CANADIAN SOCIAL STUDIES
VOLUME 38 NUMBER 2, WINTER 2004
www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css

The Historical Imagination: Collingwood in the Classroom

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Abstract

Philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood developed and elaborated a theory and approach to re-constructing knowledge about the past that relies on the historical imagination. This paper argues that Collingwood's theory offers teachers sound reasons for using constructivist approaches in their classrooms and that his methodological approach can be adapted to develop instructional strategies that recognize the importance of the human imagination in the learning process. Important aspects of Collingwood's theoretical approach will be briefly explained, a description of his suggested method for handling primary source materials will be provided, and an instructional strategy for imagining the past, based on his method, will be outlined.

Introduction

"…the historian's picture of the past is…in every detail an imaginary picture…"

For those who assume that the term imaginary means 'fictional', this may seem a rather strange and controversial statement. Perhaps as peculiar, this statement was made by philosopher and historian R.G. Collingwood (1946/1994, p. 245), who spent his working life asserting the significance and validity of historical knowledge. This statement begs the question: If the historian's picture of the past is in fact imaginary, what then is the difference between a novel and a historical account?
Collingwood has a clear answer to this question – an answer that will be addressed in this paper.

As a historian and social studies educator who has explored various theories about the origins, limitations and nature of historical knowledge (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Smith, 1998; Bermejo-Barrera, 1993; Kosso, 1993; Deeds Ermarth, 1992; Ankersmit, 1989; Stone, 1987, Tosh, 1984, Fogel & Elton, 1983; Atkinson, 1978), as well as ideas about teaching and learning history arising from educational research (Wineburg, 2001; Levstik & Barton, 1997; Seixas1997 & 1999), I find Collingwood's philosophy particularly appealing for two main reasons. First, I think that Collingwood's ideas about how historical knowledge is produced

offers teachers sound reasons for using constructivist approaches in their classrooms. Secondly, I think that Collingwood's methodological approach to the construction of historical knowledge, relying as it does on the historical imagination, can be adapted to develop instructional strategies that recognize the importance of the human imagination in the learning process.

In this paper I will first briefly discuss important aspects of Collingwood's theoretical approach, including (a) the idea that history has an 'outside and an 'inside', (b) the notion that history is 'ideal' and (c) the idea of the historical imagination. Secondly, I will outline Collingwood's suggested approach to handling primary source documents to re-construct the past using the historical imagination. This includes a discussion of the processes of re-enactment, interpolating, and interrogating. Finally, I will sketch out a strategy for imagining the past based on Collingwood's suggested approach. This strategy will sound familiar. It is related to an approach advocated by Seixas (1999) who argues: "Good history teaching… exposes the process of constructing warranted historical accounts so that students can arrive at their own understandings of the past through processes of critical inquiry" (p. 332). However, the point of this paper is not to suggest a totally novel or unique classroom practice. Rather, it is my intention to add further theoretical support for constructivist approaches and to demonstrate how Collingwood can be used in the classroom.

Who was Collingwood and why did he think history is 'imaginary'?

Robin George Collingwood (1939) was born at the end of the 19th century in England, and worked as a philosopher and historian between c. 1910 to 1943. His theories about historical methodology came out of his resistance to the positivist or scientific approach to knowledge construction that was being adopted by all disciplinary areas at the turn of the last century. Collingwood believed that there was a fundamental difference between history and the natural sciences. He thought that the scientific method, which includes the observation of phenomena, measuring, classifying and generating of 'laws' based on the observations, was a perfectly legitimate way of 'knowing' the natural world. However, Collingwood argued (1946/1994) that history is fundamentally different because the events that historians study have both an 'outside' or observable part, and an 'inside' which can only be "described in terms of thought". By the 'outside' of historical events, Collingwood meant the part of the historical event which could have been perceived using our senses; for example, we could have seen the movement of troops during a World War I battle. By the 'inside' of historical events, Collingwood meant the thoughts of the people involved in the event which caused them or motivated them to act as they did before, during and after the event. For example, the 'inside' of the World War I battle includes the thoughts of the general who ordered particular troop movements, or the thoughts of the troops themselves as they followed their orders. Collingwood argued that historical knowledge is fundamentally different from knowledge about the natural world because it involves knowing both the outside/observable and the inside/unobservable.

