

Transformative History: The possibilities of Historic Space

Samantha Cutrara, Faculty of Education, York University, Toronto, Ont.

Abstract

Until the grand narrative is recognized as a product and process of power and privilege it can never do the transformational work that it can, and should, do in education. In this paper, I argue that concept learning can be a practical strategy for exploring and deconstructing power that is structured through the grand narrative and manifested in the nation. In particular, I introduce my pedagogical model of Historic Space as a transformative tool for having these discussions and support this approach by discussing students' interactions with it.

Grand Narrative as a System

Every good historian knows that history is not the past but merely a tool for making meaning from past events. By arbitrarily designating significance and highlighting the progression one significant person or event has from another, the past becomes a structure we call history. Although all types of history structure the past, grand national narratives are a particular type of structure that "explains the culture to itself and expresses its overriding purpose" (Francis, 1998, p. 1). As a result, it is important to take the power of the grand narrative seriously and understand how its components work to establish and naturalize meaning in our contemporary world.

Despite the best pedagogical intentions, shallow grand narratives filled with names and dates pulled from the past, deemed important for (re)telling, and situated within a mythical narrative structure, remain the most salient type of history learnt in schools. In these grand narratives, "the actual histories that people live, their complex interactions with others, are obscured and eventually forgotten" (Stanley, 2003, p. 38). People in history become presented as "simplistic, one-dimensional, and truncated portraits" of themselves (Alridge, 2006, p. 663) and events in history become reduced to "their essential traits, their final meaning or their initial and final value" (Foucault, 1980, p. 154).

Following from postmodern and poststructural theory (see for example the work of Derrida, 1967 (2003); Foucault, 1980; Scott, 1997), I see political possibility in history education for using the grand narrative to (re)claim and deconstruct that which is left unsaid in popular history and in the process (re)invent that which is possible for the future. According to Paulo Freire, the key to an emancipatory structure of education is emphasizing that grand narratives, like history, are sources of "possibility and not as *predetermination*" (2004, pp. 59-60). Thus, although postmodern and poststructural theory has been accused of "assaulting" the promise of history education (Barton, 2006; Seixas, 2000), these claims have failed to take into account how breaking open narratives can allow young people to imagine possibilities otherwise unavailable in their understanding of the future.

Thinking of the grand narrative as a structure makes it easier to separate the complexity of people and events in history from their one-dimensional representation in the grand narrative. Ferdinand de Saussure's work on language as a semiological system is aptly suited for understanding how the grand narrative works as a system (1915 (2008)) because his articulation of "signs" provides parallels to the distilled representation of people and events in history. Just as words within language consist of the sign and the signified, which has both an actual meaning and a network of values that work to support and affirm the larger structure, people and events in the grand narrative consist of the name of the actual event that happened or the actual person that lived (*the meaning*) and the role the event or person plays in the grand narrative (*the value*). For example, although Laura Second was a real person, her meaning in popular national history acts as a sign for the tide-turning moment of telling the British troops of the American invasion during the War of 1812 and saving the day. Her value, however, lies in the ideals of patriotic womanhood, sacrifice for the nation, and in some cases manifest destiny, insinuated through her representation (Morgan, 1994).

When thinking of the grand narrative as a structure, and historical events and people as signs, we can use poststructural deconstruction to ferret out the values implicit in the signs that support the structure (Biesta, 2009; Derrida & Weald, 2001). Because deconstruction provides a "way of analyzing constructions of meaning and relationships of power that called unitary, universal categories into question" (Scott, 1997, p. 258), deconstructing the symbols of history in a history classroom allows students to think about the values insinuated in the grand narrative and think about what history could look like when their own values are privileged.

Concept learning, a pedagogical strategy that encourages students to attain and formulate their understanding of the "building blocks of communication" (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001, pp. 190-191), is a practical way to translate these ideas for a classroom environment because the "concept" and the "sign" share many similarities. Just as a sign signifies, a concept acts as a label for "regularities of experience" (Novak, 1998, p. 22). For historical concepts, the "regularities of experience" consist of the actual person or event (meaning) and the values it promotes through its retelling. Like in deconstruction, concept learning encourages a deeper understanding of what and how we know by focusing on how knowledge is constructed. This type of learning supports the emancipatory literacy advocated by Freire (2004; Freire & Macedo, 2003).

