Nationalism in Canadian Educational Publications: A review of current policies and recommendations for amendments

Elias Hiebert

Abstract
This paper looks at the level of nationalism in Canadian educational publications, and reviews the policies that either encourage or discourage the existence of such nationalism in educational texts. This is a work of academic experimentation: a series of journal entries, based on my own experiences of working in the business of educational publishing, punctuates the essay in an attempt to provide an in-depth look into the decisions and challenges faced by editors and writers in the field.

Keywords: Educational Publishing, Nationalism, Policy, Government

Introduction
As one of the few branches of the Canadian publishing industry that is reliably profitable year after year, educational publishing has found itself at the centre of many debates. These debates include issues of Canadian content, ownership, authorship, and whether Canadian educational publications should or should not be used as instruments for establishing and fostering Canadian culture and identity. While some of the issues that will be dealt with in this paper seem to strike nationalistic nerves, I will argue generally for a reduction in overt nationalism, leaning instead towards a policy that requires a minimum amount of Canadian content in educational publications—content that is geared towards assisting students in understanding their Canadian identities, rather than forcing
one upon them. When it comes to the economic realities of the Canadian publishing industry, we must practise nationalistic realism, as opposed to idealistic nationalism. Essentially what this means is that the policies that regulate the industry, in the interest of protecting Canadian culture and establishing a strong sense of national identity, must focus on content rules and regulation, rather than on rules relating to ownership and authorship. It goes without saying that, in the interest of teaching our children what it means to be Canadian, we must ensure that we do not hamper their ability to decide this for themselves; educational publications should never be accused of propagating nationalistic sentiment into the fragile, unguarded minds of youths. Rather, these publications should provide students with the knowledge they need in order to establish their own understanding of what it means to be Canadian, and encourage them to do so.

This paper will begin by defining the term ‘nationalism’ in an educational sense, and will then proceed to ask if the public school classroom, and the textbooks that are used therein, are an appropriate place to practice nationalistic teaching methods. I will then offer a review of the current state of nationalism in educational publishing policy in British Columbia, and assess the level of importance our government has attributed to the fostering of Canadian identity in educational publications. This section will ask questions such as “What has the government done to ensure an appropriate level of Canadian content in the educational materials used in the British Columbian public education system?,” and “should the focus of educational publications be the education at hand, or the establishment of Canadianess?” I will conclude the paper by asserting that nationalism and the promotion of Canadian culture and identity in educational publications is in fact an important feature of our educational system, and by providing the British Columbia ministry of education with recommendations for the development of future curricula and educational publishing policy. In short, this paper analyzes the economic and social arguments both in favour of and against Canadian nationalism in educational publishing in British Columbia.

In the spirit of experimentation, I will include throughout this paper short journal entries that document my experiences, challenges, and questions relating to my work as an editor/writer for a micro educational publishing company based here in British Columbia. These journal entries are appropriate because they
represent the struggles and decisions faced by those who work in the industry of educational publishing. In this way, this paper will offer a look at the policies and practises of the educational publishing industry from both without and within, and will work to form a more complete picture of the topics at hand.

**Nationalism defined in an educational context**

Before we begin, I believe it is important to discuss the meaning of the term ‘Nationalism’ in an educational context. First, I’d like to point out that this term, when used in an Anglo-Canadian context, means something completely different than when it is used in a Franco-Canadian one. In Quebec, any talk of infusing educational publications with “nationalist sentiment” immediately sounds like propagating French separatist rhetoric into the minds of youths, and is therefore seen as a highly controversial matter. Therefore, if this paper were written about Quebec’s educational publishing policies, I would instead use the phrase “Canadian nationalism.” Because this paper focuses exclusively on British Columbia, I will simply use the term “nationalism.”

Although various dictionaries define the term somewhere along the lines of “extreme patriotic feelings, especially those that are rooted in the belief that one’s nation is superior to all others,” I must emphasize that I do not consider this a viable definition in the educational context. Instead, when I talk of nationalism in the classroom, or in educational publications, what I mean is simply a promotion of the Canadian experience, of Canadian events, figures, and perspectives. I consider a Canadian textbook to be nationalistic if it is concerned with spreading information about Canadian themes, and if it provides students with the information they need in order to establish their own Canadian identities.

Now that we have a shared understanding of the term ‘nationalism,’ it should be easy to judge its importance in Canadian educational publications.