Collingwood pointed out another fundamental difference between knowing things in the present (or in the natural sciences) and knowing history. To come to know things in the present or about things in the natural sciences, we can observe 'real' things - things that are in existence or that have substance right now. The problem with coming to know things about history is that while past human actions did actually or really happen, these actions took place in the past. These actions, then, have no real existence or substance at the point in time that the historian is studying them. Based on the understanding that the events and actions that historians study have already happened - that they are finished and so cannot actually be

observed - Collingwood (1946/1994) claimed that historian must, necessarily, use their imaginations to reconstruct and understand the past. Because we cannot observe human events that have already taken place, he argued that we must imagine them.

While Collingwood concedes that imagining is often thought of as being related to the fictitious, he argues that the imaginary does not necessarily have to be about the 'unreal'. To demonstrate this, he provided the following example: "If I imagine the friend who lately left my house now entering his own, the fact that I imagine this event gives me no reason to believe it unreal." (1946/1994, p. 241) To Collingwood, imagining is simply a process we use to construct or re-construct pictures, ideas or concepts in our minds and he points out that this process should not necessarily be correlated with either the fictitious or the real.

Collingwood does claim, however, that the historical imagination reconstructs pictures, ideas, and concepts that are related to what really happened and what was really thought. It is within his support of this claim that we see the difference between a between a novel and a historical account. To counter those who might argue that imagination produces only fiction, Collingwood (1946/1994, 245-246) pointed out the main difference between a historian and a novelist. While he noted that both use imagination to construct a narrative that has continuity and coherence, the novelist's entire construction or picture can be derived out of 'fanciful' imagination. The historian's construction, on the other hand, is constrained by two important elements that can be ignored by a novelist. The historian's picture must be localized in a space and time that has actually existed and it must be related to the evidence which the historian gathers from sources. If the historian cannot demonstrate any link between the picture that she/he constructs and this evidence, then it will be assumed that the picture is merely fantasy. The key difference, then, is that historians must use sources as evidence in their imaginative process.[1]

Collingwood argued that if historians do not have some type of source - that is, written testimony, relics, or remains - to help them imagine what happened and what was thought about within a particular human event, then they cannot know anything about the event. Historians cannot make things up based on guessing or fanciful imaginings. Evidence from the sources provides the grounds on which we imagine the past, and this evidence must be referenced so that others could 're-imagine' the events and ideas we used in our narrative.

With these ideas, Collingwood developed a methodology for handling primary source documents and relics as evidence to re-construct the past using the historical imagination. I will outline the main features of this approach, including re-enactment, interpolating and interrogating. I think that these aspects of his approach provide sound ideas that could be used to develop instructional strategies that recognize the importance of the human imagination in the knowledge construction/ learning process.

Re-enactment

In order for historians to use their sources as evidence to help them imagine and thereby come to know something about the past, they engage in a process that Collingwood called 're-enactment'. Collingwood argued that to understand and imagine past human actions and thought, we must think ourselves into the situation - that is, we re-think the thoughts of the persons engaged in the situation. The process of re-enactment involves reading documents related to an event, envisaging the situation discussed in the documents as the author(s) of the document envisaged it, and thinking for yourself what the author(s) thought about the situation and about various possible ways of dealing with it (Collingwood, 1946/1994, 213 &

215). In presenting themselves with the same data or the same situation that was presented to the historical character involved in the past event, historians draw the same conclusions or offer the same solutions that had been offered by the original thinker. In this way historians are able to think the same thoughts as the human beings who created the document or relic. While this sounds like a somewhat mystical process, it is actually the same process we use to understand what anyone has written. When we read student journals, for example, we often do so with the intent of 'getting inside their heads' to determine what they are thinking.

Collingwood did argue, however, that merely reading and translating the words written by the author of a document does not amount to knowing the historical significance of those words and thoughts. To be able to re-enact past events historians go beyond what the sources explicitly tell them in two ways, by interpolating and by interrogating.

