

Primary Sources, Historical Thinking, and the Emerging Redefinition of the B.A. as a Research Degree

Chad Gaffield

WHAT ROLE should primary sources play in the history curriculum of higher education? The conventional answer to this question is now being reconsidered in departments of history around the world in light of a convergence of diverse conceptual and technological developments. This reconsideration is calling into question the familiar distinctions between undergraduate and graduate education as well as challenging a well-established hierarchical structure that framed the educational experience of those now calling for curriculum reform or, in some cases, curriculum overhaul. The role of primary sources is at the heart of this debate. As such, this question offers a useful focus for examining the ways in which the education of future historians may be quite different from that experienced by senior scholars now leading the discipline. The following discussion draws upon examples primarily from Canada and the United States, but, with some adjustment for different structures of higher education, these examples illustrate key features of international discussion and action.

Despite considerable diversity across colleges and universities, the role of primary sources in the history curriculum has, until recent years, been almost exclusively associated with graduate education. The exceptions to this generalization have involved the sporadic study of specific documents or, more usually, excerpts of a page or two, collected together either thematically or chronologically in undergraduate textbooks. In introductory courses, this primary source material has principally been used to illustrate, confirm, or give the flavour of the content transmitted in lectures and secondary source textbooks. Primary sources have also appeared in methodology courses, although such courses have not characteristically occupied a large place in the undergraduate history curriculum.

The one place where primary sources have played a major role at the baccalaureate level is in the Honours thesis, a final-year piece of independent research required in some universities. However, such theses are generally seen as a bridge to graduate work for talented students

rather than as a normal requirement for an undergraduate history degree. As a result, only a fraction of history students undertake such thesis projects and, if they do, the results of their work are rarely even inventoried by university libraries or history departments.

In this context, the vast majority of history students complete their B.A.s with very little experience with primary sources. Rather, the principal component of the undergraduate history curriculum consists of secondary sources. In addition to the textbooks and collections of readings used in introductory lecture courses (often combined with tutorial groups), history students continue to focus on secondary sources even in upper-level seminars which are characteristically devoted to historiographical debates about specific themes or periods.

The rationale for giving secondary sources the central place within the undergraduate curriculum has been based on the priority of transmitting to students the knowledge currently available about the past. From this perspective, students must first learn the conclusions of research conducted by professional historians before, if they continue in a graduate program, they seriously begin examining the

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evidence for themselves to arrive at their own conclusions. The proportion of previous research findings that should be learned by undergraduate students has been a continuing topic of debate both among educators and in public discussion. In addition to the consistent conclusion that no proportion is really "enough," some history professors have also periodically attracted media attention by claiming that students are acquiring a declining secondary-source familiarity with the past. Not surprisingly, therefore, constant pressure has been exerted to enhance the close association of secondary sources with undergraduate education even as new voices have been added to the curriculum debate in recent years.

The rationale for the conventional distinction between undergraduate and graduate in the history curriculum has been built upon a jigsaw puzzle image of historical research. In this image, students have first to learn which pieces of historical knowledge are already in place as a result of completed research projects. Then, at the graduate level, students can take up the challenge of filling in a gap by attempting to add a new piece to the historical puzzle. Within this image of the progress of historical research, the highest praise possible is for a "definitive work," meaning that a piece of the historical puzzle has been put in place for all time; no further research is needed on the topic.

An analogy from sports helps illustrate why certain scholars are now calling into question the conventional structure of undergraduate education in history, and why primary sources are now being increasingly integrated into even introductory courses. Consider, for example, the teaching of tennis. If tennis were taught in keeping with the rationale of the conventional history curriculum, coaches would spend an initial number of years transmitting to an aspiring player the current knowledge about the playing of tennis. The curriculum of this instruction would focus on the specifics of how tennis has been and is being played by top competitors. Students would read about tennis, learn about different theories for hitting different strokes, study court strategy, watch videos of matches, become acquainted with the major developments in the sport, and explore in upper-level seminars specific topics including, perhaps, the class, gender, and ethnic characteristics of the sport. Rarely, if ever, would the tennis student in such a program actually pick up a racquet (examine a "primary source") and try to hit a tennis ball (undertake, rather than read about, "historical research"). In this history-like approach to the teaching of tennis, students would begin hitting tennis balls in earnest at the graduate level, and then would truly focus on this activity only during the last stage of "thesis" completion.

