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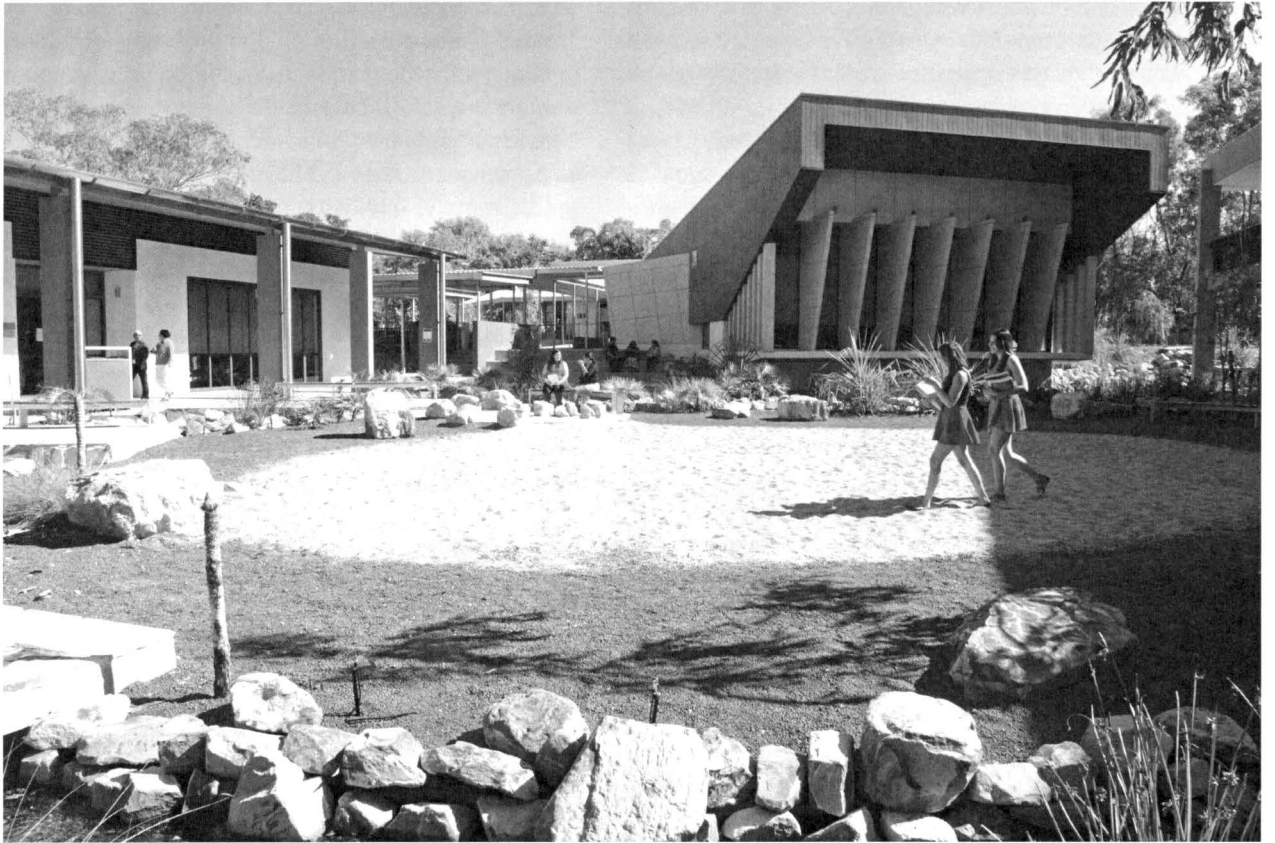
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Above: Part of the Charles Darwin University campus in Darwin, 2013.
Below: Charles Darwin University students, 2013. OFFICE OF MACE, CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

ASSESSMENT METHODS APPROPRIATE FOR TEACHING HISTORY IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Steven Farram

Australia is currently moving towards a national regulatory system for standards of teaching and learning in higher education. As professional historians we should all be concerned about the standards applied to the teaching of our discipline in Australian universities. This paper focuses on the issue of assessment and the role it plays in learning. Various assessment methods are evaluated and suggestions made on which are most appropriate for the teaching of History in Australian universities. The paper concludes with some recommendations on how assessment practices could be improved.