Interpolating

Because the authors of our sources do not tell us everything we need to know, we must interpolate between one statement and another within a document, or between what the author said explicitly in a statement and what was implied, and sometimes we must interpolate between statements made in different documents. Collingwood (1946/1994) referred to this process of interpolation as 'constructing history'. Interpolating, or bridging the gaps in what our sources tell us, is an obvious use of the historical imagination. Collingwood (1946/1994, p. 240-241) offered a simple example to demonstrate how interpolation is used to construct the whole picture of a past event. He supposed that the sources available told us that Caesar was in Rome on one day and in Gaul on a later date, but that the sources did not tell us anything about Caesar's journey from the one place to the other. We naturally interpolate, or imagine, that Caesar did undertake the journey, even though the sources do not tell us that he did so. Note however, that the historian does not fill up the imagined journey with fanciful details such as the names of people Caesar met along the way. The historian must imagine that Caesar took the journey, because the sources do not explicitly tell us that he did, but imagining anything more about the case would be to enter the realm of fiction. Historians go beyond what the sources tell them by constructing a picture of the past using historical imagination to fill the gaps in the sources.

Interrogating

Collingwood pointed out that this is only part of the process. Historians also go beyond what the sources tell them by being critical. The historian's "web of imaginative construction" (Collingwood, 1946/1994, 242-245) is pegged down by, or pegged between, the statements found in the sources. But Collingwood argues that historians cannot accept these statements at face value. The statements themselves must be evaluated using critical questions. Collingwood argues that historians must act like lawyers, placing the authors of historical documents and relics in the witness box. Here, the historian tries to shake the testimony by asking probing questions to interrogate the source. Statements must be corroborated, the biases of the author of the document and the historian must be taken into account, and the historian must judge whether or not the evidence makes sense in terms of the whole picture that is being imagined.

Collingwood points out that ultimately, the entire web of imaginative construction created by the historian, including the pegs on which the strands are hung and the strands strung to fill the gaps, is verified and justified by application of the historian's critical and imaginative mind.

In summary - to imagine the past, we get inside the heads of people who created documents in the past and rethink their thoughts. In addition, we must construct our picture of the past by interpolating, or filling in the gaps, and interrogating, or asking questions of the sources, including: 'What does this mean?' In other words, we critically and constructively use sources as evidence to help shape what we imagine. Using our sources as evidence, we create an imaginative picture of a past human event that we can claim is an accurate reconstruction of what really happened.

A Strategy for Imagining the Past

I have claimed that insight into Collingwood's methodological approach could provide a basis for the development of instructional strategies that recognize the importance of the human imagination in the learning process. While the strategy that I suggest below is closely related to familiar inquiry models, the strategy for imagining the past which I have developed directly out of Collingwood's theory is based on his ideas about how we should use documents as evidence to help us imagine. At its heart, the strategy is based on the development of two sets of questions that guide student imagining when examining primary source documents. Processes involved in the strategy are as follows:

Develop a question to guide the inquiry.

This question is related to the historical time period, topic, theme, concept, or event being studied. Depending on the age and developmental level of the students, this guiding question can be formulated by the teacher alone, or by students, or by students and teacher working together. For example, a guiding question could be: What problems and issues did Canadian families face during the 1950s?

Locate and collect primary source documents.

Government memos and legislation, newspaper articles, diaries, and letters created during a particular time period are just a few examples of the kinds of sources that students can examine themselves or have read to them. The documents located and collected should be directly related to the topic or event the teacher wants the students to imagine and can be supplied by the teacher or located and gathered by students, depending on the age and developmental level of the students. There are a number of published books as well as Internet websites that contain transcripts of such documents-see the appendix for some Canadian examples.

Develop probing questions to interrogate the document.

As mentioned, this strategy relies on the use of two sets of guiding questions. Each set is designed to guide students in a particular aspect of imagining/re-constructing the past as they explore the primary source documents. The one set of questions is particular to the inquiry - that is, the probing questions should be 'sub-questions' of the main inquiry question and should be formulated to help students dig deeply into the document as they 'mine' for information, determine the bias of the document creator, and search for corroborating statements from various documents before arriving at a final interpretation. Note that the degree of sophistication of the interrogative questions is dependent on the age and developmental level of the students. These questions could be supplied by the teacher, formulated by students, or formulated by students and teacher together. For example, the following questions could be used to interrogate documents that would be used to imagine

and construct an understanding of the problems and issues faced by Canadian families in the 1950s:

- What does the document reveal about the social, economic, political and intellectual concerns of families?
- What does the document reveal about child rearing practices of the time period?
- What does the document reveal about women's work, men's work, and the lives of children both inside and outside the family?
- What does the document reveal about relationships between family members and between family members and other people?
- According to the document, to which gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic class does the document creator belong?
- In what ways might these aspects of personal identity affect the views of the document creator?

