



## Thomas Widd: Unit and Lessons Plans

### Note to Teachers

Thank you for your interest in the Lost Stories website. The lesson plans provided here are aimed at middle school and early secondary school students (grades 7-10). However, both younger and older students may find these materials to be useful if they are provided sufficient scaffolding and/or extension material. These lessons are meant to accomplish several interrelated goals. First, and foremost, these lessons build on the website's overarching theme of recovering lost stories from the past to encourage students to think historically. As they explore these lessons students will reflect on why this story might have been lost and how it was found. In so doing, they will experience key elements of *doing* history, which include finding and selecting evidence to build a portrait of 'what happened,' and creating a contextual narrative – a story – that illustrates why it mattered. At the same time that the lessons are nurturing historical thinking, they also provide students with a great deal of insight into the ed comprise a coherent unit of study, and build upon one another in a logical fashion, it is possible to use them in a stand-alone fashion. As such, teachers are **strongly** encouraged to adapt them to the needs of their classes.

It is also important to note that the vast majority of the primary documents used in these lessons were written by members of the hearing community. Efforts were made to uncover more documents written by deaf individuals that addressed the areas upon which these lessons focus. While such documents may exist, we were not able to find them in regard to these particular issues. We welcome suggestions for pertinent documents that might be added to our collection. The lack of such records is, unfortunately, reflective of what happens to groups that have been marginalized, whose records are not well preserved. It is suggested that teachers draw their students' attention to the lack of deaf voices in the primary document collection.

### Terminology

The Deaf and hard of hearing community is very diverse and how people identify themselves is very personal and often varies between individuals. Historically, however, Deaf individuals have often capitalized the word 'Deaf' in order to signify their existence as a cultural group. These unit plans follow this tradition with the term 'deaf' being used to refer to the physiological condition of non-hearing and the word 'Deaf' used to refer to those who identify as part of a Deaf culture. The lesson plans also make many references to the Deaf community or communities. These slightly broader terms would include Deaf individuals as well as hearing allies.

It is also important to note that many of the primary documents used in these lessons make use of anachronistic terms such as "the deaf and dumb," "feeble minded," and "retarded". While such terms were widely used in the past teachers must explain to students that they are no longer acceptable.

### Unit Overview

These educational materials provide teachers and students with some strategies and supplementary materials to explore in more depth – to get under the surface of - the story of Thomas Widd, a deaf man whose advocacy for the education of deaf, protestant children led to the creation of the Mackay Institute for the Deaf in Montreal. The three lessons that make up this unit can be used as 'stand-alone' lessons, but taken together they provide a kind of 'how to' guide for recovering lost stories from a variety of communities, including local school communities.

## Lesson One:

In this two-part lesson, students develop criteria for distinguishing history from the past, and apply these to the resurrection of the Thomas Widd Lost Story. Before students can begin to engage with the “Lost Stories” project in a meaningful way they need to possess some understanding of “history” as a discipline. Specifically, they need to recognize that histories are narratives constructed from the selection and interpretation of meaningful evidence left over from the past, and about an issue, event or topic that people are interested in.

**Part 1** begins with a set of simple exercises to encourage students to think more deeply about what “history” is.

**Part 2** moves students from the general discussion of history and its highly selective nature, to apply their understanding to the specific case of Thomas Widd and how his story was Lost and then found. In so doing, students will develop their ability to work with primary documents, while also developing a deeper understanding of deaf education and its impact on deaf communities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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## Lesson 1, Part 1 (70 minutes) History vs. the Past

In this lesson, students work in small groups or pairs to examine and interpret artifacts. Having begun to think about the interpretive nature of history, students are asked more directly to articulate specific differences between history and the past. In the ensuing Socratic dialogue between teacher and students, four key differences will be clarified, and re-defined as four criteria not only for thinking historically, but for *making history* – and therefore of recovering lost stories from the past.

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### Activity 1: Teacher in a Box

This activity draws particular attention to the fact that historians usually interpret evidence that was created for other purposes.