Historic Space

Thinking about and teaching history as signs and concepts requires a different conceptualization of history than the typical and predictable structure of the grand narrative often implied through a timeline. It requires a metaphoric shift away from the imposed logic of the grand narrative and toward a rearticulation of what history can do and say when not bound to the exaltation of fact. A graphic novel and a short story can tell the same story as a novel but, borrowing from Marshall McLuhan, the message changes with the medium. By reimagining grand national narratives as Historic Spaces, a different reading of what history is and can do, can open doors for students to explore different ways of understanding and being in the world.

Historic Space is a way of conceiving history so that the semiological structure of the grand national narrative is emphasized. Historic Space focuses on re-conceptualizing the simplistic,

one-dimensional grand narrative popularly taught in schools as maps of key concepts free from narrative fixity and linear logic. Historic Space as a conceptual model would give students the opportunity to organize historical data, pull it apart, and reorganize it to search for new ideas; essentially refining what is known and applying critical subjectivity to it (Gannaway, 1994; Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2004). This model can allow national history to be a backdrop for discussing internalized judgments dictated by hegemonic understanding and practices and give students space for exploring how and why these judgments are made. By moving away from history that claims myth as fact and toward history as an accessible collection of concepts in space that can be challenged, moved around, or replaced based on evidence, research, and discussion, means that history education can go from rote, memorisable information to a purposeful, design-based knowledge (Perkins, 1986) in which students actively think about how the positioning of experiences in popular history has an influence on their lives.

The obvious question is why *space*? Despite the obvious links between history and geography to create borders that keep “us” from “them” (Lawrence, 1995; McEachern, 1998; McKittrick, 2006; Razack, 1995), “space” insinuates an openness and possibility to chart new ways of reading history and reading the world. Space is social relations “spread out” (Massey, 1994, p. 2) and thus thinking of history as space allows students to understand the social relations that are structured through the narrative and (re)create the types of social relations they want to see.

Conceptualizing history as space provides the *space* to build and rebuilt the narrative of history, just like the floor of a playroom. A playroom can have a library of books and walls full of visual stimuli, but these tools of learning do not encourage a malleable interaction between the child and their learning. A child can use a book or a picture to think about how a house or castle could be constructed, but when sitting down with their blocks, they are in control of which area to build first, what types of blocks they will use, and when they are done. Historic Space applies this principle to the substantive concept of history (Lee & Ashby, 2000) and encourages students to play with history in ways they determine as meaningful.

Working with Historic Space

In 2007, I lead eleven grade 11 and 12 students through two interview/activity sessions in which Hilda Taba’s Concept Formation model was used to articulate history through Historic Space for the post-World War II period, a period in Canadian history they should have studied in Ontario’s mandatory Grade 10 history curriculum (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2001; Taba, 1966). The random sample of students from the Greater Toronto Area, recruited by word-of-mouth, participated in the research outside of school. They came from different neighbourhoods and schooling styles, and all had varying interests in history. This research was not connected to their formal schooling, nor did their past grades act as a factor in their participation. All the students were born and raised in Canada, although many of their parents and grandparents were born elsewhere, and all the students identified themselves as Canadian or hyphenated Canadians. The interview/activity sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed, and student-produced work was photographed and then digitally recreated using concept mapping software. The transcriptions and digital maps were the main data sources for analysis and students were later contacted for any clarification of their maps (more details on student profiles and methodology can be found in Cutrara, 2007).

This research aimed to answer two questions: Are students comfortable thinking of history using Historic Space, and if they were, can this conceptualization of history be harnessed to encourage students to think about the power structured through grand narratives? The results of this research affirms that students were able to use concept learning strategies to think about history organized through Historic Space and that this approach allowed them to think about and discuss issues of inequity inscribed within historical representation.

