

**The Intersection of History and Public Policy:  
Background, Commemoration, and Apology: What a Tangled Web We Weave!**

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By

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**Commemoration:** *A ceremony to honor the memory of someone or something*

**Apology:** *An expression of regret at having caused trouble for someone* [From [www.wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://www.wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)]

The relationships among history, public policy, commemoration, and apology are complex. I offer a field manual to introduce some of the issues stemming from these interrelationships.

I start with Ruth Sandwell's assertion (2003). "It is not clear, after all, where either students or teachers in most North American schools would have encountered the idea - the definition - of history as an open dialogue about, or critical engagement with, evidence from the past." (171). The title and the issues raised provide opportunities for such critical engagement, should we choose to take advantage of the opportunities. Some of the issues arising from the intersection have been examined in Hector Mackenzie's recent *Rapport* perspective on the "apology" part of our title (2010). On the complexities of making moral judgments about the past see MacMillan (2008); Seixas and Peck ((2004).

### **My Context**

We live in interesting times and face some interesting issues today and for the foreseeable future. These involve our relationships with the world as well as issues connected to our diverse, pluralistic, multicultural society. As a result of a grant from the federal government's Community Historical Recognition Program (CHRP) [www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/programs/community-projects.asp](http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/programs/community-projects.asp)

I have just written an exciting new resource (shameless plug alert!) to explore some of these current and pressing issues under the direction of the National Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. *Welcome to Canada?* (The question mark is deliberate.) offers an exciting opportunity for high schools to supplement existing text books with material that looks critically at Canada's restrictive wartime immigration policies, with a focus on the St. Louis tragedy. The new material, which asks key questions about the past development and future course of Canadian immigration policy, is designed to enhance teaching on civics, with additional entry points in history, politics, law and economics courses. The accompanying Teachers' Guide presents option and enhances the ability of the student resource to bring these events and issues to life.

The MS St. Louis was a ship carrying refugees from Nazi Germany that was refused safe harbour in Canada, with tragic consequences. This episode will form the lynchpin of the new Student Resource, providing a Canadian case study that will have relevance to a range of communities and dilemmas. Through this case, as well as discussion of other injustices from different eras in Canadian history, the student will gain insight into how government policy on immigration is set, the role of civil society in influencing the development of these policies, and issues of personal responsibility and activism on human rights issues.

“Should we apologize for past ‘sins’?” is but one of the critical questions posed in the case studies from the Loyalists to the Roma. In accordance with the CHRP mandate, *Welcome to Canada?* Helps students examine a variety of cases from the late 1700s through to today and beyond.

Government funding enables us to provide a number of these Student Resources and Teachers’ Manuals free of charge to selected schools and educators under the initial pilot project. Please contact Tema Smith, Project Coordinator, at [tsmith@bnaibrith.ca](mailto:tsmith@bnaibrith.ca) to indicate your interest in receiving these new teaching materials.

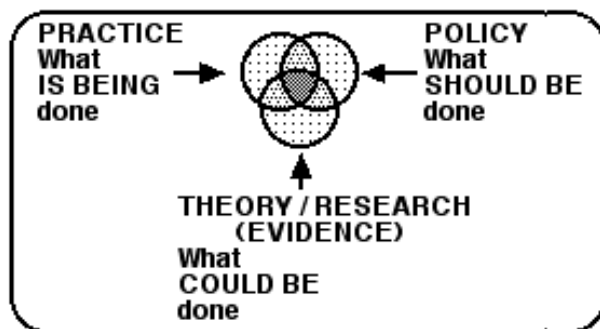
Now that my role is clear (See Myers, 2006a for my history with some of these issues). Let me offer some of the challenges we face, in addition to questions of the role and purpose of history in schools.

### Public Policy, Research, and Practice

There are always tensions among

- what policy-makers suggest or mandate,
- how such mandates are interpreted by teachers, schools, and school districts,
- how teachers and policy-makers play attention to or ignore the findings of research into teaching and learning.

These can be represented thus (Myers, 2006b).



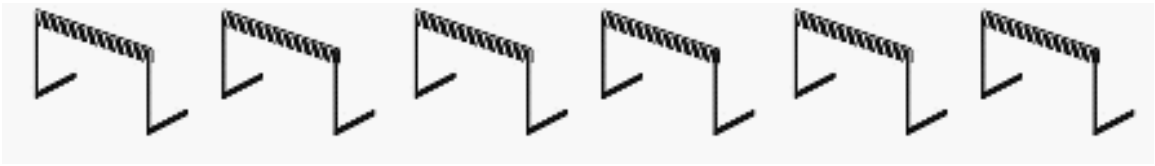
The model is dynamic in that these borders are always shifting with changes in practice, shifts in policy (and policy interpretation), and new evidence from research. The challenge is for better alignment among these components.

We never get full alignment. There are always tensions. Why is this so?

In *Inside the Black Box* (1998), Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam noted that although learning is driven by what happens *in* classrooms, teachers get little direct help with this task. Instead, classrooms are treated as “black boxes”. Inputs from the outside—students, teachers, textbooks, rules and requirements, parental anxieties, standards, high-stakes tests, new curriculum, etc.—are fed into the box. In the end, things like knowledgeable and competent students, better test results, and more satisfied teachers are supposed to come out. As Black and William point out, “it seems strange, even unfair, to leave the most difficult piece ... to teachers. If there are ways in which policy makers and others can give direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously” (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 139).

