

Teaching the nation's story: Comparing public debates and classroom perspectives of history education in Australia and Canada

Introduction

Teaching the nation's past is as contested as ever, generating public anxiety, political debates and various 'history wars' around the world. If only it generated such passion in the classroom. For many students, learning about their national history is simply 'boring', or 'repetitive', or both: repeated surveys reveal low levels of national historical knowledge among school children, and there is growing concern that students are gravely ignorant of their nation's heritage. Yet preoccupation with this apparent national illiteracy tends to overlook *how* students connect with the subject itself. This paper draws on public and professional discussions of history education in Australia and Canada, as well as results from a qualitative research project undertaken in the two countries. It argues that critical historical engagement in the classroom, rather than any return to 'the facts', is key to connecting students with their national histories.

The paper first canvasses a number of debates over history teaching in both Australia and Canada, revealing a widespread popular understanding that history education comprises the essential facts about the nation and should play a positive and uplifting role in national life. By contrast, as the second section explores, professional discussions of 'historical thinking' and 'historical understanding' represent a conception of history education that challenge nationally affirming assumptions about teaching the subject in school. Such discussions advocate a form of disciplinary historical literacy, rather than simply teaching core facts about the nation's past, in history lessons. But what do students themselves make of these debates over history teaching? How do young Australians and Canadians connect with their national histories? Finally, then, the paper turns to the classroom itself—perspectives which are notably absent from these public discussions of history teaching. Here, I argue that while students overwhelmingly sense the importance of learning about their past, they also demand historical engagement beyond mere recognition of 'the nation's story'.

I. Upholding the nation

When the Canadian Dominion Institute published the results of its 1997 Canada Day Youth History Survey on the national knowledge of young Canadians, a flurry of public concern ensued (Dominion Institute 1997). Young Canadians had 'failed' the test on their nation's past, according to the press release, which was quickly followed by headlines proclaiming Canada's future was itself under threat: 'How can a country survive without celebrating its past, without pride in its achievements, without its

own national mythology', asked one editorial in the *Edmonton Journal* (Editorial 1997); 'It is not the students but Canadian history courses in our high schools that have failed', bemoaned Joanne Harris Burgess in the *Globe and Mail*. 'And it is this failure we as a nation cannot afford' (Harris Burgess 1997). Even the prime minister, Jean Cr tien, lamented the state of young people's historical knowledge in a speech to parliament: 'It is unacceptable that our youth know all about computers, but so little about their country' (cit. Granatstein 1998: 147).

Why this anxiety over history teaching? Why do headlines proclaiming its demise appear on newspaper front pages year after year? The concern is essentially a national one: the Dominion Institute and the media coverage it helped generate tapped into a popular belief that Canada was facing a national crisis of historical knowledge. Furthermore, that knowledge was inextricably linked with the national affiliations of young Canadians. As Charles Frank (1997) responded in the *Calgary Herald*, 'Our young people know virtually nothing about the history of the county they are about to inherit'. To be sure, this insistence that history should hold the nation together into the future is popularly held—hence the pervasive collective pronouns in debates over teaching it (Levstik 2000, Clark 2006, Hunter 1991). And there is no more powerful symbol of that future than the very students ('our children') who continue to disappoint an anxious public almost annually.

Such anxiety rings just as loudly in Australia, another Commonwealth country, where debates over history teaching have sparked increasing public and political disquiet. In the lead up to the centenary of Australia's federation in 2001, for example, a number of research reports revealed low levels of knowledge among schoolchildren about their nation's founding moment and political history. In 1994, the Civics Expert Group published the results of a survey it commissioned that showed young Australians had a very tenuous understanding of their nation's political history and democratic institutions. In 1997, research by the Council for the Centenary of Federation confirmed this national ignorance with alarming statistics: only 18 per cent of those interviewed knew Edmund Barton was Australia's first Prime Minister, and 43 per cent of respondents did not even know what federation meant (Civics Expert Group 1994, Taylor 2001, Print 1995).

The research prompted public outcries over young Australians' understanding of their national history. In a letter to the *Adelaide Advertiser* leading up to the centenary, Julie Beare (1999) warned that the lack of knowledge uncovered by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation threatened national identity. 'What sort of citizens are we producing who have not learnt about our nation's history?', she asked. 'The study of Australian history should be one of the great unifying forces in our nation's life, instead of a forgotten relic in our schools'. An editorial for the *Melbourne Age* was similarly worried. 'It is a sad fact that there are probably more Australians who know who George

Washington was than could name our own founding leader’, it surmised. ‘How can people who know so little about their past make informed decisions about their future?’ (Editorial 1999).