Attaining Historical Concepts

Taba's concept formation strategy is a three step process that involves concept attainment, interpretation, and application. In Historic Space, the first step, attainment, involves students using a textbook or similar resource to list the events and people commonly associated with the historical period being studied, and then grouping and labelling them according to themes they see (Taba, 1966). This step allows students to outline what they will be studying in the upcoming unit by defining the parameters of the historic space and by doing so begin to take control over the content of their learning.

In my research, participants used their familiarity with the logic of the textbook to identify the important concepts of the post-World War II period even if, as many of them reiterated, they did not know anything about it (Alridge, 2006; Wiersma, 2008). One research participant "Brenda," flipped through the textbook and asked her partner "Leanne" to add *prosperity* to their list, "cuz I read a lot about it here." Although listing the "usual suspects" in history can be interpreted as lacking engagement with the material, by discussing concepts with her partner and rationalizing her choice to me, participants such as Brenda demonstrated that there "exists the strong possibility that their choices derived from their active pursuit of meaning" rather than simple memorization of facts (Terzian & Yeager, 2007, p. 72).

Similarly, when faced with a concept they were unfamiliar with, participants used their "frameworks of understanding" (Seixas, 1997, p. 22) to group and label concepts in a context that made them familiar. Leanne added *Diefenbaker* to her list of concepts although she admitted that she did not "know who he was [or] what he did." Nevertheless, when Leanne was grouping and labelling, she put *Diefenbaker* in a group with other figures she recognized as important and labelled the group as *Government*. Thus, in this step, Leanne could acknowledge that she knew he was a significant person even if she did not (yet!) know why.

Although in this step students are working with fairly shallow concepts, it is here where teachers can increase students' knowledge of the historical material by encouraging them to focus on learning the essential characteristics of historical concepts through class lectures, readings, and primary sources. The Historic Space strategy is not about learning an abbreviated national history, but building a usable and meaningful national narrative. Thus throughout, teachers should encourage students to gather information about the historical concepts from the textbook, popular and educational media, their family, archived primary sources, the landscape, literature, museums, and any other sites of learning they come across. Most importantly however, by attaining the relevant concepts in a historic space, students begin to build and organize the dominant narrative in ways that make sense to them and in doing so gain control and confidence over concepts they previously understood as irrelevant and untouchable.

Interpreting History

The strategy of Historic Space is intended to allow students to deconstruct the grand narrative to see the power structured within it, all while learning mandated curriculum and exploring narratives that may challenge, contradict, and complement one another. To do this using Taba's strategy, once historical concepts are gathered and classified, students interpret them by identifying, exploring, and inferring relationships between them (Taba, 1966).

I use spatial theory to articulate history as Historic Space because space highlights "the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions" (Massey, 1994, p. 2). Similarly, expressing the relationships between concepts in either a simple "note-making and note-taking" mind map (Buzan & Buzan, 2000, see Figure 1) or a complex and hierarchical concept map (Novak, 1998, see Figure 2) allow students to meaningfully visualize the "interrelations and interactions" amongst concepts by interpreting, and in the process controlling, concepts related to their subjects (Novak, 2002). By building and exploring relationships in maps of historic space, students can think about how and why historical concepts are connected and if there are any limitations to these relationships. In doing so, students begin to explore various ways history can be *routed* to tell different stories.

In my research, I found that once they were comfortable with mapping, participants had fun exploring the period by building relationships between historical concepts (Taber, 1994, pp. 279-280). One participant, "Julie," said that in creating relationships between historical concepts she could "get out every idea I had in my head and connect it somehow. And there is no right or wrong answer, no one can tell me I'm wrong about it." This allowed her to "think outside what you would necessarily think" and give "a new perspective on what we already learned." In other words, she was able to take the static material she previously learnt and mobilize it in ways meaningful for her (Novak, 1998). With mapping she could think about the subject, think about her thinking, and think about her feelings in doing so (Taber, 1994, p. 280).

