

The Canadian Studies Office: Its Purpose and Potential

Roger Elmes

1950 — a nine-year-old boy in southern Ontario exposed for the first time to the wonders of a "a new technology." Ten people have just watched two workmen struggling on the roof with a large awkward apparatus made of pieces of round aluminum pipe. These ten people gather in a semi-circle around a small box on the living room table. A large, older man turns a switch and suddenly a woman appears dressed like an Indian — its Princess Summerfallwinterspring and beside her is Buffalo Bob — and that's right folks, It's Howdy Doody Time. A nine-year-old boy in southern Ontario is exposed for the first time to the wonders of a "new technology".

He learns that the West is cowboys, good and bad; women who cook — the good ones — and women who don't — the bad ones who also hang around saloons (and he's vaguely somehow more interested in the latter than the former). Indians, all of whom are bad with the exception of Tonto and some monosyllabic counterparts. The land is flat and rolling — good; or rising in peculiar shapes — bad otherwise known as the badlands.

The west coast does not exist, the Rockies were never formed and the east coast was never heard of except in the context of murders in New York.

The nine-year-old learned all of this valuable, true information in a year on a black box with a nine-inch screen which gave him access to the world through Buffalo, New York — and he retained these truths for so many years.

1975 — a quarter century has passed. A nine-year-old boy is sitting in the family room of a house in southern British Columbia. The images on the TV screen are flashing rapidly as he points a small box in the general direction of the TV. He's having trouble deciding, this Saturday morning, which cartoons to watch. The difficulty has been caused by a workman coming yesterday and running a little wire from the

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telephone pole to the house — 13 channels — Mickey Mouse, Road Runner, Star Trek, Bonanza (just to keep it honest for the parents), and its modern counterpart The Waltons on Sunday nights, and war and more war in a small country half way around the world.

He's always had Sesame Street and for awhile he's been able to look at his own environment through The Beachcombers. But the bulk of his electronic cultural experience and with his link to cable is increasingly, with the Friendly Giant to the south. Although that nine-year-old from 1950 has become a specialist in Canadian Studies and has taken the nine-year-old from 1975 twice across the country, this new Elmes — when bothered by some social issue — sits down and writes letters to Mr. President.

"The nine-year-old learned all this valuable, true information in a year on a black box with a nine-inch screen..."

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges recognized over five years ago that we were graduating students who, in the most diplomatic terms possible, had an imperfect knowledge of their own country. My own decade of experience in British Columbia colleges taught me that both high school graduates and the adult learners in the college system of that province had a minimal knowledge of the cultural, political, geographical, historical and economic realities of Canada, and its provinces. Moreover, their knowledge of the powerful influences of other countries on Canada was at best superficial.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of British Columbia college graduates left their college

blessed with the same level of blissful ignorance of their own country as they possessed upon entry.

Numerous national and provincial studies, at all levels of Canada's education system, have painted the same picture over and over again. More recent studies show that we have made some progress — but it has been minimal. For example, a 1980 survey of Alberta students' knowledge of Canada showed marginal improvement in the three grades tested (See Table 1).

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On the surface, it would appear that by Grade 12, students in Alberta are not so badly off, particularly with respect to Canadian geography. It must be remembered, however, that this survey tested factual knowledge in the cited subject areas and not the ability of students to link facts together in some form of critical analysis.

One would hope that in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, provinces with a long and honoured history of critical political thought, the situation would be different. But if the curriculum of the institutes and colleges is

Table 1

	Gr. 6	Gr. 9	Gr. 12
Canadian Citizenship	27%	39%	52%
Canadian Geography	51%	61%	69%
Canadian History	35%	46%	54%

examined we find an extremely limited percentage of Canadian studies, or other subjects which would encourage the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills.

I emphasize that Saskatchewan and Manitoba are not unique. In Canada's colleges and institutes the problem is endemic. Indeed, the causal attitudes which have fostered and nurtured this situation can be aptly described as an epidemic.