Like the Canadian experience of these debates, Australian politicians were quick to respond to the poor results. In fact, such was the level of public concern over the state of national knowledge in the 1990s that successive federal governments (progressive and conservative) became actively involved in promoting the importance of Australian history and civics education in schools. After the Civics Expert Group reported its findings in 1994, Paul Keating’s Labor Government committed \$25 million dollars over four years to implement its recommendation. And while John Howard’s election in 1996 radically changed Australia’s political direction, his conservative Coalition Government continued the civics education momentum initiated by its predecessor with the re-badged Discovering Democracy programme in 1997. That same year the federal Education Minister, David Kemp, also commissioned a National Inquiry into history teaching because he was concerned that ‘as we approach the centenary of federation, the study of history was declining in our schools’,. And he subsequently committed \$2.3 million for a National [Commonwealth](#) History Project—one of the inquiry’s recommendations (Kemp 2000).

Of course, such concern is hardly restricted to Australia or Canada. A 1987 report by Chester E. Finn and Diane Ravitch in the USA, for example, argued that their test results of almost 8000 students revealed a generation ‘gravely handicapped’ by their own ignorance (Ravitch and Finn 1987: 201). And in 2001, the British *Daily Telegraph* reported significant public concern over results of a survey in which some schoolchildren astonishingly thought Adolf Hitler was Britain’s Prime Minister in World War II (Lightfoot 2001). Outrage over the state of historical knowledge appears with predictable regularity—as the American history educationist Sam Wineburg wryly noted, ‘The whole world has turned upside down in the past eighty years but one thing has seemingly remained the same: Kids don’t know history’ (Wineburg 2001: 306-307).

Nevertheless, the comparison between Australia and Canada is an interesting one to pursue. In particular, it sheds light on the trans-national nature of these paradoxically *parochial* debates over history education and young people’s historical knowledge. A number of scholars have well documented the consuming and often heated public controversies over teaching national narratives in the USA (Nash et al. 1997, Symcox 2002), the UK (Phillips 1998), Australia (Clark 2006) and Japan (Bollag 2001); their work confirms just how politically contested the past has become in recent years, as the polarising language of their battlefield metaphors (‘history wars’, ‘killing of history’, and so on) are repeated in these perpetual ‘crises’ around the world (Seixas 2002a, Macintyre and Clark 2003, Sears and Hyslop-Margison 2007).

This paper seeks to critically contextualise public debates over history education with professional discussion of the discipline. In particular, it challenges those calling for a stronger national narrative in schools to consider how students and teachers connect with the subject. As the history educationist Peter Seixas (1993) acknowledged in *JCS*, poor survey results give weight to popular appeals to ‘get back to the facts’ when it comes to teaching national history; the question is, how does this translate to the classroom itself?

So this study has been undertaken to examine national debates over history teaching in the context of classroom engagement. The two countries have been chosen because they are (with some notable exceptions) similar educational jurisdictions with comparable histories. Both nations are of similar geographic size and population. They are also multicultural settler-societies dealing with Indigenous rights and reconciliation in their history teaching on the one hand, as well as issues of national identity in a modern pluralist society on the other. And, unlike the UK and Japan for example, the two countries are federations, with distinctly regional school education systems. This in turn raises significant questions about teaching ‘national’ histories across broad geographical (and in the case of Québec, cultural and linguistic) areas. Indeed, it is this anxiety over ‘national knowledge’ that guides my interest in comparing the public and political concerns over history education with professional understandings of the subject.

This paper does not dispute that students’ grasp of history—revealed by repeated surveys—is indeed troubling. The historical knowledge of many young people in Australia and Canada is patchy at best, and presents significant problems for civic comprehension and engagement (Civics Expert Group 1994, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2006, Barton and Levstik 2004, Saha 2000). Yet focussing on this knowledge deficit as a form of national illiteracy has the tendency to reduce historical study to a sanctioned tally of critical facts and dates. Paradoxically, this is a very *uncritical* view of history teaching because it stresses important events in the nation’s history as intrinsic rather than contingent (and for that reason such analysis is not widely represented in professional discussions about the subject). Nevertheless, it continues to dominate public debate over the status of history education in the two countries.