Charles Ungerleider, a former deputy minister of education in British Columbia noted his own insights on the limits of public policy and research when I was on faculty at the University of British Columbia

(personal communication, 1990). The hurdles represent six of the facets of classroom life that can blunt or block completely the impact of even the clearest public policy or the most sound research findings.



**Multidimensionality:** Many things happen in classrooms at many levels. A classroom is a crowded place in which many people with different preferences and abilities must use a restricted supply of resources to accomplish a broad range of academic, social, and personal outcomes. Many events must be planned and orchestrated to meet special interests of members and changing circumstances throughout the year. Records must be kept, schedules met, supplies organized and stored, and student work collected and evaluated. In addition, a single event can have multiple consequences: waiting a few extra moments for a student to answer a question can affect that student’s motivation to learn as well as the pace of the lesson and the attention of other students in the class. Choices, therefore, are never simple.

**Simultaneity:** Many things happen at once in classrooms. While helping an individual student during seatwork, a teacher must monitor the rest of the class, acknowledge other requests for assistance, handle interruptions, and keep track of time. During a discussion, a teacher must listen to student answers, watch other students for signs of comprehension or confusion, formulate the next question, and scan the class for possible misbehavior. At the same time, the teacher must monitor the pace of the discussion, the sequence of selecting students to answer, the relevance and quality of answers, and the logical development of content. When the class is divided into small groups, the number of simultaneous events increases, and the teacher must monitor and regulate several different activities at once.

**Immediacy:** In addition to the many levels of action in a class happening simultaneously, the pace is very rapid. Elementary teachers may make more than 1000 exchanges with individual students in a single day and secondary teachers interact with as many as 150-225 individual students in a single day. Skillful teachers learn to “work the room” since order in classrooms depends in part upon maintaining momentum and a flow of classroom events. In most instances, therefore, teachers have little leisure time to reflect before acting.

**Unpredictability:** The fact that classroom events can take unexpected turns. Distractions and interruptions are frequent. In addition, events are jointly produced with students even in teacher-directed, full-frontal lectures since student reaction and response help make such classes successful. Thus it is often difficult to anticipate how an activity will go on a particular day with a particular group of students. My teacher candidates learn this early on.

**History** refers to the fact that classes meet for five days a week for several months and thus accumulate a common set of experiences, routines, and norms which provide a foundation for conducting activities. Early meetings—that first week or even first class—can shape events for the rest of the term or year and routines and norms are established for behaviour. A class is also affected by seasonal variations, periodic absences, the addition of new members, and the broad cycle of the year. Thus, planning for a single event must take into account the broader context of the class’s history.

Multiply a class' history by the individual histories of each student and the sorts of backgrounds, experiences, abilities, learning styles, skills, and moods each may bring, and it adds to the unpredictability of it all.

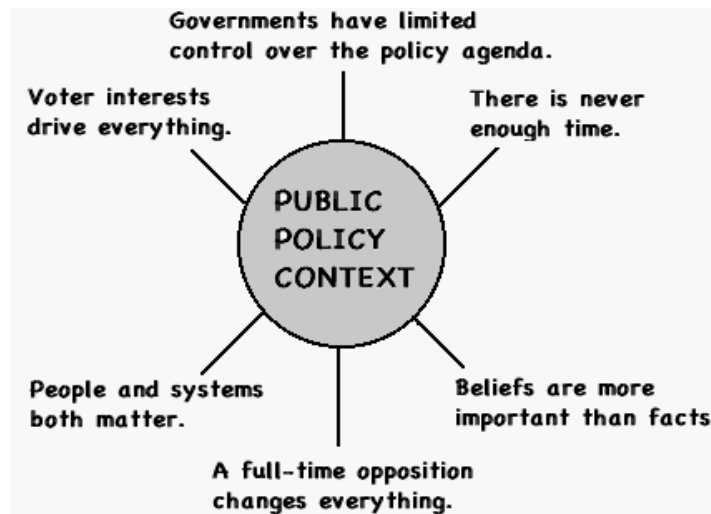
**Publicness:** All of the above happen in the open as classrooms are public places and that a large portion of students often witnesses events, especially those involving the teacher. Teachers act in fishbowls. If a teacher either fails to notice that a student is violating a rule or actually reprimands an innocent bystander, the entire class learns important information about the management skills of the teacher. In addition, the audience for a disruption may actively encourage participants to continue or may join in once a disruption starts and thus magnify the effect of misbehavior.

There are other strands of webbing that limit to power of sound public policy.

### **The Limits of Public Policy**

“How do you explain that while high school students can take a maximum of 12 options in four years of high school while there are some 270 courses in the curriculum and demands for more?” Levin (2008) commenting on the Ontario curriculum.

Ben Levin, another former deputy minister of education (Manitoba and Ontario) offers an insider's perspective on the nature of public policy. His insights can be summarized thus.



And then there is the little detail that anytime a federal initiative has anything to do with schools, the provinces object.

### **So Where Does This Leave Us?**

We do the best we can to deal with the tangled webs described in this paper. We have greater flexibility than we think in using our professional judgment for helping our students make sense of their world (See the study in Myers, 2004).

This is, after all, the 21st century. The world is changing. Otherwise we leave ourselves open to the Orwellian world of 1984 when history is written by one side.

On this note I end with a comment about the former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev who opined that if the man at the top is too busy to "write all the books," he is not too busy to "prescribe how they shall be written. To a French delegation in 1956, Khrushchev said: "Historians are dangerous people. They are capable of upsetting everything. They must be directed."

Contrast that with Ruth Sandwell's plea to work with evidence.

Which side are you on?

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