**Is the classroom an appropriate place to promote Canadian nationalism?**

Whether or not the public school classroom or state-sanctioned educational publications to be used in classrooms should include elements of nationalism is an
increasingly debated question. On the one side, students in Canada should be afforded the opportunity to be educated in material that was produced with their Canadian educations in mind, and not by some book that was written for an American school system but just so happens to be usable in a Canadian one. On the other hand, there exist some very real risks associated with purposefully including nationalistic elements in educational materials. Immediately ethical concerns come to mind. For example, a Canadian author who is writing a history textbook, and is perhaps sympathetic to the Canadian national identity, might find him or herself writing with a subconscious desire to magnify Canadian accomplishments, and minimize dark aspects of Canadian history. Although this author certainly has the best of intentions, he or she can easily be found guilty of catering their writing to a strong, positive image of the Canadian national identity. After all, this author belongs to this national identity, and of course has the desire to feel good about it.

I saw a scene on Last Week Tonight with John Oliver that showed Americans who have ancestors that fought under the confederate flag during the Civil War talk about their history, and many of them talked about their family histories in ways that blatantly misrepresented the truth, simply because it was painful for them to admit that their familial identities were not as honourable as they seemed. [HBO, 2017.] And yet they did not feel like they were lying. Simply put, their identities, and the emotions that they felt towards them, impacted their understandings of history. My point here is that, when a proud Canadian has to write about issues like residential schools, the Komagata Maru incident, the St. Louis incident, or the Somalia Commission of Inquiry, they can often downplay the extent of the atrocities, or rationalize the inhumane actions of past Canadians and/or governments, only because it is damaging to the Canadian identity not to do so.

Journal 1: October 5, 2017
Today I faced an interesting decision. I am currently working on a History 12 textbook, editing the existing material, and updating it with modern history, and as per curriculum changes. I had to come up with a title page for a chapter on the latter half of the Cold War. I made one a
while ago, but the boss didn’t like it. So I decided on a picture of some San Franciscan anti-Vietnam War hippies marching through the streets with a banner that reads, “Resist the Draft! Don’t Register!” But then I thought to myself, this is too American. My boss and I have been discussing including more Canadian content into the book, but it’s about twentieth century world history, an event that Canada was hardly invited to. So I don’t want to overplay Canada’s involvement in the Cold War, but I don’t want to Americanize students’ understanding of World History either. So here’s what I did: I added a caption to the picture that reads

“The truth was that as soon as I crossed that border it was a huge load off my chest and a huge sense of freedom. Thank God I was finally free from the oppression that had been following me for quite some time. We called ourselves “draft dodgers” in Canada. Up here it wasn’t a pejorative [like in the United States]. It was a badge of honour.”

-An anonymous American who fled to Canada to escape conscription to the Vietnam War.

So there, I feel like I’ve added a Canadian touch to history, in a way that doesn’t misrepresent the events. Although I do feel guilty of America-bashing. And then I realized that, often when I try to illustrate something that is Canadian, I do this by explaining how it isn’t American. I often seem to define the Canadian identity in terms of what its not – American – rather than what it is: pacifist, inclusive, etc….

The Current State of Nationalism in British Columbian educational publishing

The British Columbia ministry of education, although often criticized by educational publishers, for the most part does a satisfactory job when it comes to
including elements of nationalism in their curricula. As an example, I will analyse the curriculum for the course Social Studies 10.

The newest social studies 10 course curriculum is called “Canada and the World: 1919 to the Present.” By nature, this course will obviously feature substantial Canadian content, perspectives, and themes. Browsing through this document, one of the first things that come to attention is the prominence of Indigenous themes. In the past, the ministry of education has been criticized for excluding Indigenous voices, experiences, and perspectives from their curricula. Today they are attempting to compensate for that by including Indigenous topics in every aspect of education. While this should certainly be appreciated by Canadian society at large, it is a move that is often viewed unfavourably by a number of teachers and publishers. For example, in the grade 10 science curriculum you can find littered throughout the document Indigenous-related content that seems rather artificial: students are expected to learn about energy, and First Peoples perspectives on energy; plants, and how plants are used by First Peoples in your local area (BC ministry of education). Additionally, in the Math 10 curriculum it says: “students are expected to… [and then it lists 13 things, one of which is] … engage in problem-solving experiences that are connected to place, story, cultural practices, and perspectives relevant to local First Peoples communities, the local community, and other cultures.” Looking at this from an undergraduate, arts-major perspective, some of us might think, yes, this is good stuff. However, this new curriculum has teachers across the province scratching their heads and thinking, what the hell does identity have to do with math? Or, why can’t I just teach science from a scientist’s perspective? It is an unfortunate reality today that many teachers have come to describe the new curricula proposals as “shoving all this Indigenous crap down our throats.” From the perspective of someone sympathetic to the struggles and histories of Indigenous peoples, I can understand that the ministry has the best intentions in mind. On the other hand, however, from the perspective of a white guy who works in a white-dominated industry, I can also see how this push to include more indigenous content causes headaches. For instance, during the month of October 2017, my employer and I spent about three weeks researching ways to incorporate “Indigenous perspectives” into our book. Additionally, what drives many publishers to the brink of
exhaustion is the common practise of hyper-correctness when using Indigenous terminology.

