

# Historical significance and sites of memory

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This article critiques a recent professional development course for history teachers that explored how students could use memorials and heritage sites to engage with the concept of significance and how this could contribute to them developing expertise in historical thinking. The course challenged teachers to consider historical significance in terms of disciplinary characteristics (as opposed to memory-history), to move away from the teacher transmission/storytelling model and to incorporate the key competencies in their teaching. The authors argue that the disciplinary frameworks discussed in this paper are important in developing historical thinking among young people, although there is more work required to develop an approach to engaging with historical significance that not only reflects the disciplinary features of the subject but also includes the bicultural dimension of 21st century New Zealand.

## Introduction

In March 2010 the Wellington Area History Teachers' Association, in conjunction with the Historic Places Trust and the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, ran a 1-day teacher professional development course on the concept of historical significance, with a particular focus on local memorials and heritage sites. The aim of the course was to explore how engaging students with the concept of significance could contribute to them developing expertise in historical thinking. This is a priority for the history teaching community given the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), which combines generic key competencies with (in the case of history) outcomes-based achievement objectives that emphasise the contested and interpretive features of the discipline. In this article, three of the organisers of this course critique this professional

development experience and, in particular, the model of historical significance that was used as a framework. We explore how memorials and heritage sites could be useful for developing students' understanding of the concept of significance with particular reference to the key competency *using language, symbols and texts*. We argue that if teachers are to use memorials and heritage sites to develop historical thinking with their students, they need to see these as places of active meaning making as opposed to sites of storytelling.

## Historical significance and historical thinking

Historical significance is a key concept for historians because they cannot study everything that happened

in the past, so they select particular “historical events, personages, dates or phenomena [that] are more important to their studies than others” (Lévesque, 2008, p. 41). Significance belongs to a series of second-order or procedural concepts that are distinct from content-oriented, first-order or substantive historical concepts, such as revolution, capitalism, nationalism or imperialism. The ability of students to use the concept of historical significance is important in them understanding how the discipline of history operates and developing the capacity to think historically. The concept of significance in history education has generated a substantial body of international research over the past 15 years (Counsell, 2004; Hunt, 2000; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 1997). In New Zealand, however, this concept has only recently emerged as a focus of concern in light of the shift away from a prescriptive history curriculum to a framework that allows teachers considerable autonomy in how their programmes are shaped, with the only proviso being that their courses are to be “of significance to New Zealanders” (Ministry of Education, 2007). The achievement objectives in *The New Zealand Curriculum* also require students to engage with the interpretive and contested features of the discipline of history to a much greater extent than was previously the case, and this shift in emphasis is likely to be reflected in the achievement standards which are currently being aligned with the curriculum.<sup>1</sup> For historians, what is historically significant is not fixed or linked to a particular set of events/ individuals but rather it reflects the ongoing concerns, problems and questions that contemporary historians put to the past. What is seen as significant in the past is likely to change over time and establishing a consensus over what is significant is a challenge as students, teachers and historians typically view the past through their own cultural, ethnic and social frameworks (Hunt, 2000; Seixas, 1997).

## The aim of the course

Throughout our careers, the authors of this paper have led history classes on field trips to museum exhibitions, memorials, historical sites and heritage buildings in both New Zealand and overseas. The inclusion of field trips within our programmes has helped with the marketing of history as an enjoyable “hands-on” subject for students. In many cases, these field trips have also provided the basis for student research into the events that took place at the historical site or sites visited. The decisions about which historical sites to visit have been made by the teachers. The students were typically put on buses (or planes) and delivered to the site, where the teacher related his or her version of the historical events that took place

there. Often students were asked to complete a worksheet based on the information provided by the teacher or from other information available at the site. This strategy helped students to remain focused on the historical aspects of the trip and to have a record of what they had learned when they returned to the classroom.

Such field trips are extremely popular and highly successful at developing students’ interest in the past. However, the introduction of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), with its focus on the key competencies, led us to reconsider the nature of our field work with students, especially in regards to historical significance. Could students co-construct field trips with their teachers by determining which sites were significant enough to visit? Could the students take on the teacher’s role as the commentator at the sites or develop handouts prior to the trip that would guide the other students at the site? Were there alternatives to a narrative or storytelling approach that would be more effective at developing students’ historical thinking?

