Canada Studies or Canadian Studies? A Dilemma in Teacher-Based Curriculum Development

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L'auteur de cet article s'est joint à la Fondation d'Etudes du Canada parce qu'il était convaincu que, pour être efficace, tout changement pédagogique exigeait la participation active de professeurs en exercice et non l'adoption de méthodes centralisées et bureaucratiques. Cependant au sein d'un projet centré sur le développement de perspective pan-canadiennes, cette approche créait divers problèmes et un grand dilemne. Les problèmes étaient liés au fait que la Fondation utilisait surtout l'approche thématique des sciences sociales qui ne permettait guère la participation des enseignants de l'élémentaire et des professeurs de lettres et d'humanités. De plus bien des enseignants n'ayant pas été formés à l'élaboration didactique tendent à traiter leurs sujets comme des fins en soi plutôt que des domaines à explorer. Le plus grand problème cependant vient du fait que la Fondation cherche à faire développer des études applicables à tout le Canada par des enseignants inévitablement conditonnés par leur localité et leurs perspectives culturelles régionales. Pour résoudre ce dilemne, la Fondation tenta, avec un succès limité, de désigner les études à envergure pan-canadienne sous le nom d'"études du Canada" et celles à orientation locale sous le nom d'"études canadiennes". Ceci signifiait que les enseignants devaient fonder leurs travaux sur les intérêts et préoccupations de leur propre milieu tout en échangeant avec leurs collègues d'autres régions du Canada. Cette approche nécessite une énorme quantité de travail et pour faciliter la tâche des enseignants la Fondation, dans sa phase 2, encourage des projets rassemblant des enseignants d'au moins trois régions du Canada. C'est une entreprise difficile et coûteuse; il reste à voir si elle facilitera le développement de perspectives pan-canadiennes.

Five years ago, when I was first approached by a representative of the Canada Studies Foundation (CSF) and asked to be part of their team, I was quick to accept the offer. I too had always held the conviction that effective educational change had to begin in the classroom with the active *partnership* of classroom teachers. So many other ways had been tried and had produced so few results. These ranged all the way from centrally controlled bureaucratic administrative procedures (find one professor, four teachers, and one curriculum expert, mix at regular intervals for one year, print the results of their work and promulgate it, via Ministry fiat, as a new provincial course) to the massive, very expensive, highly funded curriculum project (find three professors, two curriculum experts,

and no teachers, mix well for four years, print the results, and sell them across the province). Here then was an outfit that had the support of the Council of Ministers of Education and which could, with the support of local and provincial administrators, go directly to classroom teachers. By providing them with opportunities to work with other Canadian teachers, the CSF would help them develop teaching units that could be fitted into existing provincial guidelines and that would be aimed at effecting a greater degree of national understanding in the minds of young Canadians. This "national understanding" was to be the goal of all the units produced under the auspices of the Foundation. All these units were to deal with questions and issues arising out of the nature of Canadian society. The nature of this society was defined under the general rubric of "Continuing Canadian Concerns."

This meant that all the units developed by the teachers should stem from questions or issues arising from the basic nature of Canada — and Canada was defined as being

a) a large regionally divided and diverse country;
b) a highly industrialized and technologically advanced country;
c) an urbanized country;
d) a multi-ethnic country, with two predominant linguistic groups;
e) an exposed country open to a multitude of external, cultural, economic, and political influences;
f) a country with a unique northern geographic location;
g) a country with a democratic federal system of government.

These questions or issues (the Continuing Canadian Concerns) were to be looked at in their contemporary, past, and future dimensions. Each unit would contain a section dealing with questions such as the following: What is the issue? How did it manifest itself in the past? What options are open to us in the future?

So far the task seemed simple enough — despite the fact that we were woefully understaffed and were attempting to do a national job on a 5-year budget roughly equivalent to the cost of one interchange on any major expressway in the country.

Certain problems soon developed, along with one seemingly unresolvable dilemma. Before I describe the dilemma, which I would define as a situation in which you are damned if you do and damned if you don't, I would like to describe some of the aforementioned problems.

National understanding, if it is defined as being an examination of a continuing set of issues arising from the nature of Canadian society, is a valid but only partial approach to Canadian studies. It presupposes a level of intellectual sophistication and emotional maturity which most youngsters do not have by age 12 and many do not have by age 14. Thus the Foundation's basic model of the Continuing Canadian Concerns excluded elementary teachers, except those who were extremely determined

or those who worked primarily in the western provinces, British Columbia, and Atlantic Canada, where, for a variety of reasons, a more flexible approach was adopted.

The approach also excluded the English, art, and music teacher. Despite the fact that many of the Foundation's brochures made the point that Canada had, at her peril, neglected what her artists and writers had to say about the country's experience, most English, art, or music teachers, when faced with trying to implement a basically social science "problem solving" approach, balked and refused to use this attack. Either they saw their discipline as an end in itself and hence refused to use it as a means to an end, or they felt that in working this way their discipline was made an adjunct to the social sciences. In either case, they felt that this was a violation of all reasons why they were teaching in that area of the curriculum in the first place.