Introduction

Australian professional historians work in many fields, but only a minority work in higher education. Nevertheless, it is an area that should concern us all, as it was through higher education that we obtained our qualifications, as will the professional historians to follow. Australia is currently establishing a national regulatory system for standards of teaching and learning in higher education. Historians need to consider what standards and values we believe are appropriate for the teaching of our discipline. It is in this context that this paper, on the issue of assessment and the role it plays in learning, is offered.

Assessment is a major issue in higher education. It takes up vast amounts of time of both teachers and students and is a principal motivator of student activity. Pioneer assessment researcher Derek Rowntree cites one British study that found students spent the majority of their time outside the classroom completing assessment tasks.¹ Paul Ramsden concludes in his influential book *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, that 'assessment always defines the actual curriculum',² meaning that no matter what teachers may wish students to learn, they always devote their greatest effort to gaining enough marks to pass the unit or course. Others, including David Boud, Paul Hyland, Graham Gibbs and Claire Simpson have come to similar conclusions.³ This all suggests that if we want students to learn what we think is worth learning, we had better get our assessment strategies correct.

There is an enormous amount of literature on assessment. The work of leading writers in this field from Britain and Australia is considered in this paper. However, little of these scholars' work touches on the use of assessment in History. Some British

researchers have explored the use of assessment for teaching History in universities,⁴ but British regulatory and institutional practices are different from those in Australia and we need to look at assessment needs in an Australian context. Unfortunately, there has been little work done in this area. This paper aims to stimulate discussion about this important matter.

In this paper I give an overview of various researchers' ideas on how assessment can be used to support learning. I examine various assessment methods and evaluate their effectiveness for achieving the desired aims. Finally, I list what I propose are the most appropriate assessment methods for teaching History in Australian universities and make some recommendations on how assessment practices may be improved.

What is assessment and why should we assess?

Rowntree, in his article 'Designing an assessment system', reminds us that assessment is not just grades or marks, or the means by which we create them, such as examinations or essays. Rather, assessment is the appraisal of the nature and quality of a student's thinking and performance. Assessment also comes in two forms: formative, where one supplies students with feedback to help them develop or improve their learning; and summative, which is a summing up of one's judgement on a student's learning, normally expressed as a mark or grade.⁵

Rowntree identifies a number of reasons why assessment is used in higher education. These include engaging students in learning and enabling students to be given feedback in order to improve their learning. Obviously, the type of assessment being considered here is the formative variety, which Rowntree and other researchers rate highly. On the other hand, Rowntree