The teacher professional development day on historical significance modelled a pedagogy that actively involved teachers. The day started with an introduction to Partington’s five criteria of historical significance (Lévesque, 2008; Partington, 1980): importance, profundity, quantity, durability, and relevance (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 PARTINGTON'S CRITERIA OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

<b>Importance:</b> To people living at the time
<b>Profundity:</b> How deeply people’s lives were affected by it
<b>Quantity:</b> How many lives were affected
<b>Durability:</b> For how long people’s lives were affected
<b>Relevance:</b> The extent to which the event has contributed to an increased understanding of present life

(Partington, 1980)

Each of these criteria was shaped around key questions. Working in groups, the teachers focused on memorials within walking distance of the venue, evaluating them on the basis of the criteria provided. For this activity we relied heavily on the teachers’ background knowledge of the event, person or place being memorialised and deliberately only provided the minimum extra information on the history of the heritage sites. Our intention was that the knowledge the group brought to the memorial, combined with a worksheet of open-ended questions relating to each of Partington’s criteria, would stimulate discussion and questioning about the historical significance of the past and its representation. At the conclusion of the day, each group gave a short presentation of their findings using pre-prepared

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PowerPoint slides containing photographs of the sites they had visited.

## Memorials as sites of memory

Memorials and heritage sites are easy to take for granted. We walk and drive past these historical and cultural markers every day, usually without reflecting on their inherently political nature. However, memorials are also symbolic accounts of the past constructed to regularly call a community's attention to the importance of the event, person or historical development represented. Collectively these sites of memory form a landscape of remembrance that highlights and acknowledges certain historical narratives and cultural values at the expense of others and is constructed with certain criteria of historical significance in mind. It is the selective nature of these decisions and the criteria they are based on that makes memorials and heritage sites value-laden and political, and therefore intellectually rich places to develop students' historical thinking about significance. For example, Rachel Buchanan (2010) questioned the decision to erect a statue of the nonviolent leader Mahatma Gandhi in Wellington on the 100th anniversary of the death of Te Whiti o Rongomai, of whom there is no such prominent memorial—a decision partly made due to judgements of historical significance. She pointed out that “this statue tells us there are still some histories that many in New Zealand would rather forget” (p. B5). At a different level of meaning, a memorial's design, and even geographic location, can work to position the viewer's interpretation of the past.

Students who can decode these implicit meanings and assumptions of historical significance inherent in a memorial (or for that matter in any account of the past) are in a good position to problematise representations of the past, rather than naively accept them. This kind of critical historical thinking is not stumbled upon. It is, as Sam Wineburg (2001) has put it, an “unnatural act” that requires students have plenty of practice in engaging with the disciplinary features of the subject. Lévesque differentiates between two types of criteria for determining significance: those attached to the

disciplinary practices of historians and those based on “memory-history”. Memory-history, he claims, is “an unscientific study of history, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, supply[ing] no formal evaluating principle or adequate example to the challenges of the new global (dis)order and the conflicting memories and collective claims about the past it has engendered” (2008, pp. 6–7). Memory-history is not linked with historical thinking but rather is typically characterised by a particular version of the past that reflects presentist concerns. For example, the view that a New Zealand sense of nationhood was shaped by the experiences at Gallipoli in 1915 has more to do with the ANZAC mythology than it does with the reality of what occurred, as historians are unable to find out with any certainty the thoughts and beliefs of the majority of participants at this time. So, while a history programme that is shaped by a memory-history approach might ask a question such as “How did the ANZAC's experiences at Gallipoli contribute to a sense of New Zealand nationhood?”, a teacher whose approach to the subject is grounded in historical thinking would ask a question such as “Why is Gallipoli seen as a significant event in New Zealand's past?”

In deciding what is significant, Lévesque (2008) endorses a set of criteria (Partington's) that reflect the concerns of historians in determining what is historically significant (Figure 1).

Christine Counsell (2004, p. 32) has provided a useful four-point framework that teachers can use to scaffold their teaching of historical significance from a disciplinary perspective. Under this framework, students can build their understanding of historical significance by:

- applying *given* sets of criteria for judging historical significance
- devising (and applying or testing) sets of criteria *of their own*
- discerning *implicit* criteria in others' judgements about historical significance
- using any of the above to challenge or support others' judgements about significance.

