Review of symposium paper by Stéphane Lévesque, "'Why can't you just tell us?:' Learning Canadian history with technology."

I thought I was going to review a paper about using digital resources to teach Canadian and American students about the War of 1812. According to the *Playing with Technology in History* website, the paper was entitled: "'We don't usually learn with computer activities': Canadian and U.S. Students Using Digital History." The abstract introduced the paper as follows:

> Does digital technology facilitate learning? Can perceptions about historical content and skills change with the use of computer programs? Are there differences in the ways in which Canadian and U.S. students learn digital history topics such as the War of 1812? This paper will present the preliminary results of a comparative study on digital history in Canadian and U.S. classrooms. Using the Virtual Historian (www.virtualhistorian.ca) as a learning tool, high school students engaged in a unit of study on the War of 1812 and the Battle of Queenston Heights. The presentation will highlight the key findings of this SSHRC-funded study as well as the parallels and contrasts between the two populations.

I was looking forward to this paper, because I'm interested in public history as well as digital history. The Ontario government is planning extensive and expensive commemoration events to mark the bicentennial in 2012. A digital curriculum resource about the Battle of Queenston Heights would be very timely and topical, I thought. As I clicked on the 'download-draft-paper' hyperlink on the *Playing with Technology in History* website, I could almost hear General Brock's exhortation, "Push on brave York volunteers!"

But the paper that actually downloaded was about a different topic and a different battle. It was entitled: "Why can't you just tell us? Learning Canadian history with technology." It concerned a project involving a control group of Ontario high school students who were studying the 1942 Canadian Army raid on Dieppe. It described digital resources on the Virtual Historian web-based learning tool and addressed questions about pedagogy and computers. I was surprised the paper that I downloaded was not the one described on the symposium website. But it was a playful surprise.

Anyway, herewith a few comments on Stéphane's paper. It is a well-research scholarly paper that describes a SSHRC funded project undertaken in 2008. It begins with a literature review, referencing the many scholarly books and articles that support inquiry-based and computer enhanced learning. The publications are listed in a four page bibliography. The overall thrust of the literature is captured in Stéphane's statement: "The question should no longer be about *whether* to use digital technology but rather *how* to use it" (p. 3). The authors of several

scholarly studies cited in the bibliography are participating in this *Playing with Technology in History* symposium.

Stéphane provides a very detailed description of the methodology he deployed. Basically, a group of just over 100 high school students, from two different schools, were introduced to historical material about the 1942 Dieppe Raid. One group utilized Virtual Historian resources, consisting of digital reproductions of primary material; the other used conventional social studies textbooks. The students were then evaluated and tested in a variety of ways to measure their metacognitive competence; specifically, they were evaluated on their abilities to demonstrate "historical knowledge acquisition (factual knowledge), procedural knowledge understanding (use of evidence, historical perspective, significance of the raid, and historical judgement), epistemological knowledge (knowledge of the criteria and processes used to construct history), and historical literacy (ability to make sense of and use history language, images, and texts in the writing of an essay)" (p. 13).

As it turned out, and as the author expected, "students in the VH [Virtual Historian] group were able to construct more structured and coherent arguments than their counterparts. Their knowledge of the subject (e.g., series of events, actors, facts) was greater and their ability to think historically (present clear arguments supported by appropriate evidence, consider historical significance, and make judgements on the issue) was significantly more sophisticated than those in the classroom group" (p.14). So, the results were gratifying and seemed to confirm the pedagogical value of using digital inquiry-based methods to engage high school students in a meaningful way with history. But despite the fact that these students were "digital natives" who grew up in a digital world, and who interact with it constantly, they didn't really like the VH exercise. The majority of the students, even those who scored very highly on the metacognitive competencies, were not enthusiastic about their experience with a virtual history assignment. Many of the students were confused and intimidated by the digital primary resources and the inquiry-based learning strategies they encountered; other students were bored by the exercise. Some were simply exasperated by the whole exercise, a sentiment expressed by a student who asked his teacher, "Why can't you simply tell us [the information we are supposed to learn and understand in this module about Canada's participation in World War Two]?" (p.29)

"How can digital natives, born and raised with technology, prefer classroom instruction to a computer lab activity and claim to be distracted by online learning objects?" Stéphane asks rhetorically. "There is no simple answer to these startling yet fundamental questions," he says (p. 26). But he seems to regard inadequate training of history teachers as a root of the problem. He cites several studies to support his view. "As long as teachers see history as 'a mere accumulation of facts or stories,'" one authority asserts, "then we should not be surprised that

they transform curricular or pedagogical moves designed to promote student meaning-making back into lessons that merely transmit facts" (p. 28). Stéphane argues that there must be a significant pedagogical shift in history teacher training, especially with respect to the integration of technology and inquiry-based learning methods. Perhaps he is correct.

However, I suspect that the challenges and disappointments Stéphane describes will continue. And if history is any kind of a guide, we shouldn't be surprised. As I read Stéphane's paper, I was reminded of earlier debates in education, particularly debates relating to the value of progressivism over formalism in the twentieth century. Progressive educational administrators and school inspectors were often perplexed to find that classroom teachers – who had been introduced to the progressive, project-based methods of John Dewey *et. al* when they attended teachers' college – usually practiced conventional methods of formalism afterwards. Professor Neil Sutherland, the eminent education historian of English Canada, considered these questions and events in a marvellously evocative essay entitled "The Triumph of 'Formalism:' Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s." He found that while trainee teachers subscribed eagerly to progressive theories and practices at teachers' college, once they graduated and were responsible for their own classrooms, they emulated the styles and methods of teachers whom they had admired way back when they were students in elementary school. To be known and respected as a teacher who was "strict but fair" was their highest accolade. As Professor Sutherland explained: "Like their other colleagues, they continued to teach factual material, tested their pupils' memories and evaluated their work habits; what they did best is epitomized in their answer to a question common in classroom discourse until recently: 'Yes, neatness does count.'"[1]

Just as progressivism never entirely replaced formalism, digitally-enhanced inquiry-based learning methods may never completely displace textbook-centred instruction in the classroom. But as Stéphane says, although "[t]echnology in education is inevitable…no single technology can be universally applied by teachers." "Teaching," he recognizes, "is a complex human activity that cannot be reduced to a set of pre-established pedagogical steps that invariably produce positive outcomes" (p. 34).

In revising this paper for Kevin's proposed collection of essays, I would encourage Stéphane to open his discussion with a slightly revised version of the sentence that presently concludes his paper: *We need to know more [about] how teachers can design lessons and meaningful activities with technology and, perhaps more importantly, how programs can be used to build on students' prior knowledge [and learning preferences] and to develop new epistemologies and*

[1] Neil Sutherland, "The Triumph of 'Formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *History of Education Review*, 15, 2 (1986); reprinted in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, eds. Jean Barman, Neil Sutherland, and J. Donald Wilson (Calgary: Detselig Enterprise, 1995), 101-124.

ways of thinking about the past. I would also suggest that he restructure his discussion around the very interesting questions that his paper has raised, namely: *How can it be that digital natives, born and raised with technology, still prefer classroom instruction to a computer lab activity and claim to be distracted by online learning objects? How is it that, despite the passionate and compelling scholarly discourse in recent years relating to meaningful learning and teaching in history, students continue to ask: Why can't you just tell us?*

I enjoyed reading this paper and regret I was not able to discuss it Stéphane and colleagues at the Playing with Technology in History symposium. I hope my comments in this brief review are useful. And I'm still keen to read the paper about how Canadian and American students engaged with Virtual Historian resources on the War of 1812!

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