

Days of Future Past? Reflections on What Might Have Been

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The events of 9 /11 have heightened tensions around the planet Compared to Europe and many other places in which the milk of human kindness towards diversity is rapidly decreasing, the glass is Canada is at least half full. Here the tensions around diversity may be muted, but there is vigorous debate among those who push for a recognition and acceptance of diversity and those who are advocating a more unified set of “Canadian values”.

In a naïve belief that past experience might inform future actions I want to present a brief “biased” history of a course that tried to explore issues of unity and diversity that are now so much in current consciousness and debate. I will conclude with some suggestions for future school policy in this area should provincial governments wish to more directly address these issues in the curriculum.

The Course

Canada’s Multicultural Heritage was an optional course in Ontario high schools offered in grade 9 or 10 from 1973 to the mid 1980s when new governments, new priorities, and new curriculum ended the experiment.

The course came in the aftermath of major changes in society and in education begun in the 1960s such as:

- a recognition that teaching was not telling and that the interests, experiences, and abilities of learners needed to be considered; the teacher was no longer to be the “sage on the stage” but “ a guide on the side”,
- a move away from a sole reliance on content acquisition to process and skills, especially inquiry,
- a challenge to history and geography as the sole elements of social studies with the addition of social science courses such as politics, economics, law, and other social science courses,
- a challenge within history curriculum itself to the dominant political military chronological treatment with nascent units or additions of social history, including women’s, ethnic, and labour history.

The reality of an increasingly diverse population in Ontario, especially though not exclusively in urban areas, resulted in the provincial government of Bill Davis, himself a former education minister, turning the interest in ethnic studies into a full course.

The original course focused on helping students develop “a broad understanding of his identity through an awareness of his community and his national roots, of the qualities and characteristics of his community and nation, and of the forces, person, and situations that have contributed to both personal and national identity” (Ministry of education, *History: Intermediate Division*, page 6).

The original course also proposed four units: “The British heritage”; “The French heritage; “The Indian and Eskimo heritage; and “Other Cultures of Canada”. This course replaced the British history to 1900 course I had learned in school in the 1960s and taught in my early years of teaching in the 1970s.

To help teachers work with the new course the Ministry produced a support document for teachers in 1977. This was written by classroom teachers, many of whom I got to know in the next few years. They suggested three approaches for organizing the course and meeting the objectives.

Approach A was a more traditional chronological history of Canadian immigration policies and practices stressing

- push pull factors behind the decision to leave a country to come to Canada,
- features of the immigrant heritage,
- changes in and challenges to individuals and groups as they adjusted to life in Canada,
- individual and group contributions to Canadian society.

Approach B had the most space devoted to it in the support document and was more decidedly sociological and less historical. It was also more interested in process and less on content in that it stressed among other things

- investigating personal and group heritage or a community of choice through research and inquiry,
- identifying and examining settlement patterns and issues resulting from early settlement,
- exploring family heritage, structures, and other features of individual and group identity,
- recognizing political, economic, and religious contributions to society.

The language used in Approach C was *the* most vague stressing contributions to the “roots” of Canadian society in the areas of politics, law, arts, lifestyles, and technology.

My Involvement

I began teaching in the early 1970s like most of my colleagues, pretty traditional, relatively unskilled, and at least in my case, boring. Chalk and talk, blackboard notes, textbook questions and answers were my early tools.

So why did a traditional white Angloscandian-Celtic male like me embrace the new course? I can suggest a few reasons. First, I had taken a wide range of world history, social science, and religious course that took me beyond Canada and Europe. Of course I knew nothing much about Canada’s multicultural past. Second, I wanted to be a better more interesting teacher and social history within my traditional courses seemed a way to go, along with group work and inquiry-based teaching. Third, I was the junior member of my department and would likely have to teach the new course since it was not what my experienced and quite competent colleagues were used to or interested in. So if I was to teach the new course I had better learn how to do it well.

