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Special Issue: New Approaches to Teaching History

Teaching second-order concepts in Canadian history:

The importance of "historical significance".

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To this day, it is not entirely clear, even within the history community, what criteria are accepted as valid for determining historical significance. There has been very little research on this second-order concept of history, even in England where it is formally part of the new school curriculum. As part of a larger study on Francophone and Anglophone students' understanding of historical significance, I reassessed the whole notion of historical significance by distinguishing three (simplified) communities that largely define the domain(s) within which constituents (historians, policymakers, teachers, and students) define their historical significance (see Figure 1).1 As a general rule, professional historians have (often implicitly) addressed questions of significance by employing a set of at least five disciplinary criteria outlined by Phillips (2002):

Importance: Refers to what was considered of primary influence or concern to those who lived the event, irrespective of whether their judgements about the importance of the event was subsequently shown to be justified. Key importance questions include: Who were/have been affected by the event? Why was it important to them? How were people's lives affected?;

Profundity:

Refers to how deeply people were/have been affected by the event. Key profundity questions include: Was the event superficial or deeply affecting? How were people's lives affected?;

Quantity:

Refers to the number of people affected by the event. Key quantity question include: Did the event affect many, everyone, just a few?;

Durability:

Refers to how long were people affected by the event. Key durability questions include: How durable was the event in time? Was the event lasting or only ephemeral?; and

Relevance:

Refers to the extent to which the event has contributed to historical understanding or meaning-making supported by evidence. Comparisons and analogies are more complex and lead to better appreciation of the past. Key relevance questions include: Is the event relevant to our understanding of the past and/or present? Does the event have a sense or signification to us?