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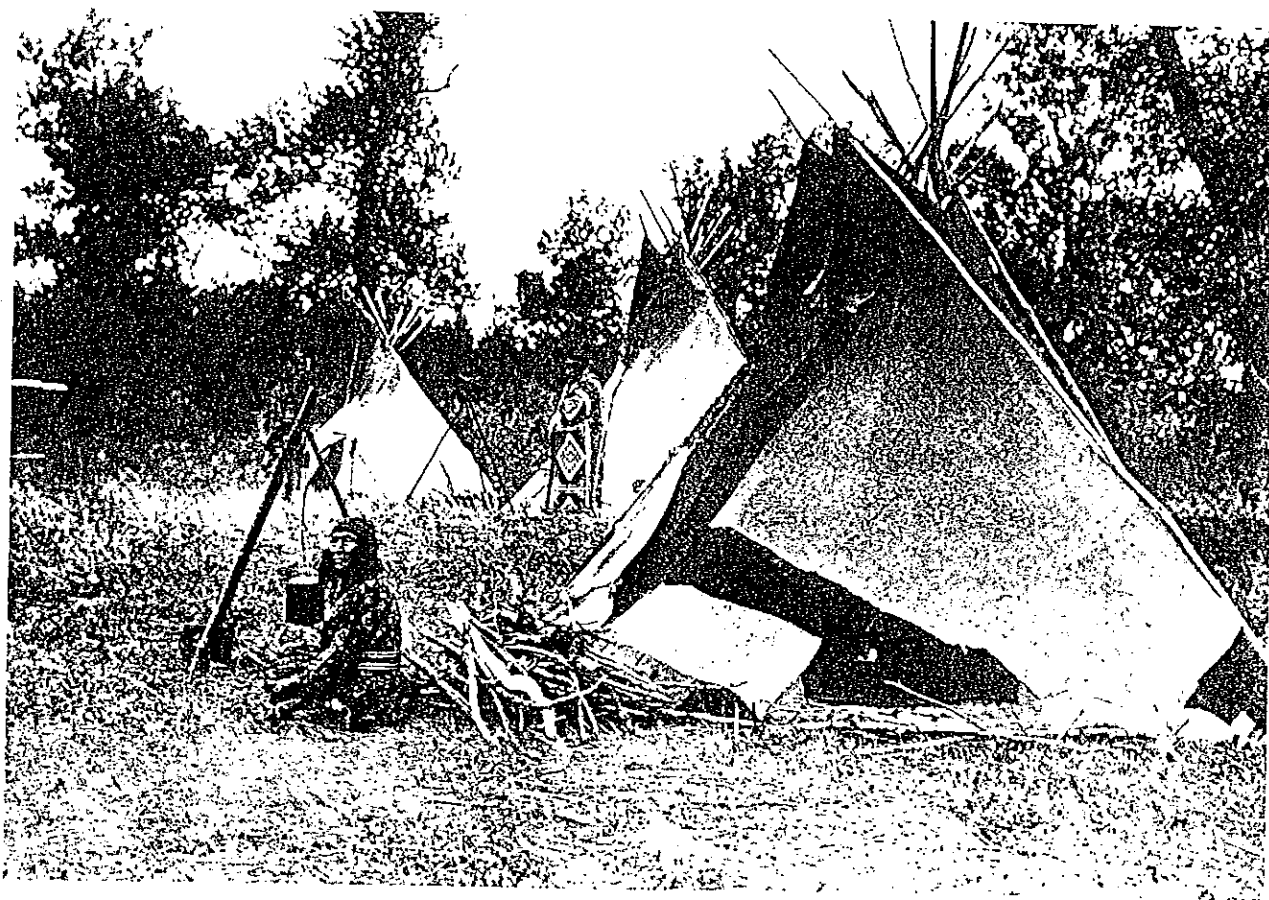
Many objections can be made to comparing the learning of a sport to the learning of the discipline of history, and, admittedly, the analogy is forced in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, the comparison emphasizes a key distinction that is generally assumed rather than confronted in the history curriculum: a distinction between learning about the past indirectly from professional historians, and learning about the past directly through historical research. In the current discussion about historical pedagogy, this distinction is being called into question. Just as historians are now emphasizing the extent to which they actively create "history" rather than "objectively" let sources speak for themselves, professors are attempting to help students develop understandings of the past that emerge in part from their own identities and perspectives. In this approach, students are no longer viewed as "neutral" receptacles into which content must be poured for several years to enable them to establish a foundation for their own historical thinking. Rather, it is assumed that students, like professional historians, are active collaborators in creating historical knowledge.¹