A potential activity for teachers is to give students a set of criteria—for example, the one used by teachers at the professional development workshop (Figure 1) and/or a quite different set, such as Counsell's five Rs (Figure 2). After a period of learning, students might use one of these models to decide which criteria could best be used to judge the historical significance, or otherwise, of an event, person or development. After this instruction students could work in groups and put forward tentative sets of their own criteria for discussion and future application to accounts of the past. As an exercise, students could apply

their criteria of historical significance to argue for the inclusion or exclusion of a certain event in a textbook.

FIGURE 2 COUNSELL'S CRITERIA OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

<b>Remarkable:</b> The event/development was remarked upon by people at the time and/or since.
<b>Remembered:</b> The event/development was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups.
<b>Resonant:</b> People like to make analogies with it; it is possible to connect with experiences, beliefs or situations across time and space.
<b>Resulting in change:</b> It had consequences for the future.
<b>Revealing:</b> It reveals some other aspect of the past.

(Counsell, 2004)

As well as being symbolic *accounts* of the past, memorials are also *traces* of the past which tell us far more about the community that created them than the event they represent. This could lead students to consider other historical thinking concepts, such as evidence, which treat the memorial as a source. Like any critical source analysis this would involve considering *attribution*, leading to questions about who was on the memorial committee and why, and what their *perspective* was.

The third and fourth points on Counsell's scale of progression are perhaps the most complex for students. They are more likely to be successfully achieved after practising the first two, and when students have enough background knowledge of the topic under study. Determining implicit criteria is perhaps even harder for students when applied to the abstract and symbolic nature of a memorial. However, due to the role some memorials play in society today and their tendency to fall into Lévesque's "memory-history" category, this only highlights the importance of students being taught how to problematise them.

There is some overlap in these sets of criteria, but taken together they provide a model of how students could establish their own set of criteria with the framework of historical thinking. One example would be an exercise using the Wellington Citizens' Memorial, commonly known as *the cenotaph* (Figure 3). Students could evaluate the significance of this heritage site through the lens of orienting questions such as, "What did the Wellington community of the 1920s intend this memorial to say?" and "What did they not intend it to say?" The first question allows students to evaluate the meaning of this memorial both in the past and the present, while the second question encourages them to note what aspects of the past are absent from this particular site and consider why this is the case. Figure 4 postulates some statements a class might come up with in this exercise.

FIGURE 3 THE WELLINGTON CITIZENS' MEMORIAL



FIGURE 4 POSSIBLE STUDENT ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CENOTAPH

What DID the Wellington community of the 1920s intend this memorial to say?		What did the Wellington community of the 1920s NOT intend this memorial to say?	
	Evidence		Evidence
That war tore their families apart and their community suffered.	Panel display showing children and mothers and their men armed and leaving.	That war is to be glorified.	The horse on top of the plinth is a Pegasus trampling on the spoils of war.
This memorial belongs to all Wellingtonians.	The memorial's official title is the Wellington Citizens' Memorial.	That this place belongs mainly to soldiers.	Other memorials, such as the Wairarapa Soldiers' Memorial, belong, in the grammatical sense, to soldiers.
World War One was an event that should never be forgotten.	The location and size of this memorial is significant—it is in a prominent position beside Parliament.	That war is brutal, bloody, violent and should be remembered this way with this memorial.	The memorial is not a realist interpretation of the carnage of war.
The men who fought were brave and acted honourably to fulfil their duty.	Text on memorial and the panoramas depicting men leaving to go to war on the side of the memorial.	That this is a place to remember people who refused to fight in World War One.	The memorial is a cenotaph or an empty tomb. As such it honours the soldiers who could not be buried in New Zealand.

## Historical significance and using language, symbols and texts

*The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) allows for a significant degree of teacher autonomy in shaping history courses. This is within the wider context of a curriculum framework that places a high premium on the key competencies. However, if these competencies are to function as more than the mastery of a simple set of generic skills, they need to “be explored from a disciplinary perspective by teachers” (Hipkins, 2010, p. 7). While the focus of the professional development course was on historical significance, this was in the context of encouraging history teachers to position their teaching within the key competencies. Jay Lemke, a sociocultural theorist who influenced the formation and intent of the key competency *using language, symbols and texts* has written that “students desperately need to know how to critically interpret combinations of words, pictures, maps, diagrams and specialised symbolic expressions” (Lemke, 2002, p. 42). In our information-rich society, which is no longer dominated by print-based forms, the ability of students to critically interpret the kinds of languages, symbols and texts Lemke refers to (as well as many more he does not mention) requires teachers to understand this key competency in a discipline-specific way (Hipkins, 2010).

