

Interdisciplinarity in the Practice and Theory of Educational Histories: Reflections on the 13th Biennial Conference of the Canadian History of Education Association

E. Lisa Panayotidis and Paul Stortz

As long-time members of the Canadian History of Education Association / L'Association canadienne d'histoire de l'éducation (CHEA/ACHE) – Lisa gave her first CHEA paper at Lethbridge in 1992, Paul at the University of Western Ontario in 1988 – we were delighted, as Association President (Lisa) and Program and Organizing Committee Chair (Paul), to host a milestone event in the history of the Association, the 13th Biennial Conference, in Calgary, Alberta, in October 2004. After a long lineage of successful CHEA conferences, we looked forward to the challenge of shaping the conference into a receptive intellectual atmosphere for researchers in the history of education. As the planning for the conference infrastructure and charting of the sessions got under way, we quickly realized how this conference, like preceding ones, could be a welcoming place for international academic discourse on the history of education. We were subsequently gratified by all the delegates who enthusiastically contributed to the scholarly dialogue over the three days of the conference, marking it as a success in large part due to the delegates' interest, support, and alacritous participation.

During the long organizational march towards the conference dates, we were faced with a decision as to the conference theme, considering this was an event that heralded the patently important initiative started in Calgary in 1980. Having attended CHEA conferences in the past, we understood that the conferences were predicated on the belief that formal meetings and seminar and panel sessions, as well as informal social interactions among colleagues, were crucial to the exchange of intellectual ideas related to the history of education in Canada and elsewhere. What theme could be broad and flexible, yet specific, enough to encapsulate the current state of the field of study?

Not much time passed before we decided on the conference theme of interdisciplinarity. Coming from the next generation after the founders of the Association, we saw the community as a multifarious group of ambitious scholars working in a richly textured field of inquiry. Since the 1980s, the history of education has attracted the serious attention of social and intellectual historians, and by the new millennium the field had been taken up by myriad academic departments and faculties such as education, history, philosophy, political studies, sociology, women's

studies, Canadian studies, and higher education. As applied to issues and arguments in the history of education, the rich range of approaches and methodologies that are characteristic of studies in gender and race, ethnicity, aboriginal cultures, labour, class, childhood and family, universities and intellectualism, business, and state formation and politics, to name just a few, rendered a conference theme of disciplinary and intellectual interconnectedness perfectly appropriate. Our intent was to build upon individual and collective understandings of past and current states of a growing interdisciplinary knowledge base, and suggest a broad theme that would allow researchers the greatest flexibility to apply their particular interests and skills in an inclusive and welcoming intellectual environment.

The obvious potential of interdisciplinarity as a practical and theoretical approach to the study of the history of education in Canada was a testament to the penetration of current research agendas into the field. Once the theme was determined, and Mona Gleason, who studies interdisciplinary approaches to childhood, confirmed as keynote speaker, the sessions took little time to organize (a process we had mistakenly thought would be onerous). An impressive docket rapidly took shape of major scholars submitting papers on a wide variety of vastly interesting and important research. We looked for papers that challenged conventional approaches and perspectives on the history of education; that proposed to investigate myriad and creative new arguments and offer substantial intellectual fodder for discussion; and that would promote international comparisons and perspectives on the role of history of education in Canada. Ideally, we hoped that the research presented would stimulate vibrant critical debate on interdisciplinarity as an effective intellectual posture in understanding the development of education in Canada and elsewhere.

The quality of the final slate of papers was outstanding, often remarked on by participants and far exceeding the program committee's expectations. In total, we had 105 presenters, representing 26 Canadian and 22 international universities. International delegates came from Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Belgium, the United States, and Switzerland. The strong response from our international guests reflected the scholarly links that CHEA has forged over the years with sister History of Education organizations, particularly in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Worthy of note is that the president of the Australian and New Zealand association was a presenter at the conference. The multi-national presence of researchers in Calgary facilitated formal and informal discussions on the possibilities of international collaboration on individual and collective research programs and the undertaking of future conferences in Canada and abroad, for example with the International Standing Committee on the History of Education (ISCHE). This CHEA conference, as with those in the past, was efficacious in establishing new academic contacts with scholarly peers while maintaining familiar and productive academic relationships.