This approach does not mean that the previous research findings of historians are any less important than in the conventional undergraduate curriculum. In fact, secondary sources remain centrally important, but they are no longer seen as sufficient for creating a foundation for original scholarship. In the new undergraduate curriculum, students

engage in both primary and secondary research from the outset of the program. In the metaphor of tennis, students begin hitting balls in conjunction with the study of theories about different strokes, court strategy, the habits of successful players, and other topics.

The belief that students should actively engage in the learning process rather than passively absorb knowledge became, interestingly, characteristic of elementary and, to a lesser extent, secondary schooling during the 20th century. Not surprisingly, therefore, the use of primary sources has for many years been a more common feature of the history curriculum in some schools than in many undergraduate programs. While educators and observers have justifiably decried the decline of history as a priority in schools, less attention has been paid to the creative and innovative approaches of some teachers to learning about the past. In these approaches, the study of primary sources is often the major way in which students are encouraged to take an active part in their own historical education.

Since the 1960s, an increasingly common pedagogical strategy in elementary and secondary schools has been the use of educational "kits" composed of a variety of historical sources about a specific topic.² In keeping with the history-from-the-bottom-up perspective of leading researchers at the time, these kits began introducing students to a wide range of documentary, visual, and routinely generated sources that reflect the history of the anonymous as well as the famous. One early example from the 1970s was *The Orillia Kit* developed at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education for use in middle-school history classes. This kit brought together sources such as newspapers and manuscript census returns to offer students the chance to explore the history of later 19th-century Canada through the example of one community. Students developed research projects on themes such as settlement, economic change, and community governance by directly examining primary sources in conjunction with secondary sources and other material including Stephen Leacock's famous novel *Sunshine Sketches*. The assumption of this approach is that key



A Sarsi camp, location not identified, before 1966 (no date). Photo by E. S. (Edward Sheriff) Curtis. National Archives of Canada, C20853.

dates and events will be learned in the context of student research in the same way as professional historians learn "facts" during the course of their primary-source research.³

During the 1970s, the content of the history curriculum of higher education also began to reflect the new questions, sources, and methods of the "new social history," but, somewhat surprisingly, the pedagogical assumptions of this curriculum remained unchallenged. While students began reading about a much larger range of historical topics, they were still generally viewed as containers to be filled with historical knowledge so that, at the graduate level, they would be ready to undertake historical research in primary sources. Similarly, scholars generally maintained the jigsaw puzzle image in which it was expected that the known "pieces" of the past had to be studied through secondary sources before "gaps" could be filled in by research in primary sources. In fact, the "new social history" was fit into this metaphor; the major change was an emphasis on the incompleteness of the established picture of the historical puzzle, since it was limited to the roles of the famous and the infamous. As a result, scholars strove to add women, the labouring classes, minority groups, and other "pieces" to the overall picture of the past.

Although the pedagogical assumptions of the history curriculum generally held firm during the years of the new social history, a minority of professors did begin to focus on the ways in which students could actively engage both primary and secondary sources at the undergraduate level. One example of this development was the creation of a new course in the early 1980s entitled "Theory and Method of Micro-History," initially offered at the University of Victoria and subsequently at the University of Ottawa. Aimed at students mid-way through undergraduate programs, this course calls for research projects based on primary sources in the spirit of the individual-level, context-specific studies that became so commonplace among historians in recent decades.⁴ Students in this course undertake research projects to address questions related to a particular time and place. At the heart of the course are epistemological discussions as well as content-based historical descriptions and historiographical debates. In an attempt to promote creativity and original historical thinking, secondary sources are not used to structure the students' work in terms of established scholarly debates but rather to enrich their own developing interpretations of the primary sources. The overall ambition of this type of course is to engage undergraduate students in research activities that reflect the actual scholarly learning done by professional historians. Like these historians, students are expected to learn about the past by actually doing historical research on both primary and secondary sources within a community of "peers."