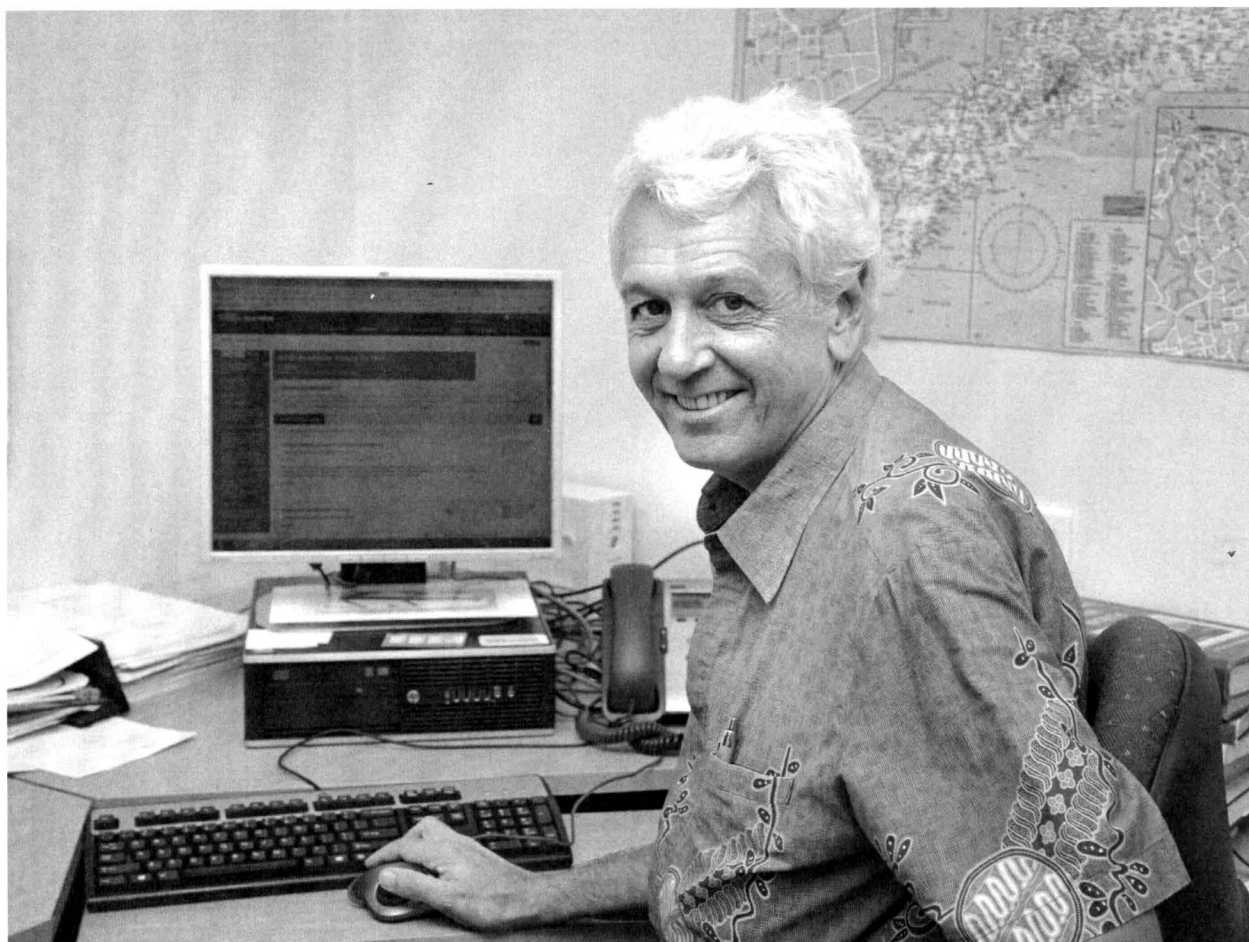
concedes that summative assessment also has its uses, especially in enabling others, such as administrators or employers, to appreciate the standard a student has achieved.⁶

Aligning assessment with learning outcomes

Several researchers have identified the propensity of students to only pay attention to those parts of a course that they know will be assessed. Considering this, Ramsden concludes that if teachers wish students to emerge from their studies with a certain degree of knowledge and understanding about any subject, assessments need to be linked to the desired outcomes.⁷ Rowntree points out that to do this we must first think carefully about what it is we want our students to learn, and make this clear to them at each opportunity.⁸ Ramsden also stresses the need to provide clear information of the expected outcomes of a course or unit and to explain unambiguously the purpose of assessment.⁹ We thus need to make sure that our assessment tools are aligned with the stated learning outcomes. So before considering what might be the appropriate assessments to use in History in higher education, we have to consider what we believe are the desired learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes

While higher education History teachers in Australia have always had ideas about what they wanted students to gain from their studies, it is a relatively recent practice in most universities to explicitly state expected learning outcomes or objectives in course or unit information documents and the like. Universities can stipulate certain criteria to be applied to these statements; for example, at my university we are advised that between four and six learning outcomes are optimal. What learning outcomes are actually stated, however, has been largely left to the discretion of unit and course coordinators. Since late 2010, History teachers in Australian universities have an additional resource to use when considering learning outcomes: that is, the *History Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement (HLTASS)*, prepared for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in response to the foreshadowed national regulatory system that will establish quality standards for teaching and learning. The *HLTASS* was prepared by a team led by Professor Iain Hay, representing employers, academics and professional bodies, which presented preliminary findings to a number of public forums. Feedback from those meetings and written



Steven Farram monitors one of his online units, 2014. OFFICE OF MACE, CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY

submissions informed the final statement, which sought to describe 'the nature and extent of the discipline' and to distinguish the 'minimum level of achievement that could be expected of an Australian bachelor level graduate with a major in History'.¹⁰

The *HLTASS* proclaims that the study of History equips students to:

- » ask relevant questions
- » analyse problems and evidence
- » consider different perspectives and values
- » make considered judgements on complex issues
- » formulate well developed arguments, and
- » communicate effectively.¹¹

The *HLTASS* then lists eight 'Threshold learning outcomes for History'.¹² These have been condensed to construct a generic set of five learning outcomes for a higher education unit in History, as appears below. The shortened list reflects my institution's stipulations, but others may wish to refer to all eight of the *HTLASS* learning outcomes, although some of these are quite similar in intent.

