

## **Editorial: the historical thought and legacy of Dr. Peter Seixas**

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It is a great honor to serve as the guest editor for the special issue of *Revista Perspectivas* focused on historical thinking and the legacy of Dr. Peter Seixas, who was an important mentor, teacher, and friend. October 9 marked the first anniversary of Peter's transition from the present to the past. I cannot think of a better way to honor his contributions to history education than by devoting a special issue to historical thinking, a concept he played a significant role in conceptualizing. Since Lord Acton mentioned "the gift of historical thinking" in his 1895 Inaugural Lecture on the *Study of History* (1906, p. 16), historical thinking has evolved from an unknown term to a central concept in teaching, learning, and researching history education in countries around

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the world (Berg & Christou, 2020; Harris & Metzger, 2018). In the last fifty years, three major developments in the conceptualization of historical thinking have profoundly influenced research, curriculum, and classroom practice.

In England, the Schools Council History Project (SCHP) radically rethought the purpose and nature of school history. It investigated new ways of assessing students' historical understanding (Shemilt, 1980). Foundational to this approach is Lee and Ashby's (2000) distinction between first-order substantive knowledge, "what history is about" (e.g., enslavement, freedom, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Underground Railroad), and second-order disciplinary knowledge (e.g., evidence, cause, consequence, perspective taking, historical significance, continuity, and change) that shape "the way we go about doing history" (p. 199). Rather than defining students' progress in history by the amount of factual knowledge they have accumulated, progress is measured by the increasingly sophisticated ways in which students understand and apply the second-order concepts in dealing with historical problems (Seixas, 2017b).

Wineburg's (1991) ground-breaking research, which applied an expert-novice model from cognitive psychology to illustrate how historians differ from high school students when reading historical sources, jump-started the second major advance in the conceptualization of historical thinking. Wineburg identified three heuristics that historians used when reading historical sources—sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration—that defined the distinctive disciplinary character of reading historical texts. The three heuristics (along with the fourth heuristic of "close-reading") provided teachers with practical tools for teaching and assessing students' historical literacy. This approach formed the basis for curriculum projects created by Wineburg and the Stanford History Education Group that have had massive uptake (Breakstone, Smith, & Wineburg, 2013; Wineburg, 2018; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2013) and inspired historical literacy research that assesses the impact that instructional techniques have on students' ability to read, think, and write about historical texts (De La Paz *et al.*, 2014; Reisman, 2012; VanSledright, 2011).

A third major development emerged from the work of Peter Seixas. In 2006, he developed a framework of six historical thinking concepts for the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking Project (later renamed the Historical Thinking Project). These concepts include historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension (Seixas, 2009). The model was designed to be “communicable and intelligible to teachers and students, and yet rich enough to invite investigations of fundamental epistemological and ontological problems of history” (Seixas, 2017a, p. 597).

The historical thinking framework created by Seixas is a hybrid model that draws from English, American, and German approaches (Seixas, 2017a, 2017b). The six historical thinking concepts identified by Seixas closely resemble second-order concepts conceptualized by English scholars. They also function as generative problems, tensions, or difficulties inherent in making history, requiring “comprehension, negotiation, and, ultimately, an accommodation that is never a complete solution” (Seixas, 2017a, p. 597). At the core of these problems is the relationship between knower and known, and the notion that historical narratives are created by people immersed in time who are shaped by particular lenses, questions, and methods. In this way, the Canadian model resembles the notion of historical consciousness, a theory operationalized in school curricula and assessments in Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Historical consciousness can be defined as “a complex interaction of interpretations of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations towards the future” (Sebastian Bracke *et al.*, 2014, p. 23; paraphrasing Jeismann, 1977). For example, the “ethical dimension” in Seixas’s model, which focuses on making ethical judgments about the past, deciding what should be memorialized, celebrated, or remembered, and judging how to respond to the past in the present, is central to historical consciousness (Gibson *et al.*, 2022).