Julie was not alone. Other participants clarified their understanding of concepts by building and expanding connections amongst them. For "Brenda" and "Leanne," the map allowed them to detach from the dates and names privileged in traditional history instruction and move toward a connected and meaningful collection of concepts that they *wanted* to build on. During the listing step, the girls kept asking each other "what else happened?" However, when making their map, they repeatedly, and excitingly, inquired, "what else can go under *technology*?" or "what about *fashion*?" and added an additional thirty-three concepts to their map (Figure 3). This supports the premise that "once the human brain realizes that it can associate anything with anything else, it will almost instantaneously find associations, *especially when given the trigger of an additional stimulus*" (Buzan & Buzan, 2000, p. 87). Thus, when mapping history, students began to take ownership of the period and define it ways significant to them, all while expanding the breadth and depth of historical concepts that could be associated with their topic.

Applying this Knowledge

After building a list of historical concepts and exploring relationships between them, can students apply this knowledge to confront inequitable realities in the nation and reconstruct

alternative possibilities for the future? Although a sophisticated question, because participants had been thinking about the historical material as meaningful concepts in space, rather than irrelevant facts fixed to a timeline, they drew on their newly developed confidence with the material to explore this question within their maps.

To begin, I gave participants images, videos, and personal reflections that were intended to challenge or confirm popular presentations of the period and asked them to predict the most suitable place for these histories, explain their easy or uneasy fit, and validate their choices by linking them to the rest of the map (Taba, 1966). Using primary sources to challenge students' understanding of history has shown to be both entertaining and engaging while providing evidence for historical accounts that may not correspond to the popular narrative (Barton, 2001, p. 108; Sandwell, 2004). Although half the resources I had chosen were intended to challenge the popular narrative, participants showed a commitment to working with these challenges and added all the histories to their maps.

For example, for most of the participants connecting a 1967 CBC video on the destruction of Africville to their map was difficult ("Africville is Destroyed," *Gazette*,) since the history of Africville is rarely given space to be adequately discussed in popular narratives of the period (for more critical discussion of Africville see Nelson, 1995). One pair of students, "Chantal" and "Charles," had to add a new concept to their map, *Racism*, in order to link *Africville* in a way that satisfied them. Afterwards, Charles gestured toward *Racism* on the previously empty side of the map and said: "We are not learning enough about this in school because...the whole mind map is taken up by things we learned... when really, some of the most important things would be more to this side with *Racism*" (see Figure 4). For Charles, it was not just knowing this history that made him take note of the injustice, but confronting that this history was literally "off side" or "to the side" of dominant history that made him frustrated with what he had been learning.

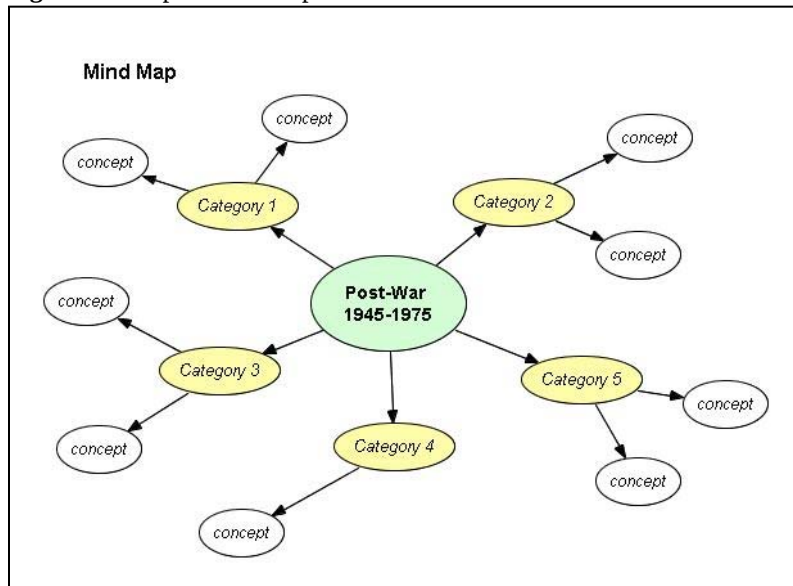
Similarly, after watching the video, "Julie" said that since she had known about Africville, she felt "so broken inside that I didn't mention this." When comforted by her partner, Julie reiterated that it was "so sad" that there was no place on the map that represented this event accurately. By looking at the exclusion of this history from her map, Julie recognized that she exercised the power to choose what and whose histories were going to illustrate the period and, like in the dominant narrative, these choices can have ramifications for how people are understood in the present. Of course, not every story can be told and Julie knew that, but it was seeing that the map she created supported the exclusion of this experience from dominant cultural capital that made Julie question her own implication in sustaining inequitable social relations.

