

Book Review

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Review of:

Seixas, P. & Morton, T. (2013). *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education. 218 pp. and DVD.

In the past decade there has been a renaissance of sorts in North America in the area of history teaching and learning. The origins of this have been described elsewhere in *Canadian Social Studies* and other journals in both Canada and the United States.

One feature of this renewed interest has been the publication of a number of books striving to teach students how to think historically – to investigate how accounts of and from the past are constructed and reconstructed in contrast to the usual take on history as received wisdom from the past to be memorized and regurgitated in a test or two. *The Big Six* by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton is one of the latest of these efforts. It focuses on six concepts: historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective and the ethical dimension. These are similar to other dimensions of historical thinking going back to work in the UK from the late 1960s.

I review this book through two lenses. The lesser of these lenses is through my work with the authors, especially Tom Morton, who kindly notes our collaborations over several decades in the acknowledgements.

A more important lens is that of implementation. Implementing good ideas through provincial education mandates, workshops, institutes, conferences, and even professional learning communities, is largely a history of failure. My former Dean, Michael Fullan, has made a career chronicling why change is hard. There must be an “elephant graveyard” of ideas and innovations in education – sound in theory with potential for improving student learning, but through misinterpretation and overselling get distorted, dismissed, and disregarded – only to appear years or decades later freshly painted yet still repeating the same fruitless cycle. One can read Ken Osborne for the history of success and failure in the waves of history education reform in Canada.

What does *The Big Six* bring that can break this cycle of implementation failure?

The layout is very teacher friendly with an extensive use of photos, charts, and diagrams: some of which I have used in my classrooms over the decades. For busy professionals, as well as for customers and marketers, appearance counts!

Additional features that can help groups of teachers work through the ideas and traverse the “implementation dip” (Fullan et al., 1990) include the following:

- For each concept there is an artful blend of theory and practice, combining ideas of how historians actually think about the historical concept in question (and reflect it through their work) with how classroom teachers actually work with the concept. I can attest to the value of the classroom examples since I have worked

with these and similar examples in many classrooms since the early 1970s. It seems to me that any work of history deals with many of these concepts simultaneously though separating them is useful for concentrated professional learning work.

- A thought that came to mind when reading the accounts of how historians deal with the concept in question was the role of deep content knowledge as well as procedures for making connections between the content and the historical context. I wonder how classroom teachers approach additional reading of books on history by historians and how such additional reading throughout their careers shapes their thinking and curriculum work. For example, after reading Margaret MacMillan's *Paris 1919* I would approach the significance of the Treaty of Versailles very differently in my modern world history course (in its final stages of revision in Ontario). For example, I would pay much more attention to emerging nationalisms in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.
- Each concept has a set of "guideposts" that I consider standards for assessing understanding. Starting with students' "limited" understandings of an historical concept, using the guideposts the authors offer a variety of teaching and assessment strategies to help students move towards "powerful" understandings without being messed up by different assessment terms and criteria that characterize education among our provincial jurisdictions. I found it easy to match. For example, the Application section in Ontario's Achievement Charts for learning can be demonstrated through powerful understandings of many guideposts such as when students can define a period of history based on justifiable criteria and can see alternative ways of defining such periods (p. 94).
- The DVD that comes with the book includes BLMs of parts and activities in each section plus additional questions and prompts to encourage the development of historical thinking in all students as well as outline rubrics for assessing the understanding of each of the concepts. These ideas are very practical and are not "methods from Mars": ideas too challenging for us to use in our classes.

If there is a challenge in using *The Big Six* it is its richness. Busy teachers, some of whom with limited background of history work as undergrads, and less in exploring issues around historiography, may wonder where to start in their further learning. The organization of *The Big Six* allows for concentration on specific thinking, perhaps with the guideposts as workshop/exploration points, this "shrinking the changes" required (Heath and Heath, 2010).

References

- Fullan, M. G., Bennett, B. & Rolheiser Bennett, C. (1990). Linking classroom and school improvement. *Educational Leadership*. 47 (8). 13-19.
- Heath, C. and Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How To Change Things When Change Is Hard*. New York: Broadway Books.