**Journal Entry 2. Oct 17, 2017.**
Recently my boss told me the interesting story of how one of our social studies textbooks was removed from the ministry’s list of approved textbooks. The first edition of the textbook discussed the Indian Act of 1876 in detail. Because the term “Indian” is considered offensive, especially when it is used in children’s educational material, the term always appeared with quotes around it, to imply that this is a word that was used, but is no longer used. Any way, in one paragraph there happened to be one usage of the term without quotes around it, and so someone at McGraw Hill, who happened to identify as Indigenous, found this out and complained to the ministry, claiming that the author was “a racist.” The ministry then scheduled a “hearing” where they would evaluate the textbook’s eligibility for the list of approved books. However, because the author was ill at the time, he was unable to make the hearing, and so the book was removed from the list without further questions. However, they then realized that being on that list was not mandatory for selling textbooks for use in BC’s classrooms, and so they have continued to publish, albeit with slightly lower sales. This is how McGraw Hill (who previously attempted to buy-out the company that I work for) used a bogus “Canadian identity” claim to bully a smaller publishing company to the fringes of the market. Moral of the story: hypercorrection around Indigenous terminology is serious business, but not for the reasons we might think.

**Recommendations for the future of educational nationalism**
While it is my belief that nationalism should to some extent exist in Canadian publications, it is important that it is used in moderation. My first recommendation for how to incorporate nationalism into Canadian textbooks is to not go the Indigo route. Indigo-Chapters sees Canadian nationalism as a financial cow that can be
milked when the opportunity exists, and slaughtered when it does not. On Canada Day, walk into any Indigo bookstore and witness for yourself the plethora of Canadian knick-knacks, books, stuffed animals, journals, pens, and even maple-leaf decorated ear buds on front display. In many of their stores, written on the wall in font size nine-thousand are the words “The world needs more Canada.” Clearly, they take every opportunity to package and sell a Canadian identity when there is profit to be had. However, Indigo will quickly abandon their Canadian nationalist stance when it senses heftier profits to be had from the sale of Americanisms. Look at their new American Girl dolls that have invaded their stores across the country. They could have used the brand of dolls called Canadian Girl, found at maplelea.com, which look exactly the same, except for the fact that one is an Inuit girl from Iqaluit, one is French, and one is a hippie who lives on Salt Spring Island. Indigo dropped the Canadian identity into the dustbin in exchange for the higher profits of an American brand, and therefore serves as an example of what the educational publishing industry should not do. Essentially, what I’m saying is that educational publishing companies should not be forced to make the kinds of decisions that Indigo made, the choice between higher profits and honouring the Canadian identity. It is for this reason that I recommend allowing small and medium sized educational publishing companies in Canada to apply for Canadian cultural subsidies. These subsidies would prevent Canadian publishing houses from being tempted into using often cheaper and more readily available American content, and would support their bottom line as they struggle to defend our national identity.

**Conclusion**

While the current level of nationalism that exists in BC’s educational publications is satisfactory at best, a lot of work needs to be done to make policies understandable to educators. Additionally, the extent to which Canadian nationalism is used interchangeably with Indigenous nationalism in BC is, paradoxically, a great step forward and a bit misleading, and could benefit from further elaboration.
Works Cited

BC Ministry of Education, new and draft curricula.  
https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/10-12

Oliver, John. HBO. season 4, episode 26. Bootlegged edition available  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKLuzwPOdnE (0:00-5:00).

© Elias Hiebert, 2017

Available from: http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/pub371/issue/view/1