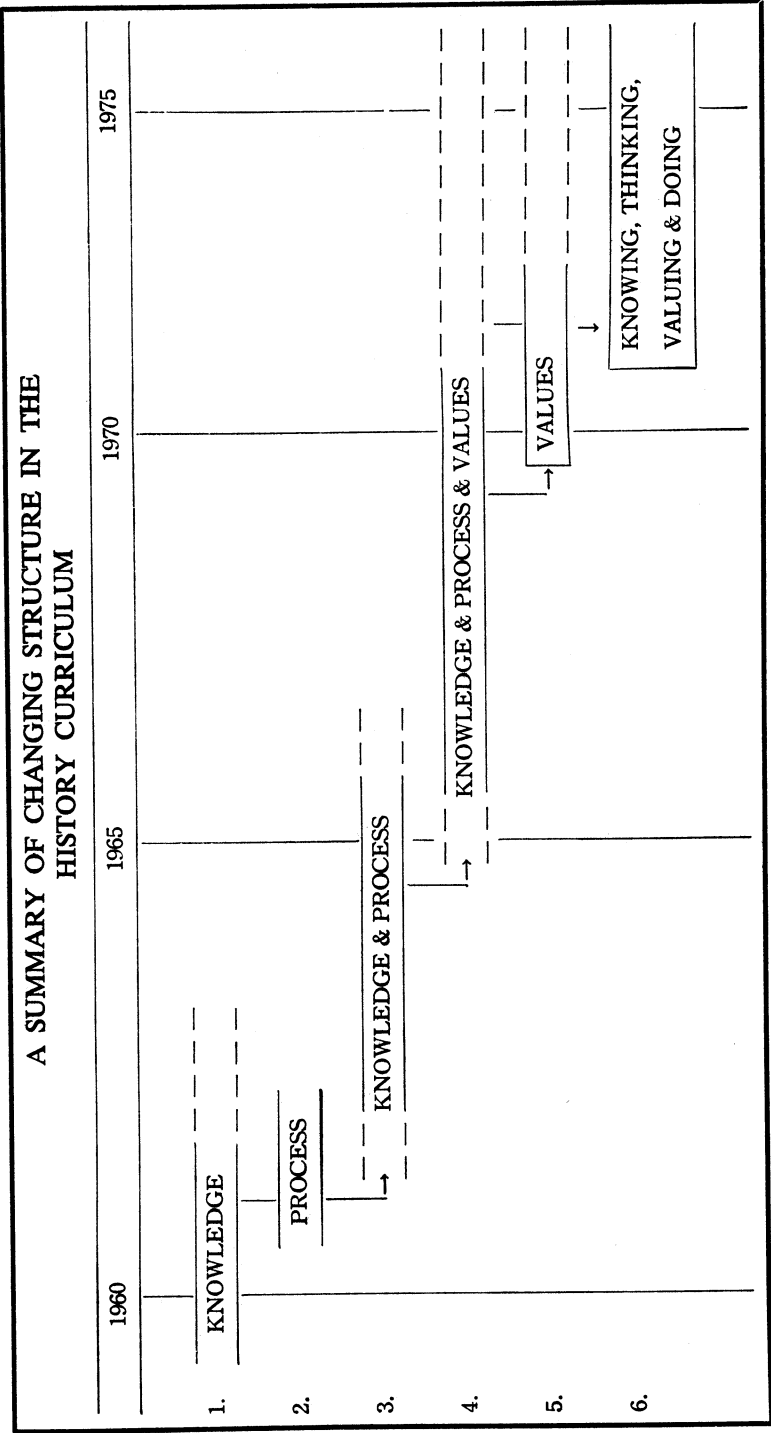
Out of this two-pronged response to Bruner's work there arose a content-process controversy with proponents of each debating the pros and cons of their respective structures. But by the mid-60's, efforts were being made to synthesize these approaches (see Step 3, *Figure 1*). Hilda Taba was perhaps among the first curriculum planners to devise successfully a social studies curriculum that fused content and process in a way that Bruner had proposed.⁷ Others, such as Eugene Gilliom, articulated well the developments that led to the structural theory behind the Taba curriculum.⁸

