

Rethinking the “Bush Doctrine”: Historical Thinking and Post-September 11 Terrorism

Stéphane Lévesque, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, Canada

Abstract *In this paper, I discuss the implications – and necessity – of teaching historical thinking in this “age of terror.” I show that despite an increasing volume of books, resources, and lesson plans on post-September terrorism, there is a dearth of relevant history education publications in North America on how to integrate terrorism in school history in ways that foster students’ historical understanding and sense of agency. To do so, I first problematize education, narrative, and terrorist issues through a disciplinary perspective, and then offer a way to engage students in the critical examination of political narrative constructions in the context of the current “war on terrorism.”*

Introduction

Narratives are extremely powerful historical tools. They are imaginative constructs of social discourse that provide people with coherent interpretations of past, present, and projected human experiences. Narratives, as Ross (2001) recently argued, are extremely serviceable, even more so in times of high uncertainty and stress. “Just at the moments when people are most disoriented, such as the period following September 11,” he observed, “we struggle to make sense of events, and shared narratives which are reinforced within groups help people find reassurance and to cope with high anxiety.” But just as narratives give shape to collective experiences, they also locate their power and meaning not so much in the events they wish to describe but in the hands of those who purposely craft them. And this has serious implications for the post-September 11 (hereafter “post-9/11”) world in which we live. Political leaders consciously know that the construction of *political* narratives – public power-driven stories – can contribute positively to public support for their decisions and actions. “Insofar as narratives affect our perceptions of political reality,” Patterson and Monroe (1998) rightly contend, “narratives play a critical role in the construction of political behavior” (p. 315). Consider, for example, the following US and French interpretations of post-9/11 terrorist response.

As part of his global war on terror, US President George W. Bush confidently addressed the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in September 2002. In his controversial Presidential’s remarks, he declared to the international community that despite UN sanctions, Iraq under Saddam Hussein represented a dangerous and immediate threat to the stability of the Middle East, the US, and ultimately to the entire world. Saddam Hussein’s arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was, for President Bush, the *chief* reason to lead a “coalition of the willing” that would topple this terrorist regime promptly.

We meet one year and one day after a terrorist attack brought grief to my country, and brought grief to many citizens of our world. Yesterday, we remembered the innocent lives taken that terrible morning. Today, we turn to the urgent duty of protecting other lives, without illusion and without fear.... Our principles and our security are challenged today by outlaw groups and regimes that accept no law of morality and have no limit to their violent ambitions. In the attacks on America a year ago, we saw the destructive

intentions of our enemies. This threat hides within many nations, including my own. In cells and camps, terrorists are plotting further destruction, and building new bases for their war against civilization. And our greatest fear is that terrorists will find a shortcut to their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale. In one place – in one regime – we find all these dangers, in their most lethal and aggressive forms, exactly the kind of aggressive threat the United Nations was born to confront... We know that Saddam Hussein pursued weapons of mass murder even when inspectors were in his country. Are we to assume that he stopped when they left? The history, the logic, and the facts lead to one conclusion: Saddam Hussein's regime is a grave and gathering danger. To suggest otherwise is to hope against the evidence. To assume this regime's good faith is to bet the lives of millions and the peace of the world in a reckless gamble. And this is a risk we must not take. (White House, 2002b)

As self-evident as this political discourse may seem to many, the so-called “Bush Doctrine” of pre-emptive military interventions, drafted in the aftermath of 9/11 as part of the so-called *National Security Strategy* (NSS) (White House, 2002a), has raised particular concerns in the international community, and provoked divergent assessments and accounts of how to respond adequately to “outlaw groups and regimes” currently engaged in a “war against civilization.” There is no need to go in further details before an audience such as this on the cleavage between the US and the “old Europe.” Perhaps the French diplomatic response to the Bush Doctrine, which was far from being welcome *à bras ouverts* on the other side of the Atlantic and particularly south of the 49th parallel, can serve as an example that encapsulates some of the divergent political accounts that have emerged since 9/11, and that are rarely recognized or addressed publicly in the US. In his speech before the UN Security Council of March 19, 2003, then French Minister of Foreign Affairs and since May 2005 Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin, put the current terror challenges in these terms:

We are meeting here today a few hours before the weapons sound. To exchange our convictions again in observance of our respective commitments. But also to outline together the paths that must allow us to recover the spirit of unity.... Make no mistake about it: the choice is indeed between two visions of the world. To those who choose to use force and think they can resolve the world's complexity through swift and preventive action, we offer in contrast determined action over time. For today, to ensure our security, all the dimensions of the problem must be taken into account: both the manifold crises and their many facets, including cultural and religious. Nothing lasting in international relations can be built therefore without dialogue and respect for the other, without exigency and abiding by principles, especially for the democracies that must set the example. To ignore this is to run the risk of misunderstanding, radicalization and spiraling violence. This is even more true in the Middle East, an area of fractures and ancient conflicts where stability must be a major objective for us. To those who hope to eliminate the dangers of proliferation through armed intervention in Iraq, I wish to say that we regret that they are depriving themselves of a key tool for other crises of the same type. (de Villepin, 2003)

As evidenced in Minister de Villepin's interpretative view of current "world's complexity," the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 seem to have radically changed the ways of responding to global challenges, particularly from the perspective of the US administration. It is not that terrorism is a new phenomenon. From Robespierre's revolutionary *Régime de la terreur* through to Stalin's purges, to PLO, ETA, FLQ, IRA post-colonial/nationalist extremist organizations, to Bin Laden's al-Qaeda, the use of violence or threat to use violence in pursuit of, or in service of, political, religious or ideological aims has been part of domestic and international affairs for centuries. But it is fair to claim today that the Western world – and ultimately the whole planet – is now part of a distinctive historical period that has been characteristically dubbed the "age of terror" (Talbot and Chanda, 2001). "One of the most powerful lessons we should all take from the experience," Booth and Dunne (2002) recently noted, is that "September 11 should have taught us that we cannot assume, for the foreseeable future, that tomorrow will be like today. The global order is being recast, and the twists and turns will surprise us" (p. ix). The ongoing war on terrorism univocally led by the US, but supported various nations around the world, brings new and unexpected challenges in fields as diverse as military affairs, anti-terrorist policies, human rights, and formal education that cannot be overcome easily by naïve patriotic allegiance or preemptive military operations.

For history education scholars, the conflicting political narratives that students are exposed to in and outside the classroom, whether it is for swift military interventions in rogue states or the adoption of peace resolutions at the UN, raise particular interests – and concerns. Narratives, Wineburg, Mosborg, and Porat (2001) rightly contend, "envelop up everywhere." "To make historical sense," they go on, "we must navigate the shoals of the competing narratives that vie for our allegiance." More than ever, citizens are facing critical decisions that require a sophisticated examination of the stories presented to them – no matter how intense or self-evident they might be.

Indeed, narratives are powerful, some would say essential, "cultural tools" that give account of and coherence to people's understanding of human situations – past and present (Barton and Levstik, 2004, p. 146). Far from being a mere *façon de parler*, or something accidental to people's knowledge, Carr (1998) claims that the narrative is a structure inherent in human experiences and actions. Quoting Paul Ricoeur, Carr speaks of narrative as a *nécessité transculturelle* linking the activity of being engaged in telling a story and the temporality of experience. He argues that human actors are constantly striving to occupy the position of the story-teller with respect to their own lives; they have, in other words, agency. Moving this "first-person narrative" further, Carr claims that social units (e.g., community or nation) also experience real life in story-form, although different individuals usually play the roles of narrator, actors, and audience. The parallel between the two is obvious for him. Both entities are engaged in actions and experiences, telling themselves the story (or stories) of their actions and experiences. As he puts it:

We have an experience in common when we grasp a sequence of events as a temporal configuration such that its present phase derives its significance from its relation to a common past and future. To engage in a common action is likewise to constitute a succession of phases articulated as steps and stages, subprojects, means, and ends. (Carr, 1998, p. 147)