Learning outcomes

1. Demonstrate an understanding of at least one period or culture of the past
2. Identify and interpret a wide range of primary and secondary materials
3. Analyse historical evidence, scholarship and changing representations of the past
4. Demonstrating effective communication skills, construct an evidence based argument or narrative
5. Identify and reflect critically on the knowledge and skills developed in the study of History.

The *HLTASS* gives no advice on what assessment activities should be used to measure if students have achieved these standards, but if we accept these outcomes as what we want our students to achieve, they give us a framework for establishing assessments that align with them.

What are the appropriate assessments?

Let us first consider examinations. Students are often perceived as intrinsically lazy, needing to be coerced into 'learning' and prevented from cheating by assessments such as the final examination. Students must study for the examination or they will fail the unit. Ramsden asserts that this approach has nothing to do with learning, discourages the pursuit of understanding, and focuses all attention on the achievement of grades.¹³

Rowntree argues that any course that requires students to produce something themselves, such as justifying a position or arguing a case (which definitely applies to History), can never be assessed adequately with multiple choice or true/false examinations, where the student merely chooses from a number of possible

answers.¹⁴ Ramsden cites studies that show that even in examinations where students must provide their own answers the questions are often framed in such a way that they can be answered through isolated factual recall without any real understanding of the concepts and processes that underpin the discipline being examined.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Phil Race, another British 'assessment heavyweight', says examinations are often favoured because of their degree of certainty in determining that the work being assessed was truly created by the student who will receive the grade. Race argues, however, that examinations have a low level of validity, as they are conducted in artificial conditions, in an unreal race against the clock with no external resources available. Also, examinations are essentially an exercise in reproduction: they tend to encourage surface learning. Feedback is usually provided only in the form of a grade or mark, often well after the event, and thus plays little part in learning.¹⁶

Most researchers involved in the study of assessment methods condemn examinations, yet they remain a major tool of assessment, especially in British universities. In Australia, it may be that examinations are no longer used so commonly for History, but data are difficult to obtain. It is notable, however, that in the 2009 ALTC report *Historical Thinking in Higher Education (HTHE)*, examinations are not even considered in the list of thirteen activities Australian students were asked to rank 'in terms of their contribution to the development of historical thinking'.¹⁷ That report informs much of my evaluation of assessment methods, below.

Essays and other written assignments

Many researchers talk favourably of essays and other written assignments. Gibbs and Simpson, for example, cite studies that show that essays result in greater retention of knowledge and higher quality learning than is achieved with examinations.¹⁸ Race also views essays more favourably than examinations, although he argues that they tend to involve assessment of essay writing skills rather than knowledge of subject matter. However, Race points out the superior value of essays where the desired learning outcomes include the ability to retrieve information, to analyse that material and then present coherent and logical arguments and conclusions.¹⁹ The learning outcomes and standards listed above explicitly mention these matters, as these are basic skills required of an historian. Effective communication is another skill listed that students should achieve from the study of History, and practice in writing essays is one way of honing this skill.

