Unwieldy Social Studies and Traces of Historical Thinking: A Response to Gibson and Case

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I'd like to begin by thanking Lindsay Gibson and Roland Case for taking the time to engage in what is an important conversation about the nature of social studies pedagogical method in Canada. In large part, I appreciate the concerns that both Gibson and Case (2017) have for reimagining social studies in ways that move beyond the simple transmission of content that shaped (and perhaps continues to shape) the social studies experiences for many, including myself (for me, Grade 7 history class was little more than attempting to write everything down that was on the board before the teacher got to the end and erased from the beginning).

In this short response, I want to focus on two concerns that remain after contemplating Gibson and Case's (2017) carefully articulated response to my primary concern as a way of returning to my original argument. Here, I'd like to take the opportunity to argue two ideas in brief. First, I suggest that social studies is unwieldy by design and, thus, is not/may not be an appropriate space for a universal framework. Second, I'd like to highlight something in Gibson and Case's response that directly speaks to and reflects my original argument, namely, that historical thinking and history more generally command a

particular privilege over how methods in social studies are to be imagined and articulated, with a specific look at the TC[2] framework offered in Gibson and Case's response.

Unwieldy Social Studies

In large part, I read our divergent views as largely informed by differences in opinion about the possibility and/or desire to create coherent approaches to social studies education. Gibson and Case (2017), in their well thought-out response, suggest that "a proliferation of thinking concepts where every social studies discipline has its own conceptual framework, as Smith would seem to invite, would make for an unwieldy curriculum" (p. 9). It may well be the case that having different disciplinary frameworks would make for an increasingly complex pedagogical space (and, indeed, I suspect it would) but I would offer two responses to this. First, social studies is already unwieldy; as a field of competing disciplines each vying for space in already busy classrooms, and in contexts where competing focal points drive different types of social studies inquiry in different kinds of ways, it would be incorrect to assume that social studies isn't already unwieldy both in terms of content and pedagogical method (or even in definitions of the field).[1] Second, while my argument may be read as a call for different and distinct thinking frameworks to accommodate different disciplinary foci, I'm not convinced that this is necessarily the solution either as this suggestion presupposes that disciplinary thinking is preferable to begin with.[2]

As a response to my argument, and, I would suspect, as a response to concerns about an unwieldy social studies, Gibson and Case (2017) offer the TC[2] thinking framework as an example of a method for social studies that is "powerful and [provides] relevant lenses that accommodate both common considerations and nuanced differences

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1   It's perhaps worth noting, for the purposes of this discussion, that the curriculum for elementary social studies in Ontario is already more than 200 pages long, which, I would argue, suggests that the curriculum already places a large burden on teachers to attend to a variety of policy ideas and curricular obligations.

2   My argument here is a reflection of my commitments to asking questions about the (im)possibilities for developing a decolonizing social studies; see, for example, Smith and Rogers (2015) on the difficulties of articulating a decolonizing citizenship education. Given colonialism's dependence on and normalization of disciplinarity as an organizing framework for creating taken-for-granted and exclusionary knowledges (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Willinsky, 1998), I'm inclined to question whether disciplinary frameworks are necessary or even preferable. However, such an argument requires attention, space, and careful consideration that is beyond the scope of this response.

across social studies" (p. 5). I want to, in what follows, provide an argument that highlights how the TC² framework, much like OME's social studies thinking framework, privileges historical method in such a way that historical thinking continues to be the central organizing principle for social studies more broadly. While Gibson and Case note that "TC²'s framework grew out of Seixas's scholarship in history education" (p. 2), I want to suggest that it doesn't go far enough to distance itself from its historical roots.

The Lingering Traces of Historical Privilege: The TC² Framework

In their response, Gibson and Case (2017) make an argument in favour of the TC² approach to social studies inquiry. For them, I am incorrect in claiming that a thinking framework that employs language from historical thinking is inadequate for an integrated social studies, given the "malleability" of the TC² framework and its applicability to each of the disciplines that may fall under the purview of an integrated social studies. I would tend to agree with Gibson and Case that the TC² framework offered does a more adequate job of attending to non-historically specific parts of social studies inquiry than some aspects of the OME's social studies thinking. I would also agree that something like "significance" does necessarily cross disciplinary bounds as all social studies inquiry does and should implore students to consider not only what is most significant for them but what is most significant for others as well. However, such agreement, I suggest, doesn't undermine or disrupt my own initial argument that thinking frameworks, including the TC² framework, are largely informed by traces of historical thinking that linger in their presentation and articulation. In what follows, I illustrate how the lingering traces of historical thinking in the TC² framework manifest themselves in two ways: first, the language of historical thinking is reflected in the TC² framework in nearly perfectly complementary ways, and, second, the language of the TC² framework maps perfectly onto the language of the framework as it pertains to history but not for any other discipline, something I suspect highlights the TC² framework's greater congruence with history relative to the other disciplines. Taken together, I argue that this reinforces historical thinking's clout over imaginings of social studies methodology, much like historical thinking operates to shape social studies thinking in the Ontario social studies curriculum.