The question of whether narratives are “structures inherent in human experiences” or “*nécessité transculturelle*” has received serious attention in historical theory (Lorenz, 1998; Vann, 1998; White, 1987). But what is more at issue, in my view, is the necessity of problematizing narrative constructions, as well as understanding how and why the same historical events can lead to the manufacturing and manipulation of radically different political stories. “Narrative may well be an important feature of human understanding,” Barton and Levstik (2004) prudently observe, “but we should pause before rushing into an uncritical acceptance of its virtues” (p. 129). Given the (still) prominent and influential role of narratives in the history classroom, educators might benefit from a critical examination of what they entail, and how they can be problematized and ultimately employed to foster historical understanding of complex phenomenon such as terrorism.

What is a narrative?

The notion of *narrative* is often used indiscriminately in the English language for describing a “story” or an “account.”¹ The Oxford English Dictionary (<http://www.oed.com/>), for example, defines narrative as “an account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account.” This imprecise linguistic usage appears to be common in both everyday life and academic practice – and even in historical scholarship. Since dictionary definitions or, more broadly, etymology are of limited help here, it might be more appropriate to refer to what characterizes a narrative according to literature in history.

For Carr, the narrative is more than a chronicle that solely presents a chronological list of historical happenings (events). In virtue of its retrospective view, the narrative “picks out the most important events, traces the causal and motivational connections among them, and gives us an organized, coherent account” (Carr, 1986, p. 59). Because of its unique structure (with a beginning, subject, actors, events, setting, plot, and conclusion), the selected events placed in sequence acquire a coherent (and intelligible) unity that offers greater meaning and significance for the audience than the individual events themselves. It is precisely this complex mental process of selecting, interpreting, sequencing, and structuring historical events into a coherent account that makes this whole crafting enterprise contested. Not only can people (including historians themselves) select different events or sequence of events for explaining what happened, but their own historical judgements (and predilections) may lead to the creation of different and even competing accounts of human actions.

The process can get even more complex when such narratives are not only crafted by people using different events and evidence, but when they are purposely driven by particular moral and political motivations. Indeed, *political* narratives, as the ones expressed by Bush and de Villepin, hold a unique feature in that they are power-driver stories seeking to advance certain claims or policies in the name of the common good. They are, as such, people-building stories crafted by political authorities (or leaders) that offer members of a political community what Smith (2001) calls a sense of “trust and

¹ Ironically, the English concept of “narrative” comes from the 14th century Middle French word “narratif.” While the words *narratif* and *narration* still refer in French language to a narrative framework, story (*récit*) and history (*histoire*) have gradually replaced the original term in popular and academic usage.

worth” (p. 78). On the one hand, they promise that authorities will exercise their power in the name of the collective good (*trust* in authority), and, on the other hand, that they will successfully do so if community members consent or give their allegiance to that political vision (*worth* pursuing). “Leaders,” Smith (2001) observes, “seek both to prompt constituents to embrace membership in the community or people they depict, and to persuade them to accept as leaders the very sorts of persons who are advancing these people-building accounts.” “Thus their stories, however sincere,” he goes on, “will always be partly self-serving or partisan” (p. 76). One can clearly see the implications of political narratives in a multifaceted and emotionally disturbing period such as post-9/11 terrorism characterized by instability, insecurity, and fear of unconventional enemies and attacks.

Because political narratives are more than rhetoric and far from self-evident, it is thus important as community members to analyze them critically and understand their internal structure, the messages and moral judgements they convey, the evidence they use, as well as their influence on people’s decisions, actions, and consent. For this reason, it is now largely accepted in the history and education communities that historical understanding is far more authentic and enduring if history is presented from multiple perspectives as opposed to a grand unified narrative that appears to be obvious and uncontested. “As educators in a democracy,” Levstik (1997) argues, “we have a vested interest in a very different history – a pluralist or perspectival history in which students participate in meaningful discussion with ‘an ever growing chorus of voices’.” Such an approach to the past not only offers students diverse interpretations of human experiences but also (and perhaps above all) a sense of historical agency. Rather than simply accepting the dominant version as inherently “right” or “true,” multiple perspective accounts allow students to question, compare, assess, and ultimately develop their own evidence-based narrative frameworks (Mayer, 1998; Seixas, 1997; and VanSledright, 2002).