Race notes that essays provide good opportunities for making feedback available to students.²⁰ Most researchers involved in the study of assessment stress

the importance of feedback for improving understanding and learning. Indeed, Rowntree refers to it as 'the lifeblood of learning'.²¹ Hyland, however, cautions that

Effective communication is another skill listed that students should achieve from the study of History, and practice in writing essays is one way of honing this skill.

in many cases the feedback given does not play a formative role, even when this may have been the teacher's intention. This occurs because the feedback may signal the deficiencies of the work being assessed, but give no guidance or practical advice to overcome those deficiencies.²²

Gibbs and Simpson, in the meantime, warn that feedback can be ignored if not provided in a timely and appropriate fashion. This is sometimes difficult to achieve, as it is common to have substantial assessment items, such as major essays, delivered at the end of semester. One way to rectify this situation is to add an assessment of a detailed essay plan, to be submitted earlier, allowing for provision of feedback. This could be ungraded and could also be a peer-assessment, a device which various researchers have noted allows students to internalise assessment criteria and increases their engagement in learning.²³ As Boud points out, such activities give students confidence to judge their own work with respect to appropriate standards. To determine that students truly understand these standards, Boud recommends students and staff establish a dialogue on the purpose of assessments and that consensus be sought on appropriate processes.²⁴

Race mentions annotated bibliographies as another useful assessment that allows students to 'learn through doing' by finding sources, analysing them and writing short summaries of their content.²⁵ This is indeed a useful activity in the study of History. A related activity is the writing of *précis*: summaries or abstracts of readings. When I was an undergraduate History student, we were required to write *précis* of core readings each week and it was rare to find students who had not done the readings in tutorials. This greatly facilitated discussion. Core readings are set because teachers believe they are valuable material that all students should be familiar with. The *précis* is one method to ensure this occurs.

There is consensus amongst researchers that written assignments combined with timely feedback are valuable means of assessment that support learning. Academics from Australian universities quoted in the *HTHE* report were in full agreement. Students, however, thought differently, ranking essays only mid-range in

importance to their contribution to historical thinking. Feedback rated even lower. Academics complained that students arrived at university poorly prepared to write and the report recommended collaborative work between historians and secondary syllabus designers to remedy this situation.²⁶ Students' poor response to feedback, however, may have other causes and university teachers need to be diligent in ensuring that the feedback provided is indeed useful for helping students learn; an external student recently wrote to tell me that after four years at university I was one of the few lecturers that had actually provided her with feedback to help her improve.²⁷

Presentations

Race comments positively on the use of presentations as assessment tools that contribute to learning, arguing that in preparing and delivering presentations students become engaged with the material to a higher degree than in many other types of assessment and can often answer questions on the topic long after the event, not least because anticipating questions is a normal part of preparation for presentations. Furthermore, presentations provide good opportunities for feedback, not just from tutors, but also fellow students.²⁸

Students and teachers surveyed for the *HTHE* report, however, were less convinced. Only half of the students thought presentations had any validity and even then they ranked them low on the scale. Academic opinion was also divided. Presentations were considered impractical for large classes. Some academics thought presentations killed discussion, but others saw them as providing students with valuable skills, even though they thought that students found the experience 'terrifying'. In contrast, some academics reported tutorial presentations being enthusiastically embraced by students.²⁹

Presentations are well aligned with the identified standards and learning outcomes. They call for analysis of evidence, construction of arguments and effective communication of ideas. The *HTHE* report also noted that verbal communication skills were highly valued by employers and essential for students who planned to pursue a research career, verbal presentation of research findings remaining a conference staple.³⁰ For these reasons, I consider the student presentation to be a valid method of assessment in History that can make a valuable contribution to learning.

Online learning

Online learning is a growing phenomenon in Australian universities. My university has embraced it for several years and all units of History offered are available online, as well as in the traditional face-to-face mode on campus. Apart from the increased workloads carried by lecturers and tutors, online teaching of History

