

# Navigating a defining moment: COVID-19 and curatorial thinking

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered a critical moment in education. Questions of equity, engagement, and interaction have been brought into sharper focus as students' homes became their classrooms. There is a demonstrated need for interdisciplinary thinking, enabling students to work with the resources they have at hand, and helping learners orient themselves in place and time. Defining Moments Canada/Moments Déterminant Canada, using the interdisciplinary framework of curatorial thinking, encourages students to make sense of information, more effectively create a meaningful story, and build a stronger sense of social responsibility and awareness. This framework is operationalized using the S.A.S.S. pedagogy—Selecting, Archiving, Sense-Making, and Sharing—through which students find their personal way into a research question and demonstrate their learning while considering narrative intent, evidence limitations, and their own role as a historical actor. This integrative, critical, and interdisciplinary focus is an approach to a (post)pandemic world that prioritizes creative student responsiveness to upcoming challenges.

**Key words:** curatorial thinking, interdisciplinary, pedagogy, critical inquiry

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## Introduction

Spring 2020's abrupt pivot to remote instruction forced new ways of approaching and delivering content, making every aspect of teaching and learning decisions more pronounced. Teachers examined what they were doing and how they were going to do it remotely, which often then forced thinking about why they were doing what they were doing. What does content delivery look like online? What do engagement and interaction look like online? How can we support students' navigation of new and contentious current events when much of their lives has gone digital? What do students have access to when their homes have become their classrooms? How might I, as a teacher, respond to the different, and perhaps unequal, ways students are able to access content or class?

Discussions with educators and historians during the spring of 2020 highlighted underlying themes that have emerged about teaching and learning because of COVID-19 (Cutrara 2020a). Historians, history teachers, archivists, and community organizers, among others, were interviewed for a video series on what history education may look like postpandemic, discussing how the pandemic helped them better see and discuss the inequitable structures that surround educational spaces. Those directly involved with teaching history saw the pandemic as a way to help students understand the historical record and themselves as historical actors: How do we teach about the strength of individual and collective actions? How can historical records and fragments from the past help us navigate these

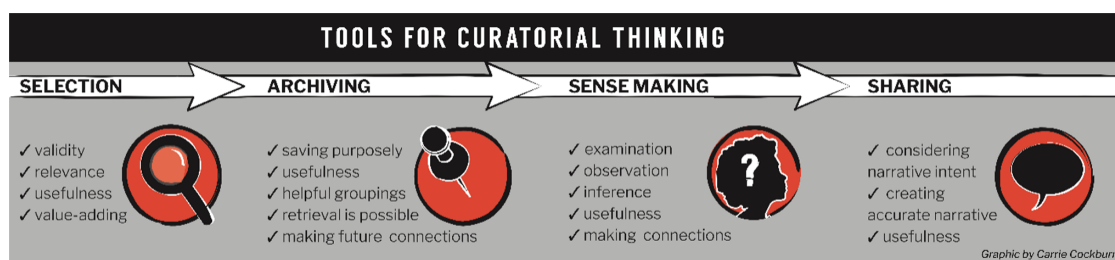
actions? A further theme emerging from these discussions involved the shift to online teaching and what this means for the content and skills that students learn. If the medium is the message, drawing on Marshall McLuhan (1964), how does remote instruction shift our conceptualization and delivery of curriculum? This question will continue to unravel and be explored as we move into (post)pandemic times.<sup>1</sup> These conversations demonstrated the importance of avoiding a transmissive model of education, wherein a teacher lectures to blank slates (or blank screens) without any context of their own. Further, these conversations continued to demonstrate the need for transactional or transformational approaches to education in which learners are in conversation with the educator and the material in interactive, integrative, and critical ways.

A common thread throughout this report is clear: we will not be returning to the prepandemic status quo. It is possible to harness the present moment and see it as the chance for revolutionary change. Preceding chapters engage with the concept of agility, in which students are able to move and problem solve with swiftness (Buffone 2021) and focus upon both the maintenance and building of relationships (Vaillancourt et al. 2021a), as student mental health (Vaillancourt et al. 2021b) and individual differences (Whitley et al. 2021) are championed both in the classroom and on the playground (McNamara 2021). These discussions have also emphasized the critical need for interdisciplinary thinking, enabling students to work with the resources they have at hand and to help learners orient themselves in place and time when thinking about their work.