Yet, asking students to look at multiple perspectives of complex issues such as post-9/11 terrorism on the grounds that there is no single truth in politics and history (since narratives are contextualized “social constructs”) inevitably leads to the unworkable epistemological stance of postmodern relativism (Seixas, 2000). If all knowledge is relative and disputed, then, one particular version of human actions is as good as another. In the face of contradictory accounts of past and anticipated terrorist challenges, naïve students could intuitively reject any discomforting viewpoint on the ground of cultural relativism. Why would a US student, for example, accept a French version of “dialogue” and “determined action over time” in the case of the Iraqi regime if President Bush’s pre-emptive war proved to be more inspiring?

With such a critical situation, it becomes imperative to look at how students can reasonably adjudicate among the different post-9/11 political narratives that “vie for their allegiance.” As Shemilt (2000) contends, if there is “no single right answer to any of the really significant questions in history... not any answer will do” (p. 98). Indeed, historians will consent that some answers and accounts are clearly more defensible than others – while recognizing the limits and contingency of their narrative claims. But which ones? According to what criteria?

Since the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington DC, there has been no clear answer to these questions in history education. On the one hand, historians and history

educators have been relatively silent on the significance of post-9/11 terrorism. The great majority of publications on the topic have come from political studies and historiography with little reference to education (Booth and Dunne, 2002; Dershowitz, 2002; Hoffman, 1998; Keegan, 2004; Pillar, 2001; and Talbott and Chanda, 2001). On the other hand, those who have recently advocated a more analytical approach to terrorism in school have considered the matter from the broader cross-curricular stances of “critical pedagogy,” “medial literacy,” and “critical thinking” (Hahn, 2002; Hobbs, 2001; MEQ, 2003; Mehlinger, 2002; and Nelles, 2003a). While there is visible merit to these approaches, they do not, however, offer history educators and students any clear procedures, standards, and ultimately “tools” of the discipline to adjudicate between the divergent stories that have emerged since 9/11 and are deliberately exploited to advance certain political agendas.

In an attempt to make sense of fictional and non-fictional narrative constructions, Michael Stanford (1994) conveniently presents a comprehensive list of no less than 12 “essential elements of narrative” (p. 88). For practical purposes, I have reorganized some of these around to the following six features of narrative framework that I briefly review below: (1) subject-matter, (2) characters, (3) sequence of events, (4) evidence, (5) moral, and (6) perspective (or contextualization). These features do not, in themselves, tell whether one narrative is inherently “better” than another, as narratives (particularly *political* ones) always entails some normative elements, but they provide essential “tools” that can help turn passive and naïve students, and ultimately citizens, into more active and critical interpreters of political discourses.

Subject-matter: Every narrative has its own subject of focus and interest. Whether it is centred on a personage (e.g., “hero”) or a particular event (e.g., “exploit”), the narrative, by virtue of its internal unity, needs a subject to focus the action. This subject usually allows people to grasp in one term or concept (Walsh [1967] refers to it as “colligatory concept”) all the elements of the story, such as “9/11.” The subject, as Stanford (1994) puts it, becomes “greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 91) because it renders the whole story in question complete and intelligible. It is the subject that, in many ways, determines the characters and events to be included in the story line.

Characters: Once the narrative has a focus of interest, it becomes imperative to have participants in the actions in question. The “actors” are those necessary to make the story moves in the direction projected. Because it is hard to render the subject intelligible when too many participants are involved, selection is necessary. Yet, it is contentious to make that selective judgement as it is not always evident to decide who should be discarded and on what grounds. Besides, some actors are not always conveniently defined in history, or worse, are not individuals *per se* but rather groups, collectivities, or institutions. There is thus the danger, in selecting characters, of either omitting key personages necessary to the unity of the story, or making overgeneralizations based solely on certain members of a group.