The memorials and heritage sites teachers at our workshop visited can be considered as “texts” requiring certain language abilities to be critically interpreted. The concept of significance is particularly useful for this purpose, especially in light of the international upsurge of interest in heritage and the past that has taken place over the last few decades (Lowenthal, 1998; Seixas, 2004). Memorials and other popular cultural markers (such as films, commemoration days, historical re-enactments etc.) are rarely based on critical analysis of evidence and more comfortably fit with Lévesque’s description of memory-history. This is not to say that memorials and heritage sites are inherently suspect, but they do need to be interpreted critically if students are to make sound value judgements about their meaning and the role they play in sustaining certain historical narratives and cultural values.

## “Problematizing” historical significance

Partington and Counsell’s frameworks for engaging with historical significance reflect a disciplinary criteria that informs historical thinking. However, in a postcolonial society such as New Zealand these models may not be able to fully incorporate indigenous

frameworks of reference that recognise the place-based nature of cultural and geo-historical significance that are attached to particular landscapes (Kelly, 1999). For example, traditional Māori place names, many of which have been erased from common usage by the processes of colonisation, serve as important cultural markers or “memorials” of a tribe’s past. They function as mnemonics that assist in the telling of oral histories and traditions that help Māori live and orient themselves in the land they inhabit (Barton, 1998; Kelly, 1999). In addition, memorials that recognise Māori experiences of colonisation and challenge nationalist and celebratory interpretations of New Zealand’s history are rare. In this context, teachers wanting to explore the memorialisation of New Zealand’s colonial legacy may want to focus on the historiography of memorials and heritage sites and consider more place-based approaches to the past. For example, teachers could pose questions such as “What memories are memorialised in the material landscape? What memories are hidden? How is memory contested?” and develop with students investigations that “consider the kinds of memories that are not being reproduced in these places” (Creswell, 2004).

Rachel Buchanan highlights this aspect of memory making, historical significance and their entanglement in specific places when writing about memorials visited by teachers in our workshop. She also writes about the contested nature of war remembrance in New Zealand, making the observation that:

the absence of any reference to New Zealand’s first wars at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, or at the National War Memorial that looms up behind it, suggests that these wars are moving even further from the centre of national collective memory. The wars of foundation are certainly not forgotten; but they remain peripheral, problematic and contested, unable, somehow, to be integrated into popular, bicultural rituals of commemoration. (2009, p. 223)

Such observations highlight for teachers the complex layers of meaning at certain sites of memory, which need to be acknowledged with students.

## Conclusion

Directing our attention to the disciplinary features of history (and engaging with concepts such as significance) has the potential to help students become active and critical meaning makers of the “content” of the past and its application to the present. Memorials and heritage sites offer rich opportunities for teachers and students to engage with the disciplinary features of historical significance and to develop the intellectual tools to better understand how the past and the present are linked. The professional development workshop held in Wellington challenged

teachers to consider historical significance in terms of these disciplinary characteristics, as opposed to memory-history, and to move away from the teacher transmission/storytelling model to an approach that reflects disciplinary thinking. However, while we found the disciplinary frameworks discussed above have considerable merit in informing how young people learn to think historically, there is more work required to develop an approach to thinking about historical significance that not only reflects the disciplinary features of the subject but also the social and cultural dimension of postcolonial New Zealand with its strong indigenous footprint.

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## Note

- 1 In the curriculum, learning in senior history is shaped by six achievement objectives (two at each level) that place a high priority on the interpretive features of history. For example, at level 7 students are required to “understand how people’s interpretations of events that are of *significance to New Zealanders* [italics added] differ” and at level 8 to “understand that the causes, consequences and explanations of historical events that are of *significance to New Zealanders* [italics added] are complex and how and why they are contested” (Ministry of Education, 2007, foldout charts). For further elaboration on the achievement objectives, see Ministry of Education (2009).

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