Introduce re-enactment and interpolation questions.

The other set of questions, designed to assist in the processes of re-enactment and interpolation, can be used to examine documents used in all inquiries as these questions are general guides to help students 're-think' thoughts and fill in gaps. During any historical inquiry, student can use some or all of these questions as a guide to re-enact and interpolate:

- What pictures/images form in your mind as you read the document?
- What sounds do you hear, odours do you smell, textures do you touch, emotions do you feel?
- What do you imagine the author(s) thinking when s/he wrote this?
- What do you imagine their main concerns seem to be?
- What do you imagine was their intention(s) when creating the document?
- Do you think the author left things out of the account?
- Why might the author have left these things out?
- Can the things the authors left out of the account tell me as much as the things that they decided to include?
- What could I reasonable imagine about the things that the author has left out?
- Do consistent patterns or trends emerge from the various documents created by one author? If so, do these patterns or trends match with findings from other documents created by other authors during the same time period?

Imagining, Analyzing and Interpreting Using the Questions.

During this phase of the strategy, documents are explored with the goal of answering the questions and imagining the past situation - in our example, students would be imagining what life was like for Canadian families during the 1950s. As they read [or are read to] and imagine, students need to record their responses. Older and more experienced learners can record written responses to the pre-formulated sets of questions and they can learn to record statements [quotations] from the document that support their responses. To organize this written information, student could begin by writing each question at the top of an index card or piece of loose-leaf paper, or the questions could be entered into a database or spreadsheet. Responses and supporting quotations can then be recorded with the corresponding question. In this, students must keep track of the sources from which they copied their quotations, so they need to learn appropriate referencing and citation styles. These responses and supporting quotations are the 'data' students will use as evidence to support the picture of the past they have imagined and as the evidence they will use to answer the general inquiry question posed at the beginning of the process.

With younger learners, teachers could have students respond to one or two questions and draw pictures or create a collage of images that represent what they imagined as a primary source document was read to them. To demonstrate the relationship between their imagined picture of the past and the evidence [primary source] used to create this picture, young learners could be assisted in choosing a quotation from the primary source that would become the caption for their drawing or collage. While young learners will likely not have the necessary skills to engage in all of the processes of this strategy, they certainly have the capacity to imagine the past by listening to readings from primary source documents.

Conclusion

While the instructional strategy I have outlined above involves familiar inquiry method processes, I think that illuminating Collingwood's particular approach provides teachers with two important insights. Understanding Collingwood's ideas about constructing historical knowledge provides teachers with sound theoretical reasons for choosing constructivist strategies. Secondly, Collingwood encourages us all to recognize and acknowledge the profound importance of the human imagination in learning and knowing.

Notes

[1] Seixas (1997) makes a similar argument:"…[empathy or historical perspective-taking] is the ability to see and understand the world from a perspective not our own. In that sense, it requires us to imagine ourselves in the position of another. However - and this is crucial - such imagining must be based firmly on historical evidence if it is to have any meaning." (p. 123).

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Appendix

Websites for locating Primary Source Documents
[or, where you can find more websites with primary source documents]
Active as at 11 February 2004

Canada Speaks
http://collections.ic.gc.ca/canspeak/english/

National Archives of Canada
http://www.archives.ca/02/0201_e.html

Learning and Researching Canadian History
http://web.uvic.ca/history/web/learning.html

Curricular Resources in Canadian Studies: Canadian History
http://www.cln.org/subjects/can-hist_cur.html

A Taste of Canada - History
http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/charlene/canada/toc-history.html

Canadian History on the Web
http://members.rogers.com/dneylan/hisdoc.html

Canadian History on the Internet
http://www.ualberta.ca/~bleeck/canada/canhist.html

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