"...do we train students to perform a particular task in industry or as a paraprofessional, or do we educate them for citizenship and career mobility in an increasingly complex society?"

The central question, across the country, seems to be — do we train students to perform a particular task in industry or as a paraprofessional, or do we educate them for citizenship and career mobility in an increasingly complex society? Surely, we can structure and plan curriculum so that we have a judicious blend of both in spite of the present restrictions imposed by Manpower funding, apprenticeship programs, program advisory committees and the intellectual and pedagogical lethargy of some instructors. There is still room to manoeuvre, even given Ottawa's recent backward move in transfers

to post-secondary education.

Is it time that we asked ourselves as educators whether the training of paraprofessionals for the health sciences should include a critical understanding of the political and economic forces and processes which affect the delivery of health services? Should we be providing future trade unionists with a critical understanding of not only the structures of Canadian labour organizations but also of the economic and political problems facing organized labour? Would students in your business programs be better prepared for their careers if they had a similar information base?

"Unfortunately, the vast majority of B.C. college graduates left their college blessed with the same level of blissful ignorance of their own country as they possessed on entry."

As educators you can cite similar examples drawn from your own areas of experience and expertise. In the final analysis, no matter how long our list, we will come back again to the central question — do our colleges and institutes adequately prepare their graduates for a meaningful contribution to our country and provinces in an increasingly complex society?

Today, many different researchers have provided insight into the issues facing educators as Canada plunges further into the information society. It will have become clear to you that "plunge" is probably the most apt verb to use in its standard meaning of "thrust violently". The verb "plunge" is, as you know, both transitive and intransitive. Thus, whether we are plunging ourselves into the information society or being violently thrust into it by technological and international market forces becomes a very

important question. With the partial exception of Telidon, and the Ontario initiative in microcomputers, it appears that forces external to Canada and certainly external to each provincial ministry of education are driving us before we have developed adequate policy initiatives or responses.

The question of Canadian content becomes increasingly critical and the urgent need for inter-provincial co-operation in the production of software is more evident day-by-day.

Moreover, there are sound pedagogical reasons why front-line educators across Canada should be involved now in policy development, specification of standards and design of hardware rather than leaving the field to the business and industrial marketplace.

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The Canadian Studies Office of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges is not the panacea to the problems outlined. What single organization could be?

With a budget of \$325,000 per year, we have attempted to serve Canada's 170 colleges and technical institutes. With a budget of less than \$1.00 per student per year it is obvious that we can never hope to be much more than a catalyst. However, in a country where the constitutional responsibility for curriculum development lies clearly with the provinces, the role of catalyst is appropriate for a national educational organization.

If the situation is to be altered, the provinces, and the colleges, institutes and individual administrators and faculty in each

province must accept the responsibility for both minor and major changes in attitude and curriculum.

The following constitute some areas of potential activity within each province:

1. Statements of support for increased Canadian content.
2. Curriculum changes: a) addition of interdisciplinary Canadian studies courses; b) modules on Canadian politics, economics, etc. oriented to the particular trade or career program; c) development of labour studies courses and modules.
3. Funding for the development of learning materials which draw on the Canadian experience.
4. Release time to faculty for the development of traditional learning materials and software for microcomputers, videodiscs and Telidon.
5. Facilitation and encouragement of exchanges of faculty and administrators between provinces.
6. Encourage faculty to cite Canadian examples whenever possible.
7. Discourage the apparent inherent — perhaps genetic propensity of Canadians for self-depreciation. Parenthetically, it must be noted that the CBC even uses medical terminology as the title of our one national open-line radio show — Cross-Country Checkup — as though we are sick.

It should be noted that the provinces have a particular responsibility to ensure a minimum of duplication of effort in the production of both traditional learning materials and software for the new communications technologies. Any other course of action in the world's second largest nation with a sparse, unevenly distributed population would be economic folly. In this vein, the provinces must create and ensure the maintenance of excellent mechanisms for the inter-provincial exchange of all types of learning materials. Inter-provincial compatibility of micro-computers, videodiscs,

and Telidon systems is an absolute necessity if the exchange of software is to be enhanced. The provinces, probably through the Council of Ministers of Education, must therefore, make common, or at least, compatible hardware acquisition decisions.