As educators, we can encourage students to counter these injustices by researching other histories left out of popular telling of the period and (re)create a history they want to see. Research shows that students are interested in learning about difficult histories especially in school, even if teachers are not up for the challenge (Lazare, 2005, p. 51; Levstik, 2000). Rather than leaving students angry or despondent, a commitment to dealing with issues of power in history education has been shown to encourage students to learn more about history outside of school as well have a positive effect on their identity and peer relationships (Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001; Terzian & Yeager, 2007). Thus, by first deconstructing the dominant narrative, reconstructing it in their concept map, and then attempting to fit "alternative" experiences from

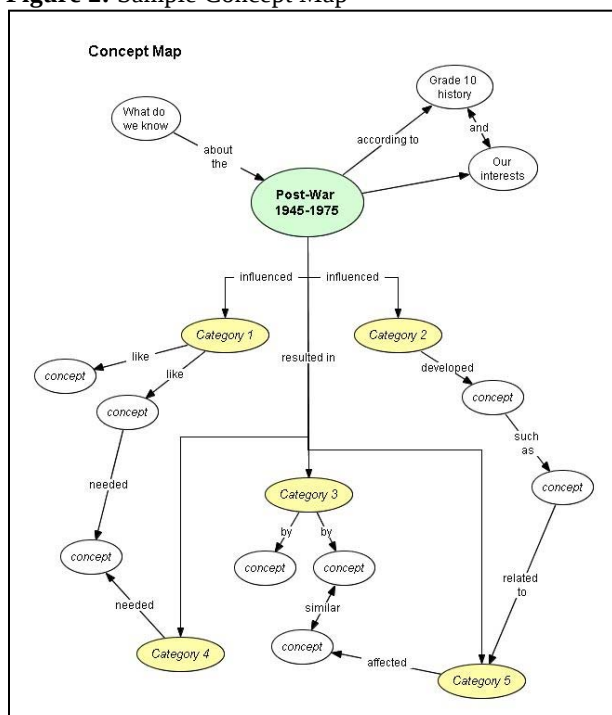
the period into their map, my research participants were able to confront the difficulties in reconciling that which challenge the “truth” structured through history, and hypothesize about the implications of historical representation for the present.

Conclusion

This research has shown that students can think about the construction of historical narratives and became increasingly comfortable deconstructing them by using Historic Space as a theoretical organizer for approaching history. Through the Concept Formation strategy, Historic Space provided a way for students to recognize and confront how “justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 36). By reconstructing the narrative and working to add “new” challenging histories into it, my research participants were able to confront a different truth about the post-World War II period and, in doing so, became committed to defining a new kind of justice. This, combined with the confidence students gained from the activities (Mitsoni, 2006), means that Historic Space has transformative possibilities when applied to history education.