In the words of Canadian historian Ken Osborne (2003: 586), ‘a serious rupture between historians and the public at large’ has come to dominate history education there. In Australia, similarly, public debates over history education fixate on the factual ignorance of students and advocate a form of history teaching as nation building. There exists in the two countries a pervasive popular belief that history education is letting ‘us’ down, that the nation ‘deserves better’.

It was in this context that the historian Jack Granatstein produced an autopsy of Canadian history education following publication of the Dominion Institute's survey. Granatstein blamed dominant educational philosophies of relativism and political progressivism for the poor test results, where a fragmented approach to teaching the nation's story had irrevocably damaged the subject (Granatstein 1998). A number of scholars critiqued Grantstein's call for a more positive, coherent national narrative as overly parochial and historically simplistic (Lorenz 1999, Mackillop 1999, Palmer 1999). Yet the book quickly reignited the public debate surrounding the Dominion Institute's history surveys and was a Canadian bestseller (Morton 2000: 51-3).

More recent debates in Québec took on a strikingly similar configuration. While nationalist Québécois concerns over a proposed history curriculum might have caused consternation for Canadians who share Granatstein's federal sentiments, they too represented a narrow understanding of history education's purpose. When a draft alternative provincial curriculum was released in 2006 there was an enormous public and political reaction: a number of historians and educationists expressed outrage over the proposed course of study, which they felt diminished Québec's historic struggle for national identity and recognition; meanwhile, history educationists were left to explain the subject's complexity beyond any simple national story (Séguin 2006, Hamilton 2006).

This question of a 'national' history is much less fraught in Australia, where the nation itself is not under such constant tension. Yet the struggle to define 'Australia's story' through history teaching remains fractious for state and federal governments alike. On the eve of Australia Day in 2006, then Prime Minister John Howard decried the state of Australian history teaching and called for restoration of the subject in the nation's schools. Only a 'root and branch renewal' of Australian history teaching could foster a lasting attachment to the nation's past, he said. 'In the end, young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history' (Howard 2006).

While the prime minister shied away from advocating an overly celebratory history curriculum, he believed in a national narrative that was ultimately affirming: teaching the nation's history was critical to ensuring its coherence, strength and identity. Over the next two years this federal push for a nationally consistent approach to history teaching dominated public and political debate in Australia. A national history summit, comprising eminent historians and public commentators from around the country, was called to develop a new approach to teach the nation's past. And despite a significant campaign from teachers and educationists to ensure a more flexible, less content oriented course of study, the prime minister launched his government's comprehensive *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10* on the eve of the federal election in 2007 (Department of Education, Science

and Training 2007). The guide included 79 milestones to be taught over years 9 and 10 and was to be tied to the subsequent federal-state funding agreement for schools, worth \$42 billion. In other words, if states did *not* sign up to teach Australian history according to the guide, they risked losing their share of federal education funding (Taylor 2008a, Hirst 2008).

The Howard Government's history guide tapped into popular demands for the teaching of a stronger national narrative in schools, reflecting a widespread suspicion that progressive educational values had corrupted both the core national knowledge and iconic national beliefs of young Australians. According to historian John Hirst, it was Howard's belief that a national history education should not only protect Australian schoolchildren from historical bias and subjectivity, but provide a positive and uplifting account of the nation to its youngest citizens. In the prime minister's own words, Australian history teaching should provide 'an objective record of achievement' (Howard 2006). And the recurrent poor levels of historical knowledge among schoolchildren legitimated his government's response.

It is impossible to fully unravel the politics from the public opinion surrounding such sentiments. To what extent do governments capitalise on popular anxiety about teaching the nation's history? And to what extent are they defined by it? It is a tangled political and pedagogical relationship. What is clear, however, is just how powerful these public ideas about the role of history education appear to be. Many people are deeply connected to their national story, and sense that any threat to national historical knowledge is a threat to the nation itself. It would be easy to dismiss such fears as conservative populism, except that they clearly straddle the political spectrum. Being seen to be strong on national history is 'good politics'—and political parties of various persuasions in Australia and Canada have been forced to respond to the popular desire to teach a more coherent and positive national story because the view is so widely held. Yet it begs the question: history may well be good politics, but do these politics make for good history?

II. Teaching for 'historical literacy'

Looking back over some of the responses to the former Australian government's history push, there was overwhelming public support for bolstering the status of the subject in schools. Many Australians are genuinely worried that students' exposure to their national history has been ad hoc and incoherent. A number of educators and historians were also very supportive of a stronger and more coordinated history presence in state curricula, but were qualified in one fundamental aspect: namely, would this national history push come at the expense of historical interest among students? While a popular belief in an affirming national story was prominent in the public debate over Australian history education,

there was simultaneous concern from prominent teachers, historians and public intellectuals to ensure historical understanding and engagement in the classroom.