Through curatorial thinking, Defining Moments Canada/Moments Déterminant Canada (DMC) already approaches learning in this way. Curatorial thinking is an interdisciplinary, student-led, explanatory framework, helping students think about the past to understand the present. This interdisciplinary framework, developed by Garfield Gini-Newman, Laura Gini-Newman, and Neil Orford and building upon their work in sustained critical inquiry, aims to help students make sense of information, more effectively create a meaningful story, and build a stronger sense of social responsibility and awareness (Gini-Newman and Gini-Newman 2008, 2016, 2020; Gini-Newman and Restoule 2019; DMC 2020a). Life during a global pandemic has emphasized how important it is to consider varied factors across disciplines when approaching problem solving, and curatorial thinking can create opportunities for teachers and students to engage in critical inquiry via multiple entry points. When using this approach, kindergarten to grade 12 (K–12) and postsecondary educators: (i) select which activities/topics are most likely to spark interest and creativity from students, (ii) encourage students to determine which entry points will allow for the best meaning-making, and (iii) help students review and acknowledge their own position in time and space. The framework encourages unsiloed thinking and empowers students to make choices in their learning. Curatorial thinking can be used to help students uncover embedded social realities and examine how we interpret them in the present. In history education, we help model for students how to be empowered as historical agents, though curatorial thinking can be harnessed in educational settings more broadly.

While curatorial thinking was developed through a combined exploration of best practices from museology, professional and public history, and K–12 history teaching, the framework has been easily integrated into K–12 history curriculum because of the national curricular emphasis on inquiry and historical skill development in Canadian history and social studies courses. Drawing on the Benchmarks of Historical Thinking (Seixas and Morton 2012), many Canadian history and social studies courses have been revised to emphasize students' active and interpretive learning with primary sources from the past. When taken at face value, elements of the Benchmarks may prevent certain non-Western explorations of the past (Cutrara 2010, 2018); however, these curricular elements have

<sup>1</sup>For more on the Pandemic Pedagogy video series see Cutrara (2020b) and Cutrara (2021).



**Fig. 1.** S.A.S.S. framework for curatorial thinking (Image copyright: Defining Moments Canada).

allowed for more transactional opportunities to teach and learn history, which DMC has found useful for operationalizing curatorial thinking.

Thus, aligning with K–12 curriculum, curatorial thinking is operationalized by DMC using the iterative S.A.S.S. framework (Fig. 1): Selecting, Archiving, Sense-Making, and Sharing (DMC 2020b; Mant 2020). While Selecting, students sift through the wealth of historical evidence available, asking themselves: what is relevant? What adds value to my research question or approach? What is valid or useful? Once the evidence is gathered students are challenged to Archive, to think about why certain pieces of evidence have been saved. They might challenge why certain gaps appear in the record, that is: whose stories are easy to access? And whose are difficult to find? At this stage students are encouraged to think of broad groupings that may aid in organizing their evidence. While Sense-Making, students dig into the analysis of their evidence, seeking to make connections and answer their research questions. Finally, while Sharing students construct and share narratives based upon their research to demonstrate their learning. They are encouraged to consider the intent of their narrative and to clarify the limitations of their evidence.

Prior to the paradigm shift caused by COVID-19, DMC had used curatorial thinking to consider the legacy of 1918 influenza. When teachers and students applied the curatorial thinking methodology to their lessons, they were able to explore how diseases shape history due to the biocultural interactions that take place within people's bodies and more broadly within their communities. This led them, and DMC, to explore the concept of "syndemics" in education. Syndemics, a term coined by medical anthropologist Merrill Singer (2009), is used to understand both how diseases interact synergistically within someone's body and how the effects of disease may be influenced and exacerbated by an individual's socioeconomic and sociocultural context. When we consider health through time, we draw upon both biological and cultural factors to understand health outcomes. Time and place therefore play equally important roles in thinking through questions of historical and contemporary health. Using curatorial thinking methodology in history learning, students can cross institutional disciplinary boundaries between health and humanities, draw connections about how public health crises happen and are responded to, and thus develop and explore research questions from multiple angles.