This was a real tragedy for the Foundation for, in the early years of schooling, songs, folklore, pictures, stories, and dances are the primary socializing agencies. If these arts are neglected, I could advance an educated guess that, by the age of 14, a student's attitudes and values are such that the whole Continuing Canadian Concerns approach advocated by the Foundation would be, if not neutralized, at least much more difficult to implement. Knowledge may be gained for a variety of reasons other than to achieve a measure of social cohesion.

Many teachers did not understand how to develop units. They did not possess sufficient curriculum skills. Their training in this area had often been confined to methods courses in which they had been taught to sugarcoat textbook generalization in an easily digested form for students to swallow and regurgitate on the final exam. This content orientation lead, naturally enough, to the misapprehension that the CSF was encouraging a kind of minor PhD on some topic in some subject area. This misapprehension manifested itself in what I used to call the photocopier syndrome: reams and reams of paper, all relating in some way to a topic such as Canadian–American relations, but with no other detectable order imposed on it except that it was presented to you in a file or pile.

These were some of the problems which had to be overcome. To some extent they were overcome, for many of the projects took steps to hire resource people who could help them to partially alleviate some of the problems I have identified.

One problem, the dilemma which I mentioned earlier, could not be solved this way. The Foundation tried to make a clear distinction between Canadian studies and Canada studies. Canadian studies were defined as being an investigation into any event or operation or phenomenon occurring in Canada, be it the study of the trillium, the operation of an outward-bound program, the organization of a Canadian poetry reading session, or the writing of the history of the Toronto Fire Department.

All these activities were considered to be legitimate Canadian studies but not Canada studies. Canadian studies did not lead students to "an appreciation of their country as a whole or of the thoughts and feelings of people living elsewhere in Canada" (1). This was the job of Canada studies. Such studies were to address themselves to helping students develop "an appreciation of their total nation wide environment" and "a sympathetic understanding of the value systems and ways of life of the vast diversity of people living in Canada" (1). Canadian studies, the Foundation felt, actually intensifies unwarranted regional and ethnocentric feelings. Hence they must be supplemented by "in depth Canada Studies programmes consciously designed to give our young people a better understanding of their total Canadian environment" (1). The dilemma faced in carrying out this injunction was that in giving responsibility for and control of Canada studies unit development to projects controlled by teachers, the Foundation was using as change agents people who had been socialized by the very type of provincially or locally designed programs that it was trying to transcend. Local teachers were being asked to develop national programs.

There were various ways out of the dilemma. One would have been to launch a national classroom in Canada studies for prospective Canada studies teachers. In view of time constraints, the Foundation's mandate, and other political considerations, to say nothing of limited resources, this option was manifestly impossible. Another option would have been to give control of the projects to people who, through some kind of experience and training, had a commitment to and an understanding of Canada studies as the Foundation conceived it. This would have meant taking control of the project, in many cases, out of the hands of local teachers, and giving it to various professors, curriculum experts, etc., and this the Foundation was not prepared to do.

It might be asked, "Why didn't you call in interested teachers and tell them what you wanted?" Quite aside from the fact that this would have produced attitudes in teachers which would have made it impossible to build up a functioning national organization, this approach would have strengthened the conviction widely held outside the central provinces that the CSF was an instrument of Upper Canadian or eastern interests designed to ensure, once again, the primacy of Ontario and Quebec in Canadian Confederation. For many Quebec Francophones, even being told that a major theme for phase 2 of the CSF should be "Canada, a Federation Under Stress" implied a perception of the issue which they were not prepared to discuss, much less pursue. Many Westerners originally felt that the Foundation was designed by central Canadian interests which were only remotely concerned with their problems. Thus to impose on the rest of the country a central Canadian perception of the issues would have insured at best tokenism, and at worst no co-operation whatsoever.

The route chosen involved responsibility, consultation, and trust. The decision was taken to go ahead and ask for submissions for projects and hope that the process of working together with other teachers from different parts of the country and with the Secretariat of the Foundation would act as a gigantic national Canada studies classroom. It was hoped that the results of this process would reflect a Canada studies approach to both teaching and learning about this country. The approach paid off in the incredible amount of work all projects did, some of which fitted into the CCC model and some of which did not. All of it had this one strength, however: it had been designed, developed, and tested by teachers and students from a particular part of Canada, and as such was a real reflection of the interests and concerns of that part of Canada.