Ultimately, these professional responses to the Australian debate reflected the multiple issues they felt were at stake. First among them was the question of historical engagement—a number of historians and educationists were concerned the government’s approach overlooked prominent research that advocated teaching a disciplinary *understanding* of history, over and above any simple tally of core national facts and dates. Furthermore, they wondered, why was their extensive collective experience of teaching and learning history in the classroom being largely ignored? By stipulating so much (national) content, these educators and historians feared students could be further distanced from the very subject the government was trying to consolidate.

The historian Stuart Macintyre requested that any revision process of Australian history teaching needed to include educators to ensure the ‘renewal’ did not alienate students. ‘I yield to no one in my conviction that we should teach the story of Australian Federation, but I know from experience that it is not an easy lesson to teach 14-year-olds’, Macintyre wrote in an article for the *Age* newspaper. ‘A precondition for the success of the summit will therefore be to listen to the informed advice of the school teachers and respect their expertise’ (Macintyre 2006). Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s ‘7.30 Report’ a few days later, Macintyre again supported the need for a stronger national history curriculum, so long as that was not at the expense of critical engagement in the classroom: ‘I think we would all agree that we need to do more to restore history, but we need to make sure that that is open to diverse viewpoints and that it is not simply an exercise in indoctrination’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2006).

Meanwhile, the president of the History Teachers’ Association of Australia, Nick Ewbank, insisted that history’s richness, rather than any simple representation of ‘what happened’, had to be the focus of any national teaching approach. ‘Yes, facts (and dates) are important. Yes, there should be some “established certainties”’, he acknowledged. ‘But there are spaces between those certainties—and those spaces are often the most interesting, the most thought provoking—to explore with students’ (Ewbank 2007). Annabel Astbury, the professional services manager at the History Teachers’ Association of Victoria also hoped that history’s complexity would not be overlooked. ‘It is only through teaching the celebrated with the uncelebrated that the values of tolerance, empathy and compassion emerge’, she insisted. ‘A history class free from question and repudiation therefore does not augur well in producing “good citizens”’ (Astbury 2006).

This concerted professional campaign against the Howard government’s history guide was arguably a success. In November 2007, John Howard lost the federal election to the Labor Party led by

Kevin Rudd. While the incoming Labor Government also promised a national history curriculum, tacitly acknowledging the considerable public support for a more coordinated approach to the subject, their stance was far more conciliatory and consultative than their predecessors'. The Rudd Government quickly appointed a National Curriculum Board to prepare framing papers in English, maths, science and history (a subtle, but important change from the former government's emphasis on 'Australian history'). And since the release of the history framing paper in late 2008 (National Curriculum Board 2008), the response History Teachers' Association of Australia has been largely positive. Notwithstanding their general support, however, history teachers' associations around the country continue to exercise visible caution about the new draft national history curriculum (History Teachers' Association of Australia 2008). Without proper implementation, ongoing government support and professional development, the promise of this national teaching document may be swamped by the realities of the classroom, where teacher training and classroom resources present significant problems to history education around the country (Taylor 2008b: 54).

Such professional activism has also characterised much of the response to the Dominion Institute's campaign for a more positive and content-driven approach to the subject in Canada. While the Institute's surveys and media coverage revealed a popular desire for a stronger national history presence in schools, the historian Desmond Morton criticised its portrayal of the subject as a fixed national narrative. The Institute's 'solution to the ignorance it discovered was to be a collection of collection of free-floating "National Standards", purged of any troubling or debatable context', he determined. 'Is knowing that Confederation happened in 1867 or the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 "history" or simply an almost meaningless fragment of an event,' Morton wondered, 'a "factoid" as easily forgotten as memorized?' (Morton 2006: 26).

Others, such as history educationist Peter Seixas (2002b), criticised the Dominion Institute's populist appeals for being historically simplistic. The version of history it proposed provided 'no way of reconciling different stories, different accounts in a multicultural society', he contended. 'This is the promise of critical historical discourse: that it provides a rational way, on the basis of evidence and argument, to discuss the differing accounts that jostle with or contradict each other'. In their study of how perceived educational crises propels debate over civics education in Canada, Alan Sears and Emery Hyslop-Margison (2007: 49) were similarly disapproving: 'In our view the knowledge necessary for citizenship is much more complex than that assessed by surveys such as those done by the Dominion Institute.' Such concerns were not restricted to Anglophone approaches to the past. Responding to the heated reaction to the draft Québec syllabus in 2006, Jocelyn Létourneau described how the

complexity of history should be conveyed through its ‘dissonance’, rather than any narrow urge towards nation building (Létourneau 2006: 81, Létourneau 2004).