Sequence of events: The narrative is not only structured around a specific subject, but based on a number of selected events grouped together in a certain coherent arrangement. Unlike a chronicle, this arrangement presents a specific and internal connection in the form of a sequence (or a “chain”). The sequence of events typically consists of causes and effects driving the story from one event to the next. The process of selecting and sequencing the events in a story-form is challenging and highly

contested. First, it requires the careful selection of a limited number of related “significant” events. Second, it implies that the sequence in question must be chronological, logically and causally defensible, and finally meaningful. And third, the process ought to lead to deeper understanding of the events. There must be a sense that understanding would be less if the events were not grouped in that particular sequence.

Evidence : Unlike fictional stories, historical and political narratives must be grounded in the available evidence to purport to be “plausible” and “true.” Evidence can broadly be divided into two distinct forms: evidence-as-relic (such as bones, weapons, diaries etc.) and evidence-as-accounts (such as reports, books, films, etc.). Both relics, emerging from the events in question, and written and oral accounts, derived from the relics or events, must be selected and evaluated carefully as they do not necessarily “speak by themselves” or reveal their original meaning. In some cases, problems occur because of a lack of relevant evidence; in other cases because there are simply too many relics or accounts to be consulted or considered. Selection, analysis, and interpretation of evidence are thus key to the crafting of narratives.

Moral: Every story has (implicitly or explicitly) a moral. People (including historians) not only connect events in a particular arrangement using selected evidence, but they do so by making moral judgements on the *meaning* of the events or sequence of events in their story. In fact, the narrative acquires its real importance in providing the audience a particular desirable message about right or wrong, progress or decline, freedom or oppression, justice or inequality, and so forth. The moral nature of the narrative is largely shaped by the initial subject and story line, the selection of characters and events, and the final event in particular. In fact, it is the ending of the story that usually defines its character and moral stance because it allows the audience to judge it by its results.

Perspective: Because the narrative has an internal unity of past, present, and potentially future times, it is important to contextualize the sequence of events so as to avoid the so-called anachronistic sin of “presentism.” Contextualization not only refers to chronology, but also to the particular historical time or period in which the events took place and are now narrated. It is thus important to be conscious of both actors’ and narrators’ respective “historicity” because it helps understand their contextually-situated historical and moral positionality. Such an achievement is only possible if the analysis of events, actors, and narrators is firmly grounded in the necessary or available evidence (that is, historically defensible according to evidence).

Post-9/11 terrorism and narrative analysis

Having defined these six complementary features of narrative framework, how do they encourage historical understanding of post-9/11 terrorism? How can educators use them in light of the previous US and French political examples?

Looking first at the *subject-matter* of US and France respective version of terrorism and the war in Iraq, it is noticeable that both President Bush and Minister de Villepin pay attention to post-9/11 terrorism. But they do so with somewhat different terms and focus. For President Bush, the subject of concern is clearly on global terrorism and WMD proliferation in the Middle East, while Minister de Villepin refers more generically to current international violence and security issues around the world, including Iraq. In

fact, President Bush employs in his speech at least five times the concepts of terror/terrorism/terrorist and WMD whereas Minister de Villepin uses crisis, violence, and danger instead. As I will demonstrate later on, this difference is consequential because it places terrorism, and more specifically the Iraq case, in the larger sphere of domestic and global violence and instability that characterize current international relations, as opposed to a narrower focus on US terrorist threat since 9/11.

This variant is also influential for the selection of *characters* and *events* of their respective story. President Bush makes explicit mention of a number of collective groups and regimes in his speech, such as “America,” “terrorists,” “outlaw groups and regimes,” “our enemies,” and “Saddam Hussein’s regime.” By consciously doing so, the US version provides a clear picture of the participants in the action, as well as a delineation of who seats on what sides (i.e., binary opposition). The initial focus on US post-9/11 terrorism and WMD proliferation helps make that narrative selection because it narrows the meaning of violence (to terrorism) and reduces significantly the number of potential actors in the story line.