The learning from the 1918 influenza defining moment not only helped many make sense of COVID-19 when it started, it actively shaped the importance of using syndemics and curatorial thinking to help teachers and students contextualize public health crises. Collaborative projects such as "Finding Hazel", a partnership between a grade 5/6 class at Dundas Central Elementary School, the Dundas Museum and Archives, and McMaster Child and Youth University, investigated biological and sociocultural effects of the 1918 influenza (Laux 2019). Focusing upon the life and death of 15-year-old Hazel Layden, who attended Dundas Central before dying during the 1918 pandemic, students learned about the biology and epidemiology of the flu, while tracking down artifacts from Hazel's life, finding her name in the school register, and visiting her grave.

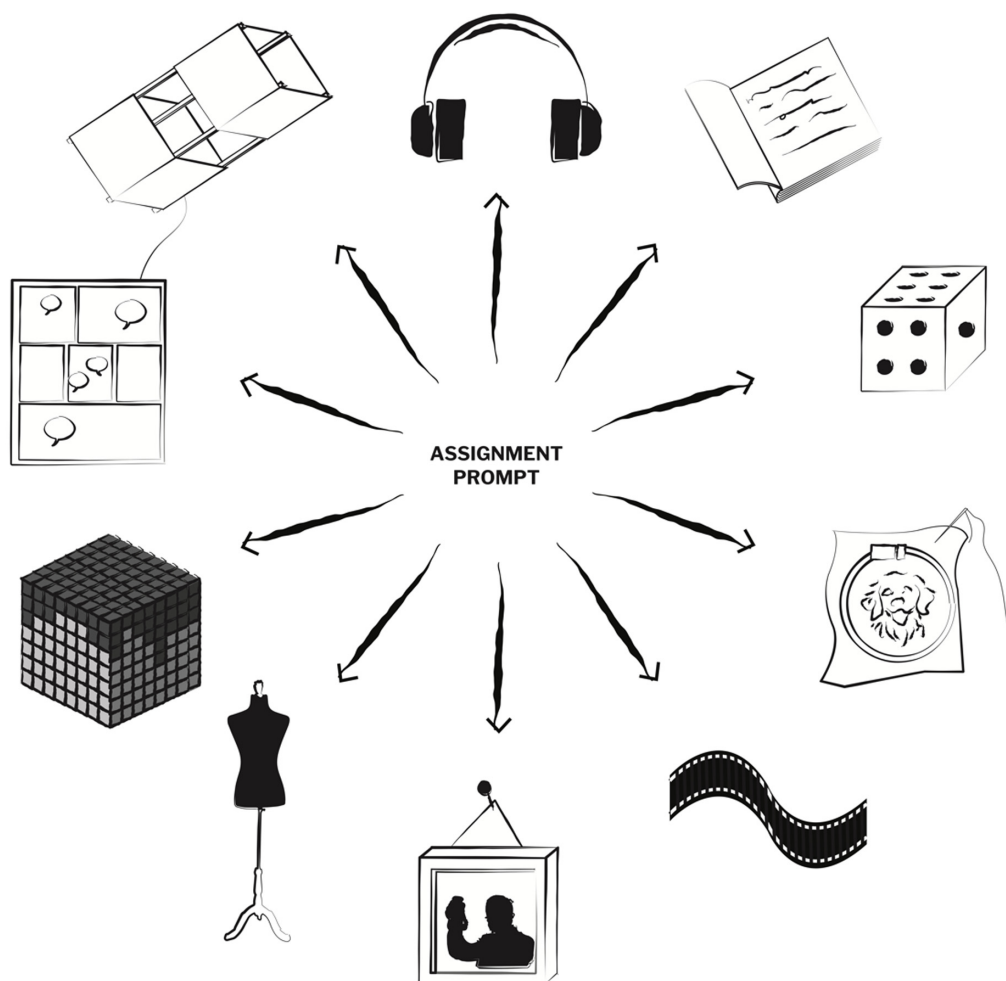
Another curatorial thinking project arising from this partnership, “The Fatal Five”, investigated the top five causes of death for children in the Dundas community during the late 19th century (Bell 2020). Students at Dundas Central identified the “fatal five” (diarrhea, consumption, bronchitis, scarlet fever, and whooping cough) by touring the local cemetery and consulting death records curated at the Dundas Museum and Archives. Determining that children’s respiratory systems were most affected by these five conditions influenced the focus of the Science program’s human organ systems learning unit. Reaching out to McMaster University yielded opportunities to dissect lungs alongside a biomedical scientist and better understand paths of disease communication through McMaster Children and Youth University workshops. This project demonstrates the iterative nature of curatorial thinking using the S.A.S.S. framework: students selected which diseases to study based upon the available evidence, grouped the data to understand which bodily systems were most affected, then worked on sense-making and sharing projects guided by their choices. Other successful projects have included digital storytelling focused upon varied stakeholders (e.g., health care workers, volunteers, and politicians) and their perspectives on the 1918 influenza experience in Toronto, Ontario (Whitfield 2019). These projects revealed how students could focus upon their own interests and skills as ways to approach defining historical moments. Students identified themselves as curators as they took ownership of the projects. DMC extended this synergistic work to the scheduled centennial defining moment on the discovery of insulin, which required a reimagination from a series of in-person workshops and commemorative events into entirely digital output.