For this activity, the teacher collects a wide range of

personally significant items from their home. Each item should have the potential to tell your students something about you. However, some of the items should be potentially misleading. For example, one teacher who has used this activity brings in a number of vegetarian cookbooks. This usually leads students to conclude, incorrectly, that the teacher is vegetarian. It is also a good idea to have more than one item for some areas of your life, thereby indicating that this is an area of greater importance, for instance bringing in several artifacts related to children or some particular activity.

Begin the activity by breaking students into small groups. Explain to them that they are taking on the role of historians in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. Because schools have all been entirely abolished by this time- replaced by individual, home-based, customized, computer-generated educational modules- historians have become very interested in the lives of teachers in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. All of the evidence that has survived about you, the teacher, is contained in the box you have brought in for them. Working in their groups students are to examine the items. Based on their observations of the evidence they will generate conclusions about you and record them using the following headings: “evidence” and “inference”. After examining all of the evidence they should write a short reflective paragraph summarizing their “conclusions.”

When debriefing this activity be sure to ask the students if there are any other types of evidence, missing from the box, they wish they had access to in order to verify conclusions or to learn more about you.

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### Activity 2: History versus the Past

A simple, yet highly effective, way to introduce students to the idea of “history” as a discipline is to discuss the difference between “the past” and “history”. Create a “T Chart” like the one below:

The Past	History

Place students into groups of two or three and ask each group to identify two differences between these two terms. Debrief this as a whole class, writing stu-

dents' answers on the board. During this discussion, the teacher should push students to recognize that "the past" is literally everything that happened before this exact moment in time, and history is the selection from it, based on certain criteria as identified below. Students can then be asked: "how is history different from the past?" During this discussion, the teacher should provide students with the following criteria for "making history:"

1. People need **evidence** -- traces and accounts -- left over from the past before they can begin to research and understand any aspect of history. These traces or accounts are called Primary Sources. Like evolutionary biologists and geologists, historical thinking depends on the existence of primary sources that have remained from the past into the present. In other words, if a tree falls in the forest and leaves no trace, it is part of the past, but will not be part of history. Think about your own life: out of everything that you experienced yesterday, how much of it left traces and accounts?

2. Traces and accounts not only have to be created, this evidence **needs to be preserved** through time before it can become part of history. Think again about your own life: of that evidence about your life yesterday that was created - a shopping list, a text message, a record of a visa purchase, a conversation that you remember - how much will be preserved through time? How much will be available in the future? Evidence (or fragments) from the past can be found stored everywhere - in everything from government statistics and personal letters in provincial archives, to scientists' pollen samples, and stories told from one generation to the next and preserved in family memories.

3. The creation and preservation of a record of the past is still not enough to make it become part of history. People need to **interpret the evidence**, the primary document. No primary source "tells the truth" about history; even eyewitness accounts, photographs and videos were created by a person at a particular time and place, and these factors influenced what was recorded, and how. Evidence, therefore must be interpreted

-in the context of how, when, where, why and by whom it was created,  
-in the relevant historical contexts of the time and place it was created  
-in the context of issues and concerns in the present

4. Historians interpret evidence that they see as **significant**— meaningful, important, of consequence. What is significant changes from place to place, from person to person, and over time. This is one of the reasons why history is never really finished, and one of the reasons why stories from the past are always getting lost and found.

In conclusion, suggest that students remember these criteria, because we will be using them to explore how a lost story from the past becomes history.

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### Lesson 1, Part 2: (210 minutes) Why are stories lost? How do stories get found?

Begin this lesson by watching the Thomas Widd video on the Lost Stories website. While watching the video, students consider the question: Does the Thomas Widd story meet our criteria for history (in comparison with the past)?

Debrief the video by asking students to discuss, first in small groups then as a class, the following questions:

- What evidence is presented in the film that was created during the time the school was built and active? Provide as many examples as you can.
- Does the film show where and/or how that evidence was preserved? Provide at least 2 examples (and remember that human memories count as evidence!) Does it provide other evidence that was not created at the time? What kind?
- What individual person or people are responsible for interpreting the evidence for this Lost Hi/Story?