Perhaps the most influential reason for my interest in the emerging new course was the epiphany I had teaching the grade 10 Canadian history course, thanks to a couple of students of African descent. They were good students and wanted to do their independent essay assignments on black history in Canada. I said “go ahead and teach me”. And they did! Mary Ann Shadd, the Buxton settlement, and a whole hidden history were revealed to me. So when the Toronto School Board advertised for curriculum writers for this new course, I volunteered for one of the positions.

Half a dozen summers and curriculum projects later I was a curriculum consultant responsible for getting this course into schools. I had begun workshops for my school district in the late 1970s while still teaching high schoolers.

In workshopping the documents we produced including ones focused on Toronto as a city and Canada as a country, I drew upon my own experiences and those of my writing and teaching partners designing and teaching the course. Among my learnings were the following:

- social history works: students were engaged as they saw themselves in the history they were studying and worked hard,
- inquiry teaching works too, provided students have background knowledge, thinking skills, and time to research, discuss, and work through complex and emotional issues involving racism, prejudice, sexism, government policy and some aspects of Canadian history that are more shameful than celebratory,
- my students were not interested in victim portrayal and definitely did not want to be preached at; “don’t preach” was the advice I got when I asked them for advice on doing my workshops for teachers in other schools,
- I had to think seriously about literacy: both because I taught many students whose first language was not English and also because finding appropriate resources at a suitable reading level for all of my students was difficult back then,
- looking at personal identity was magic! I showed an NFB field on black history (*Fields of Endless Day*) and the students of African descent wanted me to reshow it during lunch; my classroom was packed as every student of colour in the school showed up to watch.

These and other insights gave me, I think, some credibility, when working in other schools. Nevertheless there were resisters. Some of them liked the old British history course and did not want to change. Others thought that the course was fine for Toronto but not needed in the rest of Ontario. Because our approach was largely historical (Approach A) combined with Approach B, I seldom got criticized by history “purists”.

As I noted, new governments, new priorities, new policies and new curriculum resulted in the demise of the course.

And now 20 years later and in the still present aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, it may be time to return to the past in order to pursue a more just and equitable future.

I think some elements from the experiences with the earlier course should be brought back into existing courses along with some important changes.

Some of these changes we already see; for example, the use of inclusive language. It is now accepted by many that multiculturalism as a passive concept involving celebrations and heritage has limits. This approach has given way to more active approaches stressing equity and antiracism. According to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-racism> (accessed March 12, 2007), anti-racism refers to “beliefs, actions, movements, and policies adopted or developed to oppose racism. In general, anti-racism is intended to promote an egalitarian society in which people do not face discrimination on the basis of their race, however defined. By its nature, anti-racism tends to promote the view that racism in a particular society is both pernicious and socially pervasive, and that particular changes in political, economic, and/or social life are required to eliminate it.”

It goes beyond tolerance or even multiculturalism in that it promotes social action, or in the Ontario curriculum context, active citizenship.

My experiences with the earlier course tell me the following

- don't preach! This includes to teachers as well as to students,
- policies without appropriate resources or time for teachers to practice are useless; there are many useful resources but they need to be selected, explored, and critiqued by students as well as by teachers,
- the research is in! purposeful talk in groups, inquiry learning, and struggling with complex and controversial public issues work,
- teachers need more practice in working with active pedagogies: the 1 hour slick workshop or "training" session is a waste of time and effort,

In some work I am doing looking specifically at the impact of 9 / 11 on Ontario curriculum and teaching I draw some additional messages for those wishing to update curriculum to new realities.

- as teachers, we need to be confident in who we are and what we stand for; in my experience there seems to be an undercurrent of fear or at least hesitancy to tackle issues considered controversial
- we need to expand out teaching repertoire; there are two powerful instructional strategies (purposeful talk in small co-operatively-structured groups and inquiry teaching) that are useful places to start. The research linking co-operative learning to the reduction of prejudice is vast, powerful, and positive.

Pluralistic democracies work to the extent that we work through and resolve the messy, important, and inevitable conflicts that occur. Our students need to learn how to work in such a real adult world environment. Our future as a pluralistic democracy may depend on preparing the next generation to be better than us in this regard.