In the TC[2] version, it's worth noting that the key terms map perfectly on to Seixas's historical thinking framework (Seixas, 2006; Seixas & Morton, 2013); the language of "significance," "evidence," "continuity and change," "cause and consequence," "perspective," and "ethical dimension" is shared between both[3] (see Gibson & Case, 2017, pp. 5–6). This conceptual congruence is reflected further in the kinds of language used to describe the application of the TC[2] framework to each of the respective disciplines (see Table 1). When taking into consideration the language of the TC[2] framework in relation to each of the disciplines, history, unlike the other disciplines, enjoys nearly perfect "semantic correspondence" with the language of the TC[2] framework. This leads me to believe that the relationship between history and the TC[2] framework is similar to the social studies/historical thinking argument that I offer in my argument, namely, that historical thinking comes to conflate with social studies thinking/method. More specifically, in this particular instance, not only does the TC[2] framework echo the language of historical thinking but it also applies this language to history in a way that other disciplines do not or cannot enjoy, something I suggest is reflective of the TC[2] framework's greater congruence with history, relative to the other social studies disciplines. Indeed, in Table 1, we can see what was argued above, namely, that the portal concepts offered through the TC[2] framework—significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, perspective, and the ethical dimension (see Gibson & Case, 2017, pp. 5–6)—map perfectly onto history whereas each other discipline requires adapted language to "fit" them into the framework (in at least one instance). From this, one might conclude that historical thinking not only influences multiple social studies thinking frameworks but that this ultimately serves to implicitly suggest that historical inquiry is best suited as an avenue for inquiry in social studies methods.

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3   It is also revealing that all of these frameworks (social studies thinking, historical thinking, and the TC[2] framework) all have six thinking concepts, and, while this is hardly enough to draw any sort of conclusions, it is interesting to consider that six appears to be the number of concepts that sufficiently defines a thinking framework in social studies. In any case, I would be remiss to not recognize, as noted earlier, that Gibson and Case (2017) note historical thinking's influence on the TC[2] framework, so this point is perhaps not all that surprising.

Table 1. TC^2 framework

Underlying focus	History	Geography	Economics	Political science	Law	Archaeology
Determining the topics and ideas worthy of study	**Historical significance: Is this** historic event or person significant?	Geographic importance: Is this region of geographic importance?	**Economic significance: How econom-**ically valuable is this activity or resource?	Political currency: Is this a politically important idea or event?	Legal importance: Is this an important legal development or concept?	**Archaeological significance: Is this** an important site or artefact?
Assessing claims and their justifications	**Evidence** and interpretation	**Evidence (data) and interpretation**	**Evidence (data) and interpretation**	**Evidence and conclusion**	**Evidence (facts), reasons and conclusions**	**Evidence (material record) and interpretation**
Examining patterns and variations	**Continuity and change** over time	Patterns and trends	Trend and variability: in markets	Stability and change—within and across power relations	Constancy and change	Similarities and differences
Exploring causal relations	**Cause and consequence**	Interactions and associations—mutual influences	Cause and effect	Cause and effect	**Cause and consequence**	Cause and effect
Adopting the mindset of an insider	**Historical perspective** taking—understanding the times	**Geographic perspective taking**—developing a sense of place	Economic mindset—developing a sense of value	Political mindset—understanding power and privilege from inside the system	**Legal perspective**—understanding the legal point of view	**Archaeological perspective**— developing a sense of time and place based on the material record
Assessing the wisdom and ethics of actions and policies	**Ethical judgments in history** [Do we owe First Nation people an apology for their treatment in residential schools?]	Geographic value judgments [What responsibilities do Canadians have to poor people in developing countries?]	Economic value judgments [Does wind power make economic sense?]	**Judgments of political ethics** [Is civil disobedience justifiable? Is proportional representation effective?]	Legal value judgments [Is this law fair? Should the gun registry be scrapped?]	Archaeological value judgments [What is the most responsible way to preserve and enhance this prehistoric site?]

Note: Here, the highlighted and bolded concepts are those that reflect the TC^2 framework's language. In drawing attention to the application of the language of the TC^2 framework, it becomes clear that history is the only discipline that enjoys perfect correspondence, semantically, with the TC^2 framework.

Source: "Submission to the Social Studies, History and Geography Curriculum Review Committees, Ontario Ministry of Education." © The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2011.

Conclusion

While much of my attention above was focused on addressing one particular point of concern that I have with Gibson and Case's (2017) argument that the TC² framework offers, in part, a better way of thinking about a "universal" social studies method, I think there is much to be said about what Gibson and Case offer. While I would diverge from some of their reasoning as it pertains to a thinking framework's validity in pedagogical theory—the institutional validation on the part of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society, I would argue, doesn't necessarily contend the fundamental argument that historical thinking is a privileged framework for conceptualizing other disciplinary frameworks—many of Gibson and Case's considerations warrant further consideration. For example, Gibson and Case are right to note that "human–environment relations," as a necessary consideration in social studies, can very well be explored (and done so with relative sophistication) by asking questions about interrelationships. This suggests that the concepts in some thinking frameworks might work as powerful conceptual and methodological terms that could prove to be useful in some contexts. At a minimum, focusing on notions such as interrelationships, ethics, support for claims and causality (all addressed in the TC² framework) presents important considerations in social studies that should inform good, comprehensive, and critical social studies work.

More broadly, Gibson and Case (2017) are right to assert that the thinking framework may very well help to catalyze conversations about the existence of injustice (although I would argue that they are insufficient in creating the necessary political and ethical commitments necessary for active citizenship).[4] However, I think the influence of history in such a framework remains a persistent concern: history as the central organizing discipline for social studies thinking frameworks necessarily forecloses on discussions about what other disciplines might be able to offer methodologically, and implicitly conveys the notion that history and historical method are more effective and explanatory. In any case, I welcome the concerns that Gibson and Case offer, and I think that their thoughtful and critical work here in responding to some of my concerns illustrates the necessity of ongoing engagement with the notion of what it means to teach an integrated social studies in a meaningful way.

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4   Critiques offered recently of historical thinking's lack of ethical and political commitment (Ng-A-Fook & Smith, 2017) and its inability to address taken-for-granted nationalist narratives in history (Anderson, 2017) are instructive here as critiques that draw attention to some of the limits of a thinking framework for sparking the necessary practices for contending oppression and injustice.

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