attitudes and values

Almost concurrent with Taba's synthesis was another major effort to broaden the component structures in the history curriculum. Strongly influenced by Bloom's analysis of educational objectives,⁹ Edwin Fenton developed an approach to history that included the teaching of knowledge, the development of inquiry skills, and the development of attitudes and values¹⁰ (see Step 4 in *Figure 1*). But in the late sixties, the idea of values education in secondary history had not been very thoroughly explored. Values education was often conceived as a separate, additive component of the curriculum. As well, the teaching of values was a socially sensitive topic and schools were not very certain about what their roles were in it.

Throughout this period, nonetheless, increased attention was being

Figure 1



given to the valuing process by other curriculum planners who believed that valuing should have a much more prominent place in the curriculum. Pioneering the development of strategies in values clarification was the team of Rath, Harmin and Simon.¹¹ But, particular application to social studies at the elementary level was made by Shaftel and Shaftel¹² and at the secondary level by Newman and Oliver whose work on the Harvard Social Studies Project emphasized values clarification of historic and current public issues.¹³

At about the same time in Canada, the Hodgetts Report, a nationwide survey of history teaching, disclosed that "Canadian history in our schools is a shadowy, subdued, unrealistic version of what actually happened — a bland consensus story, told without the controversy that is an inherent part of history."¹⁴ Such criticism had direct implications for values teaching in history and the social studies, and appeared to give rise to the development of new teaching materials as well as inspiration to the history projects sponsored by the Canada Studies Foundation.¹⁵

Particularly in the United States by the early 1970's, values education had become clearly identified as a major force in social education (see Step 5 in *Figure 1*). Its principal tasks included value clarification, value analysis, resolving value conflicts and building value systems. Some educators ascribed so much importance to valuing and decision making that, for a period, values education was placed almost in an orbit of its own. Writing the introduction of the 1971 *Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies*, John Jarolimek, for example, stated: "The time is overdue when an all-out effort must be made to find productive approaches to values education and conflict resolution."¹⁶

In Canada, values education came into focus slightly behind the movement in the United States. An Association for Values Education and Research was established at U.B.C. in 1971. The Province of Alberta created a social studies curriculum using valuing as the principal base, and, in Ontario, developing an awareness of values and value alternatives was made an explicit objective of the social science guidelines in 1973. Since then, there has been an energetic development of the theory, techniques and strategies in valuing. In history, thought has been given to value analysis and clarification in a wide range of content from biography to major historical problems and issues. In a study of Confederation, for example, pupils would be encouraged to identify the values that British North Americans shared with each other and to identify also regional and group values and value conflicts.

attempts at synthesis

But some educators recognized that, while the movement had helped them to make enormous gains in their understanding of values education, their preoccupation with values as objectives had distorted the education enterprise. Clearly there was need for better integration of valuing with the broad approaches to objectives previously developed by people such as Fenton and Taba. Accordingly, there have followed attempts at consolidation. The work of Jack Fraenkel, a former Associate Director of the Taba Curriculum Development Project, typifies such an attempt. Fraenkel proposed a more balanced curriculum strengthening the values component in history and social science education.¹⁷ A less ambitious, but nevertheless praiseworthy attempt at integrating historical with value content is that of Norma McCoy who has applied value theory to the theme of the history of Canadian immigration. This could well serve as a model to be used for other history topics.¹⁸