- People seldom explicitly state why they think the history they are telling is significant, but they usually leave clues. What does the artist think is most important about this story? Can you guess what other participants in the film think is most important about the story of Thomas Widd? Or the film maker?
- What are three reasons why the Thomas Widd story might have been lost?
- What are three reasons why we are now able to “find” this story?

At the end of this discussion, explain to students that they are to complete a two-part critical challenge. First, students are to work in small groups to examine all of the primary documents provided in the *Deaf Education Historical Document Collection in the Teaching Lost Stories* section of the Lost Stories website. They will find that these documents support three theories, or cases, as to why Thomas Widd’s story was lost.

1. **The story was lost because many members of the hearing community saw deaf individuals as “different” and therefore as separate from the rest of society.** Historians, like Canadians in general, are well aware that people who have historically lacked power, such as ethnic minorities, women, and the otherwise –abled, have played important and varied roles throughout our history. Those who have traditionally lacked power, in other words, have a lot to tell us about “our” history, whoever “we” are. In earlier times, however, the groups were often regarded with suspicion or fear, and were often overlooked entirely. Such attitudes effected people in the past, and has also had an impact on the evidence they left behind.
2. **The story was lost because the segregation of deaf communities made them less visible to the hearing majority.** Segregation sharply divided people according to specific attributes and removed them from the mainstream. Segregated from the mainstream, deaf students were, usually for the first time in their lives, united into a coherent, vibrant, non-hearing community. While the development of this community was in many ways a boon for deaf children, their segregation did make them less

visible to the hearing community, and may have contributed to the loss of Thomas Widd’s story.

3. **The story was lost because the initial small size and later decline in size of the deaf population made them less visible.** Similar to the segregation theory, this case argues that deaf communities were often not visible to the larger hearing community due to their small size; a fact that was exacerbated by the development of mass immunization in Canada, one result of which was a decline in the infectious childhood diseases most responsible for deafness.

The teacher will assign each of the groups **one** of these theories and ask that each group identify the four or five pieces of evidence that best support their assigned theory. Students can use the **primary document analysis organizer** to help them through this process. The group’s work can be summarized in a poster that they will present to the class. Each poster should briefly restate the theory the group was trying to support (maximum 2 sentences) and should clearly identify and explain the four or five pieces of evidence they found most compelling. For each piece of evidence the group should provide the title of the relevant primary document(s), as well as quotes or summaries and pictures or drawings (Alternatively these theories could be presented orally and the class could engage in a discussion and debate) [see note].

Once all groups have presented their posters the class should discuss which interpretation is best supported by evidence using the criteria provided on the **primary document analysis organizer**. Teachers should ask all students to rank the order of the theories or cases from most to least convincing and collect this information as an exit ticket. The results can be shared at the start of the next lesson. Teachers are also encouraged to draw attention to the absence of deaf voices in the document collection. An easy way to do this is to ask the students what other types of evidence they would like to have had available.

**Note:**

Teachers can allow each group to examine all of the documents. Alternatively, teachers can point students towards the documents that most directly address their assigned theory. In this case, we would recommend that students investigating the idea that **the story was lost because it was seen as “different”** examine documents 1-8. Students looking into the idea that **the story was lost because of the segregation of deaf individuals** can examine documents 8-15. Finally, those students focusing on **the small size of the deaf population** can look at documents 16-19. Teachers may need to provide their students with assistance, by giving them additional historical context, as they try to interpret the documents. In particular, several of documents 1-8 highlight concerns that existed in Canadian society about the inter-marriage of deaf individuals and the development of a deaf “race”. These may be challenging for students who have little or no understanding of genetics. Teachers may find the Canadian Encyclopedia’s articles on *Eugenics* ([www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eugenics](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eugenics)) and *Keeping Canada Sane* ([www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eugenics-keeping-canada-sane-feature/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eugenics-keeping-canada-sane-feature/)) to be useful.