This does not mean that the national narrative should not be taught, as Nick Ewbank articulated in his response to the Australian history summit, or that ‘the facts’ are not important. These history educators advocate learning content in the classroom because knowing historical context is critical to understanding the past, but they also insist on the importance of encouraging students to engage with history’s complexity: such as negotiating contrasting perspectives, analysing different historical sources, and understanding the tension between judging the past from our own present values and those from another age. As Peter Lee (2001), who heads the History Education Unit at the University of London, explains, ‘Students need to know about the past or the whole exercise becomes pointless. But understanding the discipline allows more serious engagement with the substantive history that students study, and enables them to do things with their historical knowledge.’

Such views also permeate the impressive overview of Canadian history education offered by Ken Osborne in *JCS* in 2003. While Osborne acknowledged the importance of teaching core national knowledge in history classes, he criticised any assumptions that such content was the sum total of historical understanding: ‘to agree that schools too often fail to give students a comprehensive picture of the Canadian past is not to agree with the critics’ preferred solution, which seems to consist of a return to the old nation building narrative that was found wanting in the 1970s’ (2003: 599). For it seems ‘obvious’, he continued, ‘that teaching history well demands not only pedagogical competence, but also a reasonable familiarity with history as a form of disciplined inquiry’ (2003: 607).

This professional discourse contrasts starkly with the public debates in Australia and Canada over what students know (or do not know) about their nation’s past. It represents an understanding of history education *beyond* the popular and politicised demands for a stronger national story in school. And taken together, it provides a taxonomy of ‘historical literacy’—a term I borrow from Australian history educationists Tony Taylor and Carmel Young, whose work emphasises the importance of teaching historical skills in school and challenges the notion that proficiency in history begins and ends with core national knowledge. ‘Historical literacy can be seen as a systematic process,’ Taylor and Young suggest, ‘with particular sets of skills, attitudes and conceptual understandings, that mediates and develops historical consciousness’ (Taylor and Young 2003: 5).

Such scholarship in history education may be diverse in its geographic origins, but it offers a consistent argument for transmitting historical complexity in a thorough history education. These important studies seek to foster and encourage the development of historical thinking among students. And they confirm that, rather than simply something that ‘happened’, history is a complex practice

with particular skills and competencies (Seixas 2006a, 2006b, Wineburg 2001, Lee and Ashby 2000). Poor survey results dominate public discussion of history education, and they reveal a worrying lack of historical engagement among young Australians and Canadians. While teaching a narrowly national, content-driven approach to the subject may overcome students' ignorance of their first prime minister, it will do little in the way of fostering genuine historical understanding. Furthermore, as this paper goes on to argue, it could turn students away from the subject even further.

III. Voices from the history classroom

Lastly, then, the paper turns to the classroom to gauge students' and teachers' conceptions of teaching national history in schools. It draws on interviews that were conducted in 2006 as part of a comparative research study of history education in Australia and Canada. This classroom context remains relevant in both countries for the important perspective it offers. My contention that students must be interested in their history education if they are going to learn it is not diminished by an Australian change of government and continuing Canadian political challenges. Indeed, as a new national history curriculum is in the process of being developed for Australia and benchmarks in historical understanding are gaining increasing traction in Canada, I suggest this view from the classroom is as critical as ever.

The comparative project was developed in response to public and political debates over history teaching in the two countries. While these debates focus on an apparent national illiteracy among the 'nation's youth', there remains a pressing need to move beyond what students do not know and start asking how *do* they connect with the past. Anxiety over the state over young people's national knowledge plays out predictably in the media and in politics, but it is less clear how students and teachers engage with the subject in class. For instance, what do students and teachers think about teaching and learning the nation's history? Do they enjoy it? What don't they like? Do they think it should be a compulsory subject? And if so, how do they think it should be taught?

This comparative research is deliberately qualitative. The project was not designed to test students' historical knowledge, but to listen to what they and their teachers had to say about learning and teaching it. In so doing it gives voice to their classroom experiences, and brings what has been a largely overlooked perspective into debates about teaching national history in Australia and Canada.