In contrast, The French version, because of its larger generic focus on violence, presents a multiplicity of (often vague) players, even in the Middle East where Iraq is not even singled out. Minister de Villepin, for example, talks about “the world,” “the Middle East,” “the other,” “us,” and so forth without naming or identifying particular individuals or actors. By doing so, he purposely avoids categorizing groups, people, or regimes as President Bush openly affirms, but he does so at the expense of a clear unfolding of his political story. Because the US version has less confusing and more identifiable actors, it seems easier to follow and grasp than the French one.

The subject-matter of each respective version also influences their *sequence of events*. For President Bush, the sequence starts with “the attacks on America” and then incorporates other subsequent terrorist attacks and alleged developments. These include the building of “new bases for their war against civilization,” “Saddam Hussein’s pursuit of weapon of mass murder,” and “inspectors’ visits.” By grouping all these various (and even disconnected) happenings into a united story line, the US version suggests that they form a chain of causally related events which ultimately leads to a dangerous terrorist “risk we must not take.”

But as powerful as this simplified “causal emplotment” might be, it has not been established as of yet that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the terrorist cells and new bases that Bush talks about in his story were connected in any way to Saddam Hussein’s regime and pursuit of WMD (Cirincione *et al.*, 2004).

In fact, there is no “hard” *evidence* that Iraq did possessed or pursued a program of WMD in the months before the US invasion, or that Saddam Hussein’s regime was connected in any way to 9/11. What the Bush administration did was a clever selection and manipulation of “soft” and “inconclusive” evidence (such as confusing satellite photographs and dated intelligence reports still “classified”) that ultimately led the public to confuse reality with verisimilitude (see Blix, 2004; Milbank, 2002).

Because of the larger subject-matter of the French version of Minister de Villepin and the point in time it was officially presented (March 2003), the sequence of event is also significantly different from the US one. It does not start with 9/11 but with the imminent “weapons sound” in Iraq, and then brings in a number of general happenings such as

the “manifold crises” around the world, “ancient conflicts” in the Middle East, and finally potential “dangers of proliferation” and “other crises of the same type” in the future. Unlike the US sequence, the French one is far more diffuse and complex, with reference to past, present, and future times in a non-linear progression. The links of cause and effect and references to evidence are also very distinctive. Minister de Villepin suggests that the “armed intervention in Iraq” will not prevent terrorism and proliferation, but rather cause “other crises of the same type” and “exacerbate tension and fractures” on which terrorists feed. While he does not explicitly present “hard” or even “soft” *evidence* for his claims, it is still possible to find corroborating sources or examples for the arguments presented. In brief, once taken in its whole narrative arrangement, the French sequence offers a far more uncertain and potentially pessimistic future than the US one.

Indeed, the US and French versions of post-9/11 terrorism make very different *moral claims*. If both explicitly reject terrorism, President Bush, on the one hand, presents the arguable moral statement that, since 9/11, the US – and ultimately the whole world – will be safer and more stable if terrorist regimes, such as the one of Saddam Hussein, are toppled, by swift preemptive military operations. On the other hand, Minister de Villepin judges that the path to global peace and security lays in a “dialogue” and “determined action over time” through concerted multilateral measures and forums. The vocabulary they employ is also quite revealing of their (not-so-hidden) political agenda. President Bush, for example, talks about the loss of US “innocent lives,” the “terrible morning,” and “urgent duty of protecting other lives” against “outlaw groups and regimes” with “no law of morality.” All this binary rhetorical language creates a powerful *mise-en-scène* that helps promote the US moral claims.

Finally, the *perspectives* presented by US and French accounts are extremely interesting. Each version nicely portrays the particular positionality of their narrator. By situating President Bush’s statements in the larger socio-historical context of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War (e.g, Gulf War 1991, Kosovo 1999), and particularly following 9/11, the audience can better understand (but not necessarily accept) the context within which the narrative was crafted. “The new ‘Bush Doctrine’,” Nelles (2003b) rightly contends, “epitomizes US faith in hegemonic military force, and preemptive use of it, as its principal source of its own security” (p. 16).