All the teachers, no matter from what part of Canada they came, shared one common characteristic: they began where they were – in their own locality. This is probably not a very startling statement, given what we know about the way people learn. It was our experience that most teachers who undertook the task of developing Canada studies units preferred to begin at the local level, in other words with the familiar and the known – a place where they felt most comfortable. Since we were asking teachers to stretch their capabilities to the fullest and to assume tasks which required curriculum skills and knowledge which they would have to acquire, it made sense to begin where they were, rather than not make a start at all. Such would have been the result if we had, as the teachers would have seen it, "imposed" the Secretariat's views of Canada studies on them right at the beginning of the process. Of course it would have been possible to "buy a start," which they could have subverted for their own purposes, but this idea was rejected for the simple reason that it would have brought about no real change in the teachers and would have produced units which were not a true reflection of the way they thought and felt about Canada. Cultural and economic imperialism can be practised inside or outside a Federal state such as Canada.

Why did most teachers have a local or regional perception of Canada studies? It may be explained by Professor Northrop Frye's hypothesis that identity in Canada is a local or regional phenomenon while unity is a political one (2). In Frye's view, a concern for the larger entity called Canada, which is a political phenomenon, is felt mainly by federal politicians, teachers of those who will some day occupy powerful business or government positions, those who have axes to grind, and certain intellectuals. If this is true, the Canadian studies nature of many of the units produced by Foundation projects can be explained by the hypothesis that these units were developed by *truly Canadian* teachers. In developing these units, they were being Canadian since their identity depended not on an amorphous thing called Canada but on their being part of a locality. They were capable of intellectual gymnastics at the Canada studies level but

did not want to engage in them if they were asked to develop units of work which meant something to them in their lives. It seems self-evident that the teachers had to start where they were and not where they were not. This localism is amply documented in *What Culture? What Heritage?* (3). It was true for the students of 10 years ago. Many of these students are now the teachers of today.

If the preceding argument is valid, what steps can be taken to develop Canada studies using local teacher-based projects? One way, and this was chosen for phase 2 of the CSF, was to make sure that each project was composed of teachers drawn from at least three regions of Canada. This ensured at least three differing perspectives on whatever issue the project chose to examine. There are significant drawbacks to this option however. It is enormously expensive, it touches only a few teachers, and, since it is based on the concept of Continuing Canadian Concerns it remains a difficult approach for teachers in grades K–8.

Another option might be to allow teachers in each region to develop a project, say, on the folklore of that region, and then bring them together in a national workshop in which a combined unit could be developed – combined in the sense that it would have the flavor of all the various regions of Canada and could be taught to students across the country in such a way as to give them a national perspective.

When faced with the results of projects from phase 1, the option chosen by the Foundation was to combine formative evaluation and dissemination in what became known as a "mini-conference." About 30–40 teachers from across Canada were invited to participate in a 2–3-day workshop arranged by the developers of each project. At the conference the participants were familiarized with the aims, methods, and evaluation techniques of the project. They then took the materials home, tried them out in their classrooms, and returned an evaluation of the unit to the project developers. This process had several results. It familiarized a small group of Canadian teachers with the work of the project, it enabled a group of Canadian teachers to share views and attitudes about a particular Canadian issue, and it provided the project developers with answers to questions about whether the curriculum product they had developed was transferable, that is, would appeal to other students and teachers across the country. As an instrument of formative evaluation the mini-conferences were successful, but as a means of disseminating materials on a national scale they left much to be desired, in view of the relatively small number of people involved.

As I see it, the Canada Studies Foundation had two great strengths; one was its willingness to practise what the Project Canada West teachers called "devolution" (4) thus giving teachers the responsibility which they should have; the other was the insistence that a certain amount of social cohesion in the form of knowledge and attitudes is essential for the

functioning of a civilized democratic nation. A truly national Canada studies program is totally lacking at the present moment in this country. This phenomenon is well documented by the recent OECD study which seems to imply that Canada has no National Education policy at all. Educational activities and reforms in Canada are described by those doing the assessment as "– an array of exceptionally active programmes – derived from no explicitly stated over all national conception of the country's interests". (5, p. 21)

As I conclude this paper, I notice that the Toronto *Globe and Mail* quotes a senior Ottawa diplomat, Bruce Rankin, as saying that Canada is becoming a balkanized and insular country, turned in on itself to the point of corrosive parochialism. To quote Mr. Rankin, "I suppose we need some leadership in a variety of ways – perhaps through the media, political leaders and business leaders – to remind all 22 million of us that we are a nation and we've got a great thing going for us and we are liable to destroy it if we don't recognize it". (6)

In my opinion Mr. Rankin is correct in identifying the problem but wrong in thinking that the media, political leaders, and business leaders alone can remedy it. Part of the solution lies in developing strong Canada studies programs in every school across this land – programs which dispel the ignorance that Canadians have of one another and which create attitudes that make us willing to understand one another.

Perhaps what is needed in the educational field is a national classroom for teachers of Canada studies. A place where teachers from all parts of Canada can come, meet with their colleagues, listen to experts in the various fields related to Canada studies, and develop units of work which will help give their students a better national understanding. We have a National Defense College; why not an institution dedicated to helping teachers to teach their students to have a better appreciation and understanding of the country which we are all privileged to inhabit?

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