The project focuses on the experiences of high school history classes. First, this is where most Australian and Canadian history is explicitly taught in the respective countries. Furthermore, secondary history teachers are much more likely to have been trained in history education, which is critical to get a professional sense of how to teach the subject well. The middle to upper years of high school are also where students are most likely to have a comparable understanding of their nation's past. (In the

primary or elementary years, national history usually begins by looking at families and local communities.)

In all, 182 high school students ranging from years 9 to 12, along with 43 history teachers and 21 curriculum officials from all eight Australian states and territories, were interviewed for this research (246 participants in total). A smaller, comparative set of interviews with 78 participants (56 students, 17 teachers and 5 curriculum officials) was conducted in four Canadian Provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, Québec and New Brunswick). Eleven ethics proposals were completed for this project (eight in Australia and three in Canada), as well as various police checks and permissions to visit the schools and conduct the interviews. Thirty-four schools from Australia, and eight from Canada, took part in this project.¹

The students were interviewed in small focus groups, rather than individually, to avoid intimidating them during interview process. The typical group contained about five or six students, and this seemed to provide a fairly good balance between gauging students' individual opinions and generating discussion between them. The interview schedules themselves were divided into five topic areas, with questions on (i) Local and Regional Histories, (ii) Indigenous Histories, (iii) Federation/Confederation, (iv) The Nation at War, and (v) Contemporary Political History. These five topics were chosen because they reflect important themes and timeframes in Australian and Canadian history, and because they have generated significant public debates in both countries. It was imperative that the topics be represented in history syllabuses from each of the Australian States and Territories and Canadian Provinces so that meaningful comparisons between the jurisdictions could be made.

Respondents were then asked about their attitudes to national history more generally (how they identify with their nation's past and how they think the subject should be taught)—and for the purposes of this paper, it is this second section of the interviews that I focus on. The state of young people's historical knowledge is indeed concerning to historians and educators (and even some students), but the classroom perspectives presented here challenge assumptions about *fixing* Australian and Canadian history education by simply doing 'more of it' or returning to 'the basics'. These students and teachers do not question the importance of learning about national history—far from it—but they do have strong opinions about how it should be taught.

All of the teachers interviewed for this project were passionate about teaching history (either within amalgamated subjects such as Social Studies, or as a discrete discipline). The teachers were approached for this research through history teachers' associations in Australia and history education networks in Canada, so they were undoubtedly a self-selecting bunch. Nevertheless, their experience proves to be a powerful asset of this research: despite the diversity of their political views, their

backgrounds, and their schools, they are compelling advocates for history education. And, like many of those commentators and pundits prominent in public debates over history education, they also strongly believed in teaching national history to their students. As one Vancouver history teacher responded when asked whether Canadian history should be a mandatory school subject: 'It is, and it should be'.²

Importantly, however, these teachers and curriculum officials also criticised the populist calls to teach core national knowledge. Such an approach not only precluded critical historical engagement in classroom, they insisted, but was also relatively dull. Instead, they described a very different sort of history class, where they tried to encourage students to think critically and creatively about the subject. Mary in Brisbane said she wanted her history lessons to come alive for students: 'It's fun, it's good—you create critical kids', she explained. 'The really bright ones will actually learn to challenge you as well as the texts and the sources and stuff. At a Catholic boys' school in Adelaide, Stephen was similarly open about the skills of critical analysis he hoped to instil in his students: 'I like students to think, I like them to be critical thinkers. I like them to question what they're being fed, and even question what I might say to them as well.'³

Canadian teachers were as eager to explain the importance of critical engagement in the classroom. Geoff from Toronto enjoyed the difficult questions history demanded from his students. 'Like if you look at science or math or anything, yeah, the kids think, but they think within a paradigm, in that box of the subject matter', he said. 'Whereas in history, you can really take a look and ask, "OK, was this right? Was this wrong? Why did they do this? Did they do it with any understanding?" You know, that sort of thing that you can really stop and question.' Paula, another Toronto teacher, was adamant Canadian history should be a mandatory school subject, but was determined that its strong presence in the classroom should not reduce its complexity or appeal. 'It's my belief that no student at a Canadian high school should leave without a senior Canadian history course', she insisted. Although if that meant simply teaching 'Facts and figures and dates, you know, that just kills history', she added.⁴

In other words, teachers sensed that reducing history classes to the transmission of core national knowledge does not simply undermine critical understanding, but actually turns students off the subject. Their concern is supported by research that indicates students appreciate historical complexity more than public debates over the subject allow for (Barton 2006, Barton and Levstik 2004, Edwards 2005). The teachers who were interviewed for this project were keenly aware of the varied abilities and application among their students, but were also committed to conveying the richness of the subject to all learners. They wanted students to know 'the facts' *and* be able to cope with a range of opinions—and they claimed their classes were enlivened for it.