With the current work on insulin, DMC has challenged students to use curatorial thinking in speculative projects. Through free lesson plans available on the DMC website, our organization advocates for the “unessay”, a term coined by O’Donnell (2012), which asks students to think outside the boundaries imposed by the traditional academic paper and develop their own way in to developing a research question (Fig. 2). The unessay was employed in an undergraduate course on the anthropology of health taught by Dr. Madeleine Mant, Chair of DMC’s Academic Advisory Board and co-author of this paper, at the University of Toronto Mississauga (Mant 2021). Students were asked to consider the history of insulin, the individuals involved, and the history of diabetes prior to and after the discovery by selecting three individuals/events/objects that they determined best illustrated/celebrated/explained the discovery of insulin. Through scouring the primary and secondary resources online, students selected the evidence they felt best represented entry points for their consideration of this revolutionary event. Through the archiving step, learners considered what was available to them (what has survived, what has been written, and what was available to them digitally) and why. Creative and sensitive sense-making resulted in a range of fantastic output, including comic strips, stop-motion animations, live-action skits, paintings, poetry, rap songs, embroidery, children’s educational toys, infographics, and a horror story. Finally, the work was shared with an accompanying reflective write-up, explaining the chosen medium. This type of lightning-in-a-bottle brand of creative expression, using the tools available to the students at home, is possible in future blended/in-person learning. Thinking across media and across disciplinary boundaries helps lessen the educational distance imposed by the digital divide.

To move forward in a (post)pandemic world, education must be (re)configured in ways that ensure the learner is able to actively construct meaning. Thankfully, much of the history and social studies curriculum in Canada invites this active construction of meaning aligning with the North American trend of skills-based history education found in the C3 framework or the Historical Thinking Benchmarks. However, as *Historica Canada* (2021) Canadian history report card has shown, these curricula do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to integrate personal and community histories into their understanding of the Canadian past. Moving into a (post)pandemic world, students’ homes and contexts must be taken into consideration so that students are actively invited to understand these perspectives in both time and place.

## THE UNESSAY

This concept asks students to use their own framework or focus to approach a topic, to toss out the rules of essay writing, and to approach the prompt in a medium of their choosing. Speculative projects like the unessay harness students' creativity, encouraging students to find their personal way in to an assignment.



Source: Daniel O'Donnell  
Graphic by Carrie Cockburn

**Fig. 2.** The unessay concept yields projects based upon students' creative choices (Image copyright: Defining Moments Canada).

A key component of this work is ensuring that students are not siloed in their thinking or limited by disciplinary boundaries. Students can readily understand impacts and effects across bodies, lives, and experiences, which is why teaching with the concept of syndemics has been such a valuable tool for DMC's work over the last three years. DMC, with an emphasis on intersections and curatorial thinking, has been able to eschew "pedagogical compartmentalization" (Hackett et al. 2020) and develop more integrated ways of thinking about the world: past, present, and future. This integrative, critical, and interdisciplinary focus is an approach to a (post)pandemic world that prioritizes a creative student responsiveness to upcoming challenges. DMC believes that curatorial thinking meets the

challenges that educators will have to grapple with in the coming years and looks forward to further collaborative opportunities to expand this vision.

## Author contributions

MM and SC conceived and designed the study. MM and SC performed the experiments/collected the data. MM and SC analyzed and interpreted the data. MM and SC contributed resources. MM and SC drafted or revised the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no known conflicts of interest.

## Data availability statement

All relevant data are within the paper.

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