The conceptual underpinnings of courses like "Theory and Method of Micro-History" have been considerably strengthened over the past two decades by research in learning theory that increasingly emphasizes the importance of active student participation in education. In fact, the findings of cognitive psychologists challenge the conventional belief that original scholarship in history best follows the mastery of current wisdom. Rather, researchers have now suggested that an exclusive focus on absorbing knowledge from "experts" undermines, rather than enhances, the potential for subsequent creativity and innovation. The explanation for this phenomenon is that, by insisting that students learn all the reasons for the location of the current research frontier, this approach encourages students to think so much like their predecessors that they become less able to push the frontier to a new place. According to such cognitive theories, the secondary-source-based undergraduate history curriculum undermines the potential (rather than lays the foundation) for original scholarship at the graduate level. Although much more study needs to be done to understand the daunting process of creativity, the conventional structure of the history curriculum may help explain a series of consistent findings about higher education including, for example, the poor correlation between grades in courses and subsequent research productivity; the pattern by which theoretical and methodological innovation come from outside more than inside the discipline; and the association of "schools of thought" with specific departments.

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In this context, the increasing role of primary sources in undergraduate history courses reflects a profound change in which educators have begun rethinking the established distinctions between the baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels. Over the past decade, the emerging pattern is for all levels to adopt a graduate education approach to the curriculum. In B.A. history programs, this approach combines, in a dialectical way, a back-and-forth, active and passive engagement with both original research projects and current scholarly findings. In this sense the baccalaureate is beginning to become a research degree. The point of this degree is still linked to graduate education for only a small minority of students. For the majority, the aim of the B.A. as a research degree continues to be the opportunity to acquire an informed cultural framework and competency in order to lead a full and productive life as an engaged citizen. The advantage of viewing the undergraduate program as a research degree is based on the enhanced education achieved through active learning.

The efforts to give primary sources a larger role in the undergraduate history curriculum have also reflected the widespread rejection of the jigsaw metaphor of historical research. In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the interrelated character of complex and dynamic historical processes as well as admitting the inevitable interaction between historians and historical evidence.⁵ As a result, historians have largely abandoned the notion of a "definitive" study; by the 1980s, the highest praise for monographs focused on their new concepts, sources, or research strategies and the questions they raised for further research.

In this changed context the new information and communications technologies (ICT) began accelerating the transformation of the discipline of history. Unlike the 1960s and 1970s, when controversy raged about the appropriateness of computer-based historical research, the past two decades have witnessed the computerization of almost all aspects of historical teaching and research.⁶ The key point, however, is that the stage was set for the integration of ICT into scholarly and educational activity by new conceptualizations of the past and of cognitive development. In this sense, computerization has been facilitating and enhancing a development that was already underway for substantive reasons.

One illustration of the increasing speed and diversity with which ICT has been contributing to the emerging undergraduate "research degree" in history is the Lower Manhattan Project which, since the 1980s, has been exploiting technology to promote the role of primary sources in undergraduate course content.⁷ Initially, the Lower Manhattan Project produced a mainframe-based

curriculum unit in which students used statistical packages to study manuscript census enumerations of a district of late 19th-century New York City. By the early 1990s, however, the project was focusing on the students' use of personal computers and on expanding the primary-source infrastructure of the curriculum unit to include substantial documentary sources.⁸ Soon, of course, this approach gave way to Internet-based learning through the construction of web sites and virtual collaboration in networked computer installations.⁹

Over the past decade, the proliferation of digitized primary sources for use at all educational levels for the teaching of history is thus only surprising in a technological sense since, by these years, the conceptual transformation of the discipline of history was already underway. It is worth remembering that the educational demand for easily accessible and substantial primary source material has been growing steadily for many years, beginning long before anyone envisioned the ability to download instantly significant amounts of historical evidence for undergraduate education. During the period when the Internet was entering the popular imagination, the conventional dichotomy between teaching and research was already weakening among many historians, and more and more professors and students were joining in collaborative educational activities at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.¹⁰