Up to now, I have concentrated on painting with a broad brush some of the problems which the Association of Canadian Community Colleges has identified with relation to Canadian Studies. In the process the purpose of the Canadian Studies Office has hopefully been identified.

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I have touched briefly on the question of the potential of the Canadian Studies Office by describing our work as that of a catalyst.

In some provinces, we have had a greater impact than in others. This situation is likely to remain for some time although our higher rates of success will likely shift to other provinces.

In attempting to draw together — Canadian studies and content on one hand and new communications technologies on the other, let me point once again to the technical advances which television made in its first 25-30 years of commercial use. If you examine those changes closely you will discover an exponential rate of technical change in the last eight-ten years. Given the pervasiveness of television today and its cultural and social effects we would have to be blind to ignore the potential impact of microcomputers, videodiscs, Telidon and satellite broadcast TV on Canada's political, economic and cultural sovereignty.

Children's Perception, Retention and Preference of Asymmetrical Composition in Pictures

Nikos Metallinos

The ability of children to understand and enjoy dynamic structures in visual images has often been underrated. Depending upon their age and development, elementary school children have a greater level of comprehension of visual display (due primarily to their constant exposure to television) than we realize. Just because their responses are not in accordance with the established pictorial codes and compositional guidelines drawn by adults, does not mean that children cannot appreciate and learn from a dynamic and more complex composition. We often simplify the visual images used for class instruction to such an extent that children lose interest and the learning task is jeopardized. This over-simplification in developing visual aids for instructional purposes (drawings, photographs, slides, TV and film programs, etc.) has delayed the development of visual literacy in children. I suspect that the rules of picture composition that underline the aesthetic function of pictorial media apply equally when constructing visual messages for elementary school children. Furthermore, I am in total agreement with the advocates of hemispheric lateralization who suggest construction of visual images on the bases of the asymmetrical functions of the human brain (Ragan, 1977, p. 3).

Statement of Problem

There are extensive empirical investigations on the dynamics of speech delivery, speakers' credibility, persuasion techniques, etc. (McCrosky, et al, 1971). There are also studies dealing with pictorial factors in visual education (Cochran, 1980, Levie, 1978). However, studies concerning the dynamic structure of the visual image in instructional materials in education, such as asymmetrical placement of visual elements within the visual field, balance, framing, spacing, image size, form, color, etc., are scarce (Metallinos, 1980). Studies on the importance of the distinct functions of the human brain (in processing visual cues) have only just begun to emerge (Anderson, et al, 1981).

In their study on the effects of the left vs. right placement of visual images in regular newscasts, Metallinos and Tiemens (1977)

suggest that color, shape or form, size and directional lines (vectors) of pictorial cues are contributing factors affecting viewer perception, recognition and retention of visual images. The recognition of these pictorial cues as factors affecting the total composition of a visual display by elementary school children depends on two factors: 1. their level of cognitive development, and 2. the visual codes or production elements which are used in the visual message (Acker and Tiemens, 1981). The perceptual and cognitive skills of children in elementary school (aged 9-11) are well developed, at least insofar as image size, color and shape or form are concerned (Piaget, 1974).

This study examines how children are influenced by idiosyncratic shapes, distinct colors, and dynamic composition or asymmetric placement within the confines of a still photograph. In other words, placement of visual elements within the left or right side of the visual field will differentially affect children's perception, retention and preference. Furthermore, such distinctions are attributed to the particular shapes, colors and total synthesis of the visual displays.

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Previous Studies

Psychological studies on the perception of visual images (Heber, 1968) and neurological studies on the distinct functions of the left and right hemispheres of the human brain (Ornstein, 1973) have contributed greatly towards our understanding of the composition of images. Scientific evidences provided by such psychological and neurophysiological studies, have shown that viewers' discriminate in their preferences of place-

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