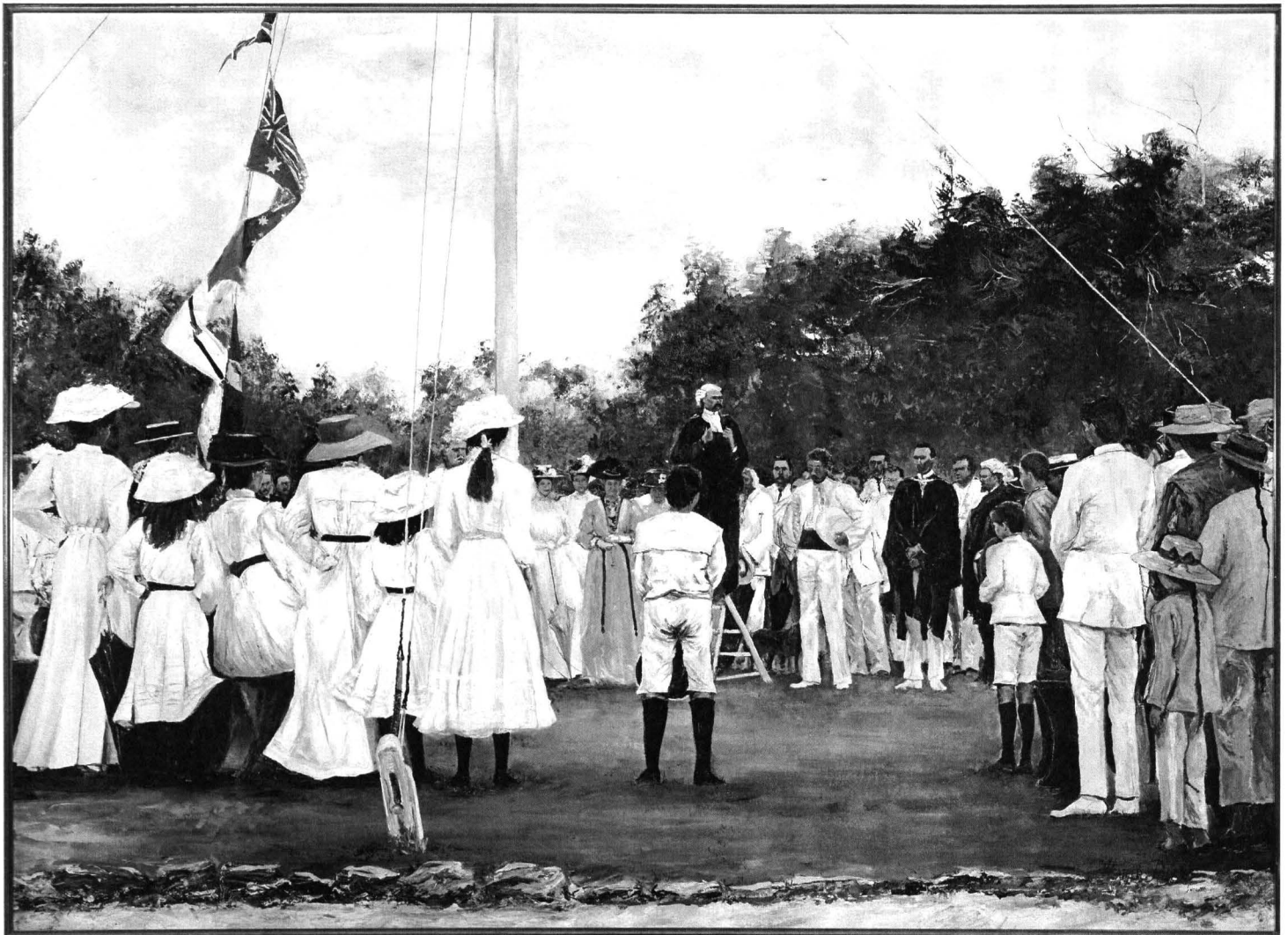
raises a number of issues. For example, if we accept presentations as a valid form of assessment, how will this be done for online students? Skype, Wimba, Collaborate, Elluminate or some similar technology, or simply video, could be used for external students. But it is difficult to simulate the live class experience; one cannot expect all students to be available for synchronous online sessions. Video-making requires skills that may be beyond some students and it is not an aim to assess such skills. Furthermore, many teachers are deficient in the required skills and the time needed for such activities.

For these reasons my external students are not assessed for presentations, but instead are expected to participate in an online discussion board for each tutorial. This is a flawed compromise as, although students can get quite engaged in online discussions, they can also make their individual posts and not visit the site again. Interestingly, the *HTE* report found that students gave visual and new media the lowest ranking

of all options given for their contribution to historical thinking. Some academics reported that students had to be coerced to go online; however others reported that external students made great use of online facilities.³¹

The writers of the *HTE* report were disturbed by students' ambivalence to visual media, as this is the primary means by which the wider community engages with History. Moreover, employers have expressed interest in graduates having not only verbal and written communication skills, but also online communication skills. The