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Multiple Perspectives

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Guiding Question:

What is a multiple perspectives approach and how can Social Studies teachers successfully implement it?

Abstract:

One of the foundations of the new Social Studies Program is a multiple perspectives approach. Designed to move beyond conventional history education, this approach encourages consideration of 'the other' and development of historical consciousness and critical thinking skills. Recognizing that a multiple perspectives approach is more than 'culture' and content will help teachers successfully infuse a multiple perspectives approach into everyday practice.

Introduction:

When asked about the inspiration for the movie *Letters From Iwo Jima*, director Clint Eastwood indicated he wanted to examine the Second World War battle from a Japanese perspective, exploring ideas such as "life was pretty miserable for the Americans; imagine how miserable life was for the other guys. What were their lives like?" ("Fresh Air from WHYY", NPR, January 10, 2007).

While the movie remains an interpretation of history, Eastwood's comments do reflect the intents of one of the foundations of the new Alberta Social Studies program, the infusion of a multiple perspectives approach into the study of history and contemporary events.

Social studies curricula and resources, and in education in general, have tended to emphasize one perspective at the expense of others. Told from the perspective of the 'winner', conventional approaches of teaching history have ignored and marginalized the ideas, contributions and perspectives of 'the other'.

Rather than present a single view or master narrative, the new program explores events, ideas and people from multiple perspectives. The inclusion of a diversity of experiences and perspectives is viewed as central to the development of active and responsible citizens in a democratic and pluralistic society. A multiple perspectives approach is founded upon the idea that "our pluralistic world is interpreted from multiple perspectives often characterized by deep cultural, religious, political, and historical differences … since there are various ways of characterizing things and events, no one account has a privileged claim to uncontested truth" (Werner and Case, p.181).

> *"A multiple perspectives approach to education implies the development and enlargement of human consciousness or awareness of the world, of "seeing" or looking at the world with new and enriched perspectives that transcend the local and particular and that enables individuals to achieve a greater meaning and sense of who they are and how they relate to the world."*
>
> Douglas Stewart, "Purposes of Public Education: Philosophic Reflections," p.6.

Given this, the import and richness of multiple perspectives may be most practically and effectively addressed through two key recognitions and approaches:

More than 'culture':

Though the new social studies program does infuse Francophone perspectives as well as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives where appropriate, the importance of multiple perspectives is not found in the mere inclusion of the perspectives of specific groups of people.

In addition to the perspectives mentioned in the Program of Studies and resources, teachers have the freedom to explore the collective identities and perspectives found within their schools and communities. Students should be encouraged to be considering multiple perspectives throughout the process of exploring and analyzing issues, ideas and concepts.

When developing learning and teaching activities it is important to expand exploration of multiple perspectives beyond those associated with 'culture' or specific identities. Instead of being asked for one 'definition' or

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generally accepted narrative, students could explore a range of understandings. Could there be other interpretations of this event? Might there be more than one perspective on this concept? Do all people view citizenship in the same way? Might there be different understandings of globalization? Quality of life? Liberalism? Canada?

As citizens, students should have opportunity to hear the authentic voices of other citizens; these opportunities, however, should be extended to include exploration of ideas and perspectives that challenge the 'meta-narrative' or conventional ways of viewing the world.

More than content:
One of the challenges that the developers of the new program of studies encountered was determining how curriculum and learning resources could include all perspectives. Realizing that it would be impossible to do so, development of a multiple perspectives approach became increasingly important.

Since it would not be reasonable to expect learners (or teachers!) to 'know' all of the perspectives in an increasingly diverse and complex world, learners must be encouraged to develop the cognitive abilities and habits of mind required to recognize and appreciate multiple perspectives.

Engaging students in multiple perspectives with the intent of developing citizens who can demonstrate empathy requires an approach that is founded upon skill development rather than a focus limited to content.

As elements vital to inquiry- and issues- based instruction and learning, the models of critical, historical, and geographic thinking each present strategies and tools for helping students understand and appreciate perspectives. Drawing upon multiple historic or geographic sources will encourage understanding of diverse perspectives. Designing learning activities that encourage students to understand the prevailing norms of the time will contribute to understanding contexts and perspectives (Denos and Case, p.47).

Perhaps most important is the recognition and appreciation of the relationship between a multiple perspectives approach and the other foundations of the new program. Thoughtfully infusing multiple perspectives into instructional methodology will ultimately support inquiry- and issues-based approaches, contribute to skill development and promote the habits of mind required for active and responsible citizenship.

Annotated Resources, Web Sites, Books, etc.

Annotated References, Articles, Books...
To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, & Citizenship in Canada (Ruth Sandwell, editor.University of Toronto Press, 2006). A thought provoking collection of articles that includes works by Peter Sexias ("What is Historical Consciousness?") and Timothy J. Stanley ("Whose Public? Whose Memory? Racisms, Grand Narratives and Canadian History"). The book provides multiple views on what history should be taught and how it should be taught in Canadian classrooms.

"Themes of Global Education", Walt Werner and Roland Case. In *Trends and Issues in the Canadian Social Studies* (Ian Wright and Robert Sears, editors, Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 1997). A collection of articles that present practical ideas on contemporary topics and issues in the social studies classroom.

"Indigenous Knowledge: Foundations for First Nations" (Dr. Marie Battiste). An essay that describes the tensions between Indigenous and Eurocentric ways of knowing. Dr. Battiste also provides numerous examples of ways of knowing that would enrich explorations of Indigenous perspectives.

Teaching About Historical Thinking (Mike Denos and Roland Case, The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2006). This book provides practical ways to encourage the development of historical thinking and a multiple perspectives approach.

Biography
Warren Woytuck is a consultant with The Critical Thinking Consortium. An experienced 15-year teacher, writer and facilitator in Alberta and British Columbia, Warren was co-lead of the development of the new High School Social Studies curriculum. In addition to extensive collaboration with publishers of the new high school social studies resources, Warren has created and edited materials for the "Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian history" project and developed training materials for the Alberta Bus Drivers' Training Program.