For their part, curriculum officials also commented on the importance of teaching students to ‘do’ history in the classroom and encourage them to be historians. Jenny Lawless, the Inspector for History at the New South Wales Board of Studies, described the aims of the curriculum in that state: ‘What we have tried to implement is teaching the whole area of historical skills’, she outlined. ‘Basically we have made it prominent in the syllabus, starting with the lower skill levels of comprehension right the way through to empathetic understanding, perspectives and interpretation, particularly with the emphasis on analysing sources.’ For Lawless, the curriculum represented an approach to history that was ‘not just rote learning facts, which is a very lower order skill, but being able to actually engage in history’.⁵ Far from reducing history to a set of core facts in his Ontario jurisdiction, Alan Hux was similarly concerned to encourage student connection: ‘There’s a lot of opportunity and breadth and you can make connections between the current and the past—in the hands of a qualified, capable teacher I think the kids can have a lot of fun’.⁶

Perhaps it is to be expected that the views of these experienced teachers and curriculum designers echo current academic thinking about history education, where historical understanding not only reflects the complexity of the subject but also has the capacity to connect students to it. Yet the vast majority of students who were interviewed for this project also preferred history classes that were not only interesting, but challenged them with complex ideas and contrasting perspectives. They might not have used terms like ‘historical literacy’ to describe the ways they best learnt the subject, but their engagement with history can be seen within the frame of a disciplinary historical understanding. Students overwhelmingly appreciated the opportunity to history that was contested, changeable and not restricted to core national knowledge.

A group of year 12 students from a public school in Darwin in Northern Australia said they learnt history best with the questions raised in class by their active and encouraging teacher:

Natalie: We did a lot of debating last year, like arguing our different sides, and I think one of the really big components is having good teachers. I think what made that so interesting was that we had really good teachers who know their stuff and have like actively engaged us and they’ve questioned our opinions, and it’s just been a really good experience.

Gabby: I think on the whole, I don’t want to speak for everyone in our history class, but I get the feeling that we all *learn* better through the discussions.

All: Yeah.

Gabby: Through being able to ask those questions and that sort of thing, rather than just reading dates out of a textbook. Although that is helpful in some instances, I think as a whole a lot of our learning has been through discussion.⁷

Their group discussion provides a strong counterpoint to any insistence that students should be learning a more content-oriented and nationally affirming history in their classes. The students acknowledge the importance of learning historical content, but they are adamant that it is the possibilities for contingency and contention that make the subject engaging; indeed, far from being turned off multiple perspectives, they suggest that is in fact how they learn history best.

Such comments confirm the work of North American scholars such as Linda Levstik, Keith Barton and Peter Seixas, who have each insisted that the complexity of the subject needs to be reflected in the classroom itself. Why is it, Levstik (2000) has asked, that despite such overt public historical debate, a multiplicity of stories is rarely taught in schools? Seixas similarly rejects teaching a fixed national story: 'it would be self-defeating to attempt to resolve these arguments before we get into the classroom, in order to provide students with a finished truth. Rather, we need to bring the arguments into the classroom' (Seixas 2002b).

Students themselves certainly seem more than capable of dealing with these arguments, with the help of a confident teacher. At a public high school in Vancouver a group of year 11 students described how they connected with the subject, and explained that discussion and debate in class was certainly preferable to an overemphasis on historical facts and dates:

How do you think you learn history best?

Ju: Debates.

Jing: I think the worst way is just to have the students sit there and the teacher spitting out facts, expecting you to absorb it like that. I think that's the *worst* way you can do it.

Ju: I like debates because of the fact that you have your own opinion and everyone's involved, everyone's like screaming out stuff—'no you're wrong' or 'no you're right'—and then the teacher will be like, 'ah, no, that's not exactly it', and we'll talk a little bit about it and then you can go back to the debate. So everyone gets involved, and you know when you're having fun you kind of learn, right?⁸

That these students found the subject interesting was no doubt down helped by their enthusiastic and experienced teachers, who were devoted to the subject. For their part, teachers were also concerned about training and professional development needed to teach history well. Many teachers talked specifically about the critical importance of being trained in history in order to teach the subject well. Their repeated insistence on the importance of qualified history teachers can be read as a professional response to those students who complained of boring classes with narrow historical and educational approaches: in other words, if there were more trained history teachers, history classes would be significantly improved.