Following in the tradition of the conferences before Calgary, we were committed to involving students in universities and research institutes across Canada. In conjunction with the inquiry-based and learner-centered foci of Calgary's teacher education program and certain specializations in the graduate program in the faculty of education, we wanted to encourage students as active participants, including them in the intellectual debates that would allow them to exercise critical inquiry as nascent interdisciplinary researchers. Accordingly, we had a strong showing by student presenters. In total, twelve students gave papers at the conference: nine doctoral students, two master's students, and one undergraduate student from the University of Calgary who is interested in pursuing graduate study. Upon request, we provided full travel subsidization for all graduate students. In addition, seventeen University of Calgary Faculty of Education graduate students and eight Master of Teaching students (i.e. in our B.Ed. teacher preparation program) accepted our faculty-wide invitation to attend the presentations (in part or whole) for free. The program committee was impressed with the quality of the student submissions, their research designs, and their commitment to the field of study, all of which presages well for a future generation of educational historians.

Interestingly, the CHEA conference made quite an impact on the University of Calgary. Despite an overlapping Alberta Teachers' Association Social Studies Conference in Banff over the same weekend, several members of the Faculty of Education as well as faculty members from Social Sciences and Communication and Culture participated as presenters and panel chairs. Heads of academic departments eagerly attended. The conference had wider university implications as it preceded the province's and the Faculty of Education's 2005 Centennial celebrations of the founding of Alberta. This conference was the first scheduled major event in a series of planned university and community activities that consider the historical, contemporary, and future place of education in Alberta and more broadly in the western world, and how education as a fundamental institution in society has shaped communities' identities and cultures as part of a developing province.

Over the two years required to plan for the conference, the need rapidly arose for the establishment of a CHEA information headquarters and resource. Delegates often wrote to us asking for more information about CHEA, specifically asking for the Association's website. The Call for Papers brought us into contact with a host of international scholars and students who were interested in CHEA but were unable to find any information about the Association outside of old conference sites on the Internet. As we were arranging and filing the paperwork before the conference, and planning for an on-site photographer for the duration of the event, we also became aware of the need for an ongoing depository of hardcopy and electronic documents related to the Association since its conception twenty-four years ago (we [Lisa, Paul] are pursuing funding for an oral history project on CHEA, including applying for special

projects grants through the University of Calgary). As a result, two noteworthy motions were passed at the CHEA general meeting which will likely have substantial and positive long-term effects for the Association and the membership. One was for the creation of a CHEA home website, apart from biennial conference websites, which will detail the history and pertinent information on CHEA including helpful links, bibliographies, indices, contact lists, and membership forms; and second, for the establishment of an Association archive, housed at a yet-to-be-determined university archive in Canada.

Organizing the conference, determining its theme, and during the four days guiding the stages of or “patrolling” the event was a humbling yet richly rewarding and challenging experience. From a unique vantage-point, as the event unfolded and we understood the calibre of delegates, their erudite yet insouciant comportment, and their adept intellectual legerdemain in deconstructing socio-historical argument, we thought that this was possibly a harbinger of a golden age of historiography in education in Canada, surely just as members and organizers in the past had envisioned their own conferences, and those who will do so similarly in the future. Judging from our perhaps more objective but brief perspective as conference caretakers, the history of education in Canada is an intellectually and academically turnkey operation – the richness of the field and obvious criticality of the researchers within it will sustain the field with a revolving demographic of young scholars and experienced researchers alike in interdisciplinary discourse. We are heartened that this environment, led by the members and scholars, will ensure that the conferences will always be an integral part of our prestigious and expanding organization.