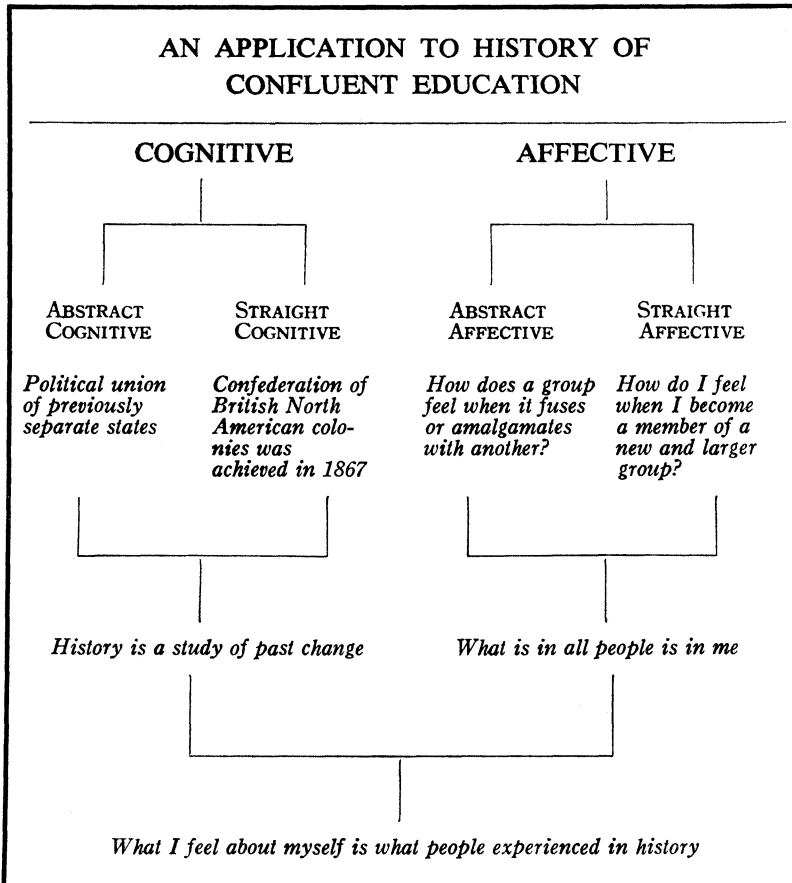
There have been, also, those who are critical that values education emphasizes only one dimension of objectives in the affective domain, and ignores other objectives such as the cultivation of sensitivities, feelings and emotions. Some have strived toward a melding of cognitive with affective learnings, the rational with the irrational, to produce a better blend of learning objectives. The work of George Isaac Brown¹⁹ suggests that in the mid-1970's we may be at the threshold of a new era in the realization of human potential if we can achieve a better fusion of internal personal experience and external cognitive curriculum structures. Using Brown's paradigm, we can show, by means of the diagram in *Figure 2* below, how one approach to confluent education might be applied to our previous example of Confederation. Brown's attempt to fuse cognitive and affective learning could be viewed as placing Dewey's *The Child and the Curriculum* into its modern idiom.

It is more difficult to see where we are in the mid-1970's than it is farther back where we have the benefit of hindsight. This author's estimate (Stage 6 in *Figure 1*) is that we may be moving towards giving pupils more responsibility by actually encouraging greater social participation as a natural extension of learning and that also we may be achieving a more balanced and effective synthesis of the objectives that have been differentiated and articulated for the history curriculum over the past two decades.

If we reflect on what these trends have been since the 1950's, we can discern three principal developments. The first has been the widening of the range of objectives that has been accepted and prac-

ticed in the classroom. In the 1950's teachers were preoccupied with knowledge, but other very important kinds of learning have since been admitted into the consciousness of teachers. A second observation is that there has been a certain amount of faddism in which educators, excited by new developments, such as the process of knowing or valuing, have been temporarily carried away by them, later usually to "re-enter," and contribute toward, a wider mainstream of development. The third trend is that there has been some limited integration of the broadening range of objectives so that they are conceived not as separate, fragmentary goals, but as strivings that merge into each other.

Figure 2



interpretations of change

There remains the question, why have these changes in the theory of the history curriculum come about? To understand them, we must look at history teaching in the larger educational context. When we trace the origin of influences on the history curriculum, it is striking that several emanate from the university community.

Through the fifties and sixties, the physical sciences achieved very high prestige in academia. Exactness and objectivity were the values *par excellence* of scholarship. Within the halo of the scientific method, historians started to look more critically at the kinds of problems they investigated, the sources of data used, the quality of the data gathered, the methods by which hypotheses were tested. Even the vocabulary of the physical sciences was brought to bear upon the study of history. The ground was laid for the introduction of inquiry and discovery approaches in the secondary school.