Cameron in Perth stressed the importance of expertise in history for those teaching the subject. 'I think that the teachers that teach history also need to know their subject and they also need to know how to teach it,'⁷ he insisted. 'You can't just get someone who is an English teacher or someone who's from another subject area and get them in to teach history because unless they're specifically trained in how to teach it well then it's not going to be enjoyed by the students.' For Terry in Vancouver, support for teachers could be linked directly to classroom results: 'I think you'd probably knock the socks off the students if you gave the teachers some time and support for developing things.'⁹

While these classroom responses are by no means comprehensive, they reveal that students and teachers appreciate being able to debate and discuss their ideas in class. For many students, it is history's complexity—not any sense of national duty—that draws them to the subject. Ryan, a year 12 student in New South Wales, said he liked the fact that 'everyone's allowed to have their own opinions' in history. 'Like, you're allowed to have yours—I don't care—as long as you can kind of back up your evidence.'¹⁰ Derek from New Brunswick was blunt in his assessment of the subject: 'I think they should get rid of the whole importance of the dates and the specific dates and times, and concentrate more on *what happened*. Like, because it's all just memorising dates for the test—When did this happen? When did that happen—not like the detail of actually what went down. And that's kind of taking away from the whole feel of the course.'¹¹

There were only a handful of comments from students who said they disliked any sort of open-ended learning and felt happiest in their history class when they could just read their textbooks. Roger, a year 10 student from Hobart said rote learning was his favourite: 'I learn better from reading from textbooks and stuff, like just finding out the facts and sitting in front of it I can relate to it easier than just going out and having to do it yourself.'¹² Such students must be catered for—they feel much more comfortable with a concrete, content-oriented history lesson. But those like Roger were a very small minority of the students I spoke with. For the most part, far from being undone by the challenge historical understanding, students seemed to revel in the way its skills, perspectives and methods complicated the story of the past.

Conclusion

While there is significant public and professional concern about the state of young people's historical knowledge in Australia and Canada, these classroom perspectives surely challenge popular demands for teaching a fixed and content-driven national narrative in schools. The teachers, students and curriculum officials who were interviewed for this project overwhelmingly sense the importance of

learning about their nation's past, but they do not want a simple and uplifting national history. Their views speak to the multiple issues at stake as both countries grapple with the question of how to teach their nation's history: educators and students alike demand that their history classes engage and challenge them beyond any recitation of the 'nation's story'; they ask that these classroom experiences be recognised in public debates over the past; and they remain concerned that if these perspectives are ignored, students may be turned off the very subject both countries are trying to strengthen. This research does not question the powerful arguments for greater historical knowledge among young people in Australia and Canada—it simply argues that students and teachers want, and deserve, a history education reflecting the complexity of the subject itself.

¹ Interviews for this paper have been conducted as part of a large research project based at Monash University and funded by the Australian Research Council. Curriculum officials who were interviewed agreed to be identified in this research, however the names of teachers and students have been changed. For a comprehensive account of the Australian research, see: [REDACTED]

² 'Terry', history teacher, public high school, Vancouver, 3 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

³ 'Mary', history teacher, public high school, Brisbane, 26 July 2006 (notes in possession of author); 'Stephen', history teacher, Catholic boys' school, Adelaide, 15 June 2006 (notes in possession of author).

⁴ 'Geoff', history teacher, public high school, Toronto, Canada, 18 October 2006 (notes in possession of author); 'Paula', history teacher, public high school, Toronto, Canada, 18 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

⁵ Jenny Lawless, Inspector Human Society in Its Environment (including History), Western Australia Board of Studies, 24 August 2006 (notes in possession of author)

⁶ Alan Hux, Program Coordinator for History, Toronto District School Board, 16 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

⁷ Interview with students, public high school, Darwin, 21 June 2006 (notes in possession of author).

⁸ Interview with students, public high school, Vancouver, 3 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

⁹ 'Cameron', history teacher, Catholic boys' school, Perth, 23 May 2006; 'Terry', history teacher, public high school, Vancouver, 3 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

¹⁰ 'Ryan', public high school, New South Wales Central Coast, 22 August 2006 (notes in possession of author).

¹¹ 'Derek', public high school, New Brunswick, 12 October 2006 (notes in possession of author).

¹² 'Roger', public high school, Hobart, 4 May 2006.

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