At the same time, it remains to be said that in many, and perhaps most, departments of history, the undergraduate and graduate curricula look much as they did many years ago. Introductory lecture courses and upper-level seminars based on secondary sources remain the predominant features of undergraduate programs in many universities. In the context of inadequate resources and declining numbers of professors as a result of continuing cuts to higher education budgets, the potential for curriculum change in history has only begun to be realized in a minority of programs. Even worse, the deteriorating student-professor ratios in many departments of history have worked against research-oriented initiatives and have favoured the use of multiple-choice tests and rote learning as a way to accommodate inappropriately large classes.¹¹ Nonetheless, there is good reason to believe that the role of primary sources in undergraduate programs will continue to increase as professors' changed conceptualizations of history converge with students' demands for an active-learning curriculum. The rapidly improving capacity of ICT will undoubtedly continue to accelerate the speed of this increase, such that, in the years to come, the discipline of history may gain considerable credit for helping to redefine the baccalaureate as a research degree.

NOTES

1. For example, an emphasis on active learning was a central theme of presentations at the major conference "Giving the Past a Future: Conference on the Teaching and Learning of Canadian History" held in 1999. The proceedings are posted at <http://www.historymatters.com>.
2. Pene Davey and Ian Winchester, *Local Studies in the Classroom: A New Method for Historical Analysis* (Toronto: Canadian Social History Project, 1975).
3. Chad Gaffield and Ian Winchester, "The Concept of Total History in the Classroom," *The History and Social Science Teacher*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 1981), pp. 159-165.
4. Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things I Know About It," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20 (1993), pp. 10-35.
5. An accessible overview is presented in Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999).
6. Chad Gaffield, "Machines and Minds: Historians and the Emerging Collaboration," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 21, no. 42 (November 1988), pp. 312-317.
7. William Crozier and Chad Gaffield, "The Lower Manhattan Project: A New Approach to Computer-Assisted Learning in History Classrooms," *Historical Methods*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 72-76, and "The Lower Manhattan Project: An Urban Laboratory for the Liberal Arts," *History and Computing*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1993), pp. 98-109.
8. William Crozier, Clarke A. Chambers, H. Patrick Costello, Chad Gaffield, and Beverly Stadium, eds., *On the Lower East Side: Observations of Life in Lower Manhattan at the Turn of the Century* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's College, 1990). This volume is also available at <http://www.tenant.net/Community/LES/contents.html>.
9. Kathleen W. Craver, *Using Internet Primary Sources to Teach Critical Thinking Skills in History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999).
10. The extent of possible collaboration among all levels of historical teaching and research is illustrated by the innovative work of John Bonnett involving the National Research Council of Canada, the Institute of Canadian Studies at the University of Ottawa, and teachers and students at schools across the country. See "Bringing Students to a Virtual Past: Teaching Ottawa History with the 3D Historical Cities Project" in Jeff Keshen and Nicole St-Onge, eds., *Construire une capitale — Ottawa — Making a Capital* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), pp. 483-502. More information is available at <http://cfml.uit.nrc.ca/3DVirtualBuildings/ProjDesc/Title.html>.
11. It should also be admitted that a pessimistic view of the future of the history curriculum is supported by an array of ideological currents now running through many educational settings. Robert Wright offers a thoughtful analysis in "Historical Underdosing: Pop Demography and the Crisis in Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 81, no. 4 (December 2000), pp. 646-667.

The Fur Trade, Hudson's Bay Company and Exploration

www.canadiana.org (after August 1, 2001)

This new online exhibition is a treasure-chest of information and primary sources for learners and researchers of all ages. Designed and written for young learners aged 9 to 12, it is supplemented by links to digitized texts in *Early Canadiana Online*. The exhibition gives a history of the fur trade and the rise of the Hudson's Bay Company, and how this led to the exploration of much of what is now Canada. It is richly illustrated with images from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and has lesson plans and activities to assist educators.



Fort "Prince of Wales" 1734. HBC's 1922 calendar from an original painting by the artist A. H. Hider in the Fine Arts Collection of the Hudson's Bay Company. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, HBCA P-386 (N87-47).