The physical sciences had a marked effect upon the social sciences as well. Derek Heater points out that more analytical and quantitative approaches were used in economics, sociology, anthropology and political science. The developments in these disciplines had a lateral effect upon history not only with respect to the methods of study but also in the use of basic social science concepts by historians.³⁰

Another powerful influence on the history curriculum has come from university psychologists and philosophers. We have already examined the direct impetus provided by Jerome Bruner and Benjamin Bloom in rethinking the history curriculum, but numerous others have made a very significant, even if less direct, impact upon the process of reflection and change. Certainly, the research of Jean Piaget on the stages of cognitive development, and of Lawrence Kohlberg on the stages of moral development, are widely acknowledged.³¹

A third explanation lies in the influence of speculative thought among professional historians and more directly in university departments of history. As agents for the academic training of history teachers, they wield a very pervasive, yet often unacknowledged, influence upon the teaching of secondary history. Their influence has been, again, primarily in the area of historical method. Geoffrey Milburn has emphasized the degree to which scholarly reflection "upon the definitions, interpretations, objectivity, causation and generalizations within the discipline," and Canadian historiography have affected the teaching of history.³² Thus the new generation of history majors and honors graduates is much more competent in the use of primary sources and critical inquiry techniques than were its generalist predecessors.

Besides the developments in academia, there are other explanations for changes in the history curriculum. Marshall McLuhan asserts that the electronic media have had a fundamental impact upon learning. The perceptions and mentality of young people have been dramatically affected by the new media, particularly by radio and television. Each has the characteristic of instant communication so that we realize that anyone who watches the six o'clock news is learning along with everyone else. But unlike learning from print, the electronic media have an all-at-onceness, total field quality. The person viewing a televised constitutional conference or party leadership convention sees the political process at work — not just the decisions as end product. Through multiple experiences of this type, young people have become much more aware of the significance of process, as well as product, in learning, and they have therefore been mentally conditioned to engage the inquiry process in the learning of history.²³ The intellectual skills orientation of history teaching and the process orientation of the young happily intersected in the sixties to produce the phenomenon we have observed. Hence the rising popularity of ethnographic studies, community history and the archaeological dig.

A final explanation of the changing patterns in history teaching may help us to understand further what happened in the years between our observations of Mr. A. and Ms. B. It is that history teaching, like any other teaching, tends to reflect what our society currently conceives as being the sort of education needed to produce the model citizen. Those conceptions have changed considerably over the past twenty years. In the 1950's the educated person was still "the person who knows." History teaching therefore tended to be a transmission of knowledge of facts, events and others' historical explanations. But there was much ado about the explosion of knowledge and the realization that knowledge was expanding so quickly that few could really keep up with the developments in their fields. So in the early 1960's, emphasis was placed on learning how to learn and the educated person then became "the person who could find out." This development paralleled the investigative and inquiry approach to history and the content versus process debate. The synthesis that appeared to end the debate was the idea that "an educated person is the person who can find out what he or she needs to know."

In a decade of issues and controversies, however, simply finding out and being informed on the issues could make us into no more than a nation of fence-sitters. We had take a position, to make value judgements about where we stood on historical or contemporary issues. The result was the changing conception that "the educated person was one who can find out what he or she needs to know and

then make a decision." There followed in the social sciences, the all-out effort to develop values education and to integrate it with existing conceptions. We are now so close to the present and future that it is difficult to speculate upon how the model is changing. Some might say that unless action follows mental decision, we have no real commitment to our decisions. Perhaps then we are moving towards the idea that "the educated person is one who can find what he or she needs to know, can make a decision and can act upon that decision."

In retrospect, we can say that Mr. A. and Ms. B. are both good teachers, striving to give their pupils what they regard as the most appropriate type of education in the circumstances of their time. But the history curriculum confronting Ms. B is potentially complex and sophisticated. Her teaching is characterized by experimentation and doubt, reconstruction and hope in the belief that what she is doing is becoming more intellectually stimulating, emotionally satisfying and practically useful to her pupils.

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