The version of Minister de Villepin, in contrast, shows all the determination but also reserve that France, and more broadly the “old Europe,” has to fight global terrorism if it means giving a “blank check” to US military intervention. Reflecting on the relations between France and the US since 9/11, Gordon and Benedicte (2002) of the Brookings Institute recently observed that “French leaders foresee a campaign [against terror] that will primarily involve diplomacy, law enforcement, and international intelligence cooperation.” “Military response,” they insist, “should be limited as much as possible to precise terrorist targets, rather than countries or regimes more broadly.” Perhaps the best encapsulating statement of France’s position came from then French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin when he claimed that military strikes must be “proportional, strategically and militarily justified, and politically coherent” (in Gordon and Benedicte, 2002).

Discussion

Clearly, these two political narratives present very interesting and illuminating cases in point. Those who craft stories, and perhaps above all *political* stories, have the

enormous advantage and power to decide where their story starts and ends, who is included and excluded, how the events are arranged and how they unfold, and what is ultimately the moral of it. “The skilled storyteller,” Husbands (1996) sensibly argues, has “the power to shape reactions and to direct emotions towards one account rather than another...” (p. 48). Perhaps more importantly, the storyteller and storycrafter “can entrance the imagination, conjure a picture of the past which is vivid and immediate, give ‘life’ to the characters they describe, create excitement and interest (Husbands, 1996, p. 49).

But, at the same time as these people (consciously or not) define and organize their stories in ways that render their content and messages intelligible, in every step of this process they run the risk of oversimplifying a complex human reality, imposing a predetermined “logical sequence” or interpretation to a messy situation, or confusing emotion with thought, and fiction with reality. Their influence can, therefore, be extremely terrifying and dangerous, notably for the audience.

For this reason, the ability to deconstruct and compare narrative content, underlying messages, arrangement, evidence, and positionality can shift the power of the story from its original crafter to those who were meant to be the audience. By looking critically at President Bush’s political account of pre-emptive military intervention in “terrorist states,” for example, it is possible to understand that the initial powerful message he delivered suddenly becomes an imaginative *trompe l’œil* of archetypal binary opposition of “good” versus “evil,” that is very limited in its empirical content and use of causality. Moreover, by comparing it to the French story of global conflicts since 9/11, it is also possible to realize that human experiences are not only manifold and heterogeneous, but interpreted differently by different groups and with different sets of evidence and morality.

The goal here is not to suggest that the French version is inherently better than the US one – although one could legitimately make that case two years after the war. The point is rather to show that political narratives provide people with a “compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world” (Cronon, 1992, p. 1374). But, because of the contingency and usage of this historical tool, it simply cannot be taken for granted. Storytellers, political leaders in particular, clearly know about the power and structure of narrative. Yet they do not seem to have any obligation to evidence, accuracy, causality, or any other standards, concepts, and procedures of the history discipline. Standards and procedures, as Rogers (1984) observes, do not necessarily make historical knowledge less contested. But they surely allow for common disagreement and exchange, and ultimately trustworthiness. “The fact that historians disagree,” he notes, “is exactly what makes historical knowledge reputable by providing the most rigorous check upon its provenance and content” (p. 23).

The six features of narrative framework that I have introduced here are far from revolutionary. They have been part of the historians’ toolbox since the days of Leopold von Ranke. Yet, it is fair to claim that history teachers and students rarely get an opportunity to employ them in class. If we, as educators, simply resort to follow the well-traveled path of unreflective patriotic storytelling, we may well comfort our students and provide them with a (temporary) sense of security. But, in the long run, we run the risk of equipping them for the wrong battles and the wrong challenges coming ahead. “Unless and until people are able to locate present knowledge, questions, and concerns within

narrative frameworks that link past with present and past with present in ways that are valid and meaningful, coherent, and flexible,” Shemilt (2000) concludes, “the uses that are made of history will range from impoverished to pernicious” (p. 99). In this ongoing war on terror, formal education in general, and history education in particular, can play a decisive role in the victory. The first step in this direction is to give our “troops” the necessary tools to engage successfully in the battle against civic ignorance.

Contact details

Stéphane Lévesque,
Faculty of Education
John George Althouse Faculty of Education Building,
University of Western Ontario,
London, Ontario,
Canada , N6G 1G7
slevesqu@uwo.ca

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