

REVIEW ESSAY

Sandwell, R., & von Heyking, A., eds.. (2014). *Becoming a History Teacher: Sustaining Practices in Historical Thinking and Knowing*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 360 pages

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B *ecoming a History Teacher* addresses the need for the Canadian education system to reconsider the ways in which we know and teach history. The book contains a collection of essays that represent an impressive array of historians and history teachers. The common concern in each chapter is that throughout our education system, from elementary school to university, history is taught as nothing more than a series of events and facts that need to be committed to memory. The authors argue, persuasively, that real history is not something that is conveyed via lectures and notes, but something that is *done*. The authors explain that in order to authentically teach history, our teachers need to approach it as historians do, by thinking historically. Fortunately, teachers have access to a framework for historical thinking that has been clearly outlined by The Historical Thinking Project (directed by Peter Seixas, another contributor to the volume). The six second-level historical concepts presented by The Historical Thinking Project include establishing historical significance, using primary sources, identifying continuity and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking historical perspectives, and understanding the ethical dimension of historical interpretations. This framework is increasingly being woven into curriculum across Canada, thereby entrenching the idea that historical thinking and history are things that we *do* in our education systems.

Unfortunately, Sears, around whose chapter the volume is built, explains that we will not see a successful transition between history as memorization to history as action until we ensure that our teachers “learn to think and know historically” (p. 8). As it stands, our education system continues to prepare history teachers by teaching them historical facts rather than historical thinking. Sears equates this lack of congruity with the absurdity of teaching a class about hockey by exploring the history of hockey but not ever playing the sport (p. 11). With this structure, teachers are not learning how to do history, and as Sears

states, history teachers “cannot teach others to understand what they do not understand themselves” (p. 13). Sears explains that a large part of the problem is that history teachers operate as marginal members, or outsiders, of the historical community of practice (13). He argues that to truly understand history, they need to be invited further into that community so that they become active members who do history (p. 12).

Sears goes on to explain that the difficulty in inviting history teachers to be active practitioners of history lies not only in recreating the system, but also in convincing these same teachers that this is what they should do. As he explains, teacher candidates, like all learners, come to their learning with prior knowledge, or cognitive frames, that help them to understand what history is, and which can render them resistant to change (p. 15). He argues that a handful of methods classes are not sufficient for molding these cognitive frames (p. 21). Truly transformative education requires commitment to quality historical teaching during their time in history classes, their time in curriculum and methods classes, and during their immersion in teaching via professional development opportunities (p. 20). In other words, if we truly expect our teachers to be lifelong learners, then we need to support that journey throughout the length of their careers.

This collection of essays has strong ties to *The Anthology of Social Studies: Issues and Strategies for Elementary Teachers*, both in terms of content and authorship. Many sections of the anthology speak to the same issues of integrating historical thinking, using the six second-level historical concepts in lessons, and moving beyond an understanding of history that is grounded in facts and lectures. With that being said, these discussions are held at the level of the teacher candidate, and address what the individual can do in their classroom to integrate historical thinking; there is little of the structural analysis undertaken in *Becoming a History Teacher*. The volumes work well together due to the fact that the individual and the structure are intertwined, and it is recommended to those who are unfamiliar with historical thinking to read them together in order to more fully understand the concepts being addressed in *Becoming a History Teacher*.

As a student in the College of Education, this anthology solidified the concepts that I had tentatively explored in my Social Studies methodology classes. With examples of the six second-level historical concepts applied in examples of a variety of assignments, courses and PD experiences, I was able to solidify my understanding of classroom application. With this being said, as I advanced through the book and came to understand its central thesis, it seemed clearer that student teachers were not always the intended audience. While there is certainly a great deal of useful information and advice for student teachers, the primary target is institutions that guide us. The advice given to these institutions is that for history teachers to truly understand history and how to teach it, we need a re-structuring of the ways in which they are delivered history classes, education methodology classes, and professional development opportunities. Pollock calls the focus on individual thinking as opposed to institutional structures a “questionable approach” (p. 67), and with this in mind, it seems that this text will be just as useful to college administrators, if not more than, teacher candidates, who are, for better or worse, in very little control of how and what they are taught.

Unfortunately, the way that history is taught today is too often steeped in a grand narrative that is strung together by disconnected dates and celebrated names. This instructional method continues despite the fact that historians have moved away from grand narratives and toward a more complex understanding of history. The anthology presents convincing evidence that teachers are not shifting alongside the historical community of practice, or, that many teacher candidates simply are not receiving enough time to re-learn what history is (p. 177). The result is that too many teachers continue to teach our students the “anglophone Canadian grand narrative” (p. 192) rather than how to be critical and historical thinkers. The anthology also argues that the ability of history teachers to help their students think historically is a crucial part of building and sustaining a functioning democracy. As Lévesque explains, one of the reasons we explore history is so that we can understand the present and make decisions about the future (p. 116). These are exactly the kind of skills that we need to help our students build so that they can enter the world as critical thinkers and informed citizens. By merely perpetuating a grand narrative we are not doing our history, our democracy, or our students’ potential justice. It is clear, then, that a shift on both the part of the individual and the institution is needed if we are to answer this anthology’s call for a re-imagining of the way in which we know and teach history.