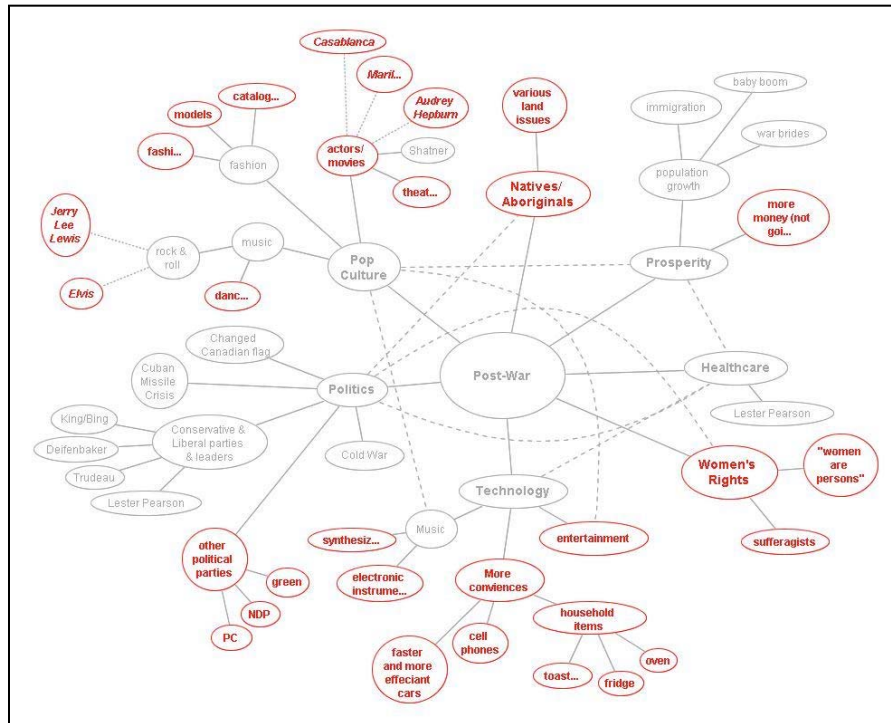
Figure 1: Sample Mind Map

Mind Maps are intended for brainstorming and work as a visual “note-making and note-taking” strategy for students.

Figure 2: Sample Concept Map

Note that this map is organized hierarchically, has linking terms between concepts, and depends on the categories students’ developed in concept attainment. These attributes force a greater engagement with the material than the Mind Map.

Figure 3: A reproduction of Brenda and Leanne's Mind Map



All the bolded concepts are ones Brenda and Leanne added during the mapping process

The mind map illustrates the interconnectedness of various historical and cultural movements in postwar America. The central node is 'Post War Period'. It branches into several key areas:

- Political changes:** This branch includes 'King & Saint Laurent', 'FID Crisis', 'Gouzenko', 'Cuban Missile Crisis', and 'Secrets'. It also connects to 'What do we know about the' and 'according to'.
- RACISM:** This branch leads to 'Many Organizations' and 'NATO'. It also connects to 'and situations like' and 'was shown through places like'.
- Baby Boom:** This branch leads to 'New generation' and 'Hippies'. It also connects to 'return from war created'.
- American Dream:** This branch leads to 'Suburbs' and 'Consumerism'. It also connects to 'depicted' and 'affected by'.
- Counter Culture:** This branch leads to 'Baby Boom' and 'New generation'. It also connects to 'lead to'.
- Suburbs:** This branch leads to 'Consumerism' and 'Counter Culture'. It also connects to 'created'.
- Consumerism:** This branch leads to 'TV', 'Cars', and 'Technology'. It also connects to 'but instead'.
- TV:** This branch leads to 'Cars' and 'Technology'. It also connects to 'created a demand for'.
- Cars:** This branch leads to 'Technology'. It also connects to 'revolutionized'.
- Technology:** This branch leads to 'Music' (Rock music, Beatles, Yoko Ono). It also connects to 'revolutionized'.
- Music:** This branch leads to 'Rock music', 'Beatles', and 'Yoko Ono'. It also connects to 'changed'.
- Rock music:** This branch leads to 'Beatles' and 'Yoko Ono'.
- Beatles:** This branch leads to 'Yoko Ono'.
- Yoko Ono:** This branch leads to 'missing memories' (represented by a photo of a couple).
- Hippies:** This branch leads to 'Sex' (Weird) and 'Anti-political'. It also connects to 'were'.
- Sex:** This branch leads to 'Weird'.
- Anti-political:** This branch leads to 'Preventing genocide'.
- Preventing genocide:** This branch leads to 'UN'.
- UN:** This branch leads to 'advocated for'.
- advocated for:** This branch leads to 'Anti-war'.
- Anti-war:** This branch leads to 'Many Organizations'.
- Many Organizations:** This branch leads to 'NATO'.
- NATO:** This branch leads to 'UN'.
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When I asked them to create the map based on “importance” they chose their concept of “Political Changes” as the main factor and all their concepts flowed from there. When asked to reconcile the “challenging” histories (the images in the map above), they placed “Racism” further up than “Political Changes” (circled above) indicating the importance they felt this concept had for understanding the period

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