Seixas’s historical thinking approach has inspired the development of theoretical and empirical research, curriculum, textbooks, learning resources, assessments, and professional learning opportunities in Canada and countries worldwide. I do not think Peter ever imagined that his scholarship would influence history education scholars in Central and South America, and he would be both humbled and honored that a special

issue of *Revista Perspectivas* is devoted to his legacy. Peter enjoyed nothing more than discussing and debating all aspects of history education. When he retired in 2016, Peter eschewed the idea of a standard retirement party. Instead, he hosted an academic symposium entitled “Coming of Age: Life/Time/History.” International scholars who influenced Peter’s career, and younger scholars whom he mentored as graduate students engaged in a series of lively discussions about the past, present, and future of history education. The spirit of international collaboration, conversation, and debate featured during Peter’s retirement symposium is also reflected in the articles written in this special issue by scholars from Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Portugal, and Spain.

Each article discusses ideas, theories, and concepts central to Seixas’s scholarship, including historical thinking and historical consciousness. Ecuadorian scholars Isidora Sáez-Rosenkranz and Virginia Gámez Ceruelo compare publications about the use and analysis of primary sources in history teaching in Spanish-speaking Latin American countries and Spain. They concluded that academics from Latin America and Spain had different concerns when studying the use of primary sources. They also reflect on the role of sources in the construction of historical knowledge in schools, the role of the teacher in the construction of knowledge, and ethical precautions that should be considered. The authors make a convincing case for the unique contributions that Latin American scholars can make to disciplinary approaches to teaching history and analyzing primary sources.

Chilean scholar Carolina Chávez Preisler traces the influence of Denis Shemilt’s ground-breaking proposal to teach history using the methods and perspectives of the historical discipline to the work of international scholars, including Peter Seixas. Chávez Preisler argues that Peter Seixas’s most significant contribution is clarifying the particular methods and perspectives required to think historically.

In the context of commemorating the 50th anniversary of the civil-military coup in Chile in September 1973, Chilean scholar Fabian González Calderón considers that Peter Seixas’s theoretical developments from 2000 to 2018 can contribute to democratic and critical thinking about teaching complex histories. Using historical narratives from Chilean high school students about the 1973 coup, González Calderón

draws from Seixas's classic articles to rethink the global and national challenges facing history education in an era dominated by extreme right-wing populism.

In their article, Nilson Javier Ibagón, Óscar Armando Castro, and Luz Yehimy Chaves discuss the possibilities of developing an educational project focused on historical thinking in Colombia. They review the official curricula that have regulated the teaching of history and social sciences in Colombia for the past 40 years. They imagine the place that historical thinking could play in these regulations and propose a curricular reform that aims to develop historical thinking in the next generation of Colombian students.

José Montoya and María Julia Flores summarize how Peter Seixas's work has contributed to the transformation of history teaching in El Salvador's social and civic studies curriculum. They describe how Seixas's work has helped them rethink the purpose of history teaching in the curriculum and its relationship to the promotion of citizenship. They also provide theoretical insights into the second-order concepts that constitute historical thinking. They provide examples of how El Salvador's ongoing curricular transformation has benefited from Seixas's contributions to teaching history.

Andrés Soto Yonhson and María Soledad Jiménez present the results from an exploratory qualitative research project that analyzed how 70 students in Santiago, Chile, understood the motivations and relevance of examples of individual and collective resistance to the Chilean dictatorship. The students' responses revealed ahistorical understandings of the motivations for resisting and organizing against the dictatorship; many responses shared the belief that collective citizen actions were the main cause of the fall of the dictatorship. When working with difficult histories such as Pinochet's dictatorship, Soto Yonhson and Soledad Jiménez discuss the importance of complexifying and explicitly teaching the ethical dimension concept in Seixas's historical thinking framework.

Portuguese scholars Marília Gago and Sara Oliveira shared their findings from a research study. This study focused on understanding how Portuguese students, at the end of their grade 12 compulsory education, attribute historical significance to events and historical agents in the history of Portugal over the previous 100 years. They found that

students used various types of attribution of significance, but causal and standard significance types were most prevalent. The authors used their findings to construct a three-level model for classifying students' historical significance thinking.

The final article is a transcription of an interview with Dr. Antoni Santisteban Fernández, a researcher and professor in History Didactics at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and a member of the GREDICS group (Grup de Recerca en Didàctica de les Ciències Socials/Social Sciences Education Research Group). In the interview, Santisteban Fernández discusses a wide range of topics relevant to Seixas's scholarship and history education in general. This includes the development of the concept of historical thinking from Piaget to the present and the conceptual framework of historical thinking competencies developed by the GREDICS group, which encompasses interpretation of primary sources, historical perspective activities, and constructing historical narratives. Santisteban Fernández also discusses the importance of historical consciousness, which is a form of critical consciousness essential for thinking about historical problems in the past, understanding social problems currently happening in the world, and building a better future. In the last part of the interview, Santisteban Fernández discusses the importance of critical history teaching to strengthen and improve democracy.

History education in countries around the world is a contested space. There are historical and ongoing controversies about its purpose, what should be learned about, and how it should be taught and assessed. The widespread influence of Seixas's approach to historical thinking around the world should not be construed as consensus about its complex nature, relevance, and appropriateness for school history. It would be antithetical to Peter's values and character if I did not mention the various critiques of his approach to historical thinking. Peter genuinely appreciated it when people critiqued and challenged his ideas because he knew it would deepen his understanding and open new lines of inquiry.

One of the most commonly heard critiques of historical thinking is that the academic discipline of history is seen as an inadequate model for school history because academic historians aim to produce new knowledge about the past, whereas school history focuses on

providing knowledge and skills for active and engaged citizenship (Thornton & Barton, 2010). Others have criticized Seixas's model of historical thinking for oversimplifying and reducing the complexity of the discipline of history. They also criticize how teachers and students have uncritically accepted his historical thinking framework as "the" approach. Critical scholars have also critiqued how historical thinking has been reified as a static, apolitical, atheoretical, and immutable method for understanding the "truth" about the past (Parkes, 2009; Segall, 2006). Additionally, they criticized its lack of attention to how students' cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, and disability identities shape their historical understandings (Crocco, 2018; Epstein, 2008; Peck, 2010; Segall, Trofanenko, & Schmitt, 2018).

Because historical thinking is rooted in Western, European traditions of Enlightenment thought that restricts "what counts as knowledge and what counts as valid ways of assessing that knowledge" (McGregor, 2017, p. 12), it has been criticized for using Western intellectual developments to define universal goals and standards for history education and imposing them on cultures that have their own forms of temporal orientation, different ways of understanding the relationship between the past, present, and future, and different standards and methods for assessing knowledge claims.

Another common criticism of historical thinking is that it does not adequately address key aspects of historical consciousness, including the various ways that students experience historical culture in their everyday lives, the interrelationship between past, present, and future, and the impact that students' intersecting identities have on their historical understandings. Andreas Körber (2011) argues that school history should aim to teach students the competencies needed to participate "in the historical and memorial culture of their (pluralist) societies" (p. 148).

For historical thinking to be taught, learned, and assessed in schools, then clearly articulated, easily communicated, and pedagogically practical conceptions of historical thinking are essential. One of the challenges educators often experience after first being introduced to Seixas's approach to historical thinking, is how to actually implement it in their teaching practice. Although Seixas's historical thinking framework



is clearly articulated and easily communicated, more work is needed to make it pedagogically practical and usable for history teachers.

Despite the massive gap between the practices of the academic discipline and what is possible in the school history classroom, Seixas remained convinced that historical thinking can make an important contribution to history education by conceptualizing the historical tools, processes, and ways of thinking that help students, make sense of who they are, where they stand, and what they can do—as individuals, as members of multiple, intersecting groups, and as citizens with roles and responsibilities in a complex, conflict-ridden, and rapidly changing world.

In order to address these significant challenges, further theoretical, empirical, and practical developments are required. More theoretical work is needed to articulate the purposes of history education that can be applied in multiple contexts and accommodate diverse forms of historical consciousness. More empirical research is needed to better understand how students' substantive and disciplinary knowledge, dispositions, and intersecting identities shape their historical understandings and how they see the world they live in. Lastly, continued collaboration among scholars in different contexts is needed to develop strategies, inform school practices, and develop the technological, institutional, and organizational supports needed for ongoing history education renewal. The articles in this special issue have made important contributions to all three areas. I look forward to seeing how scholars from Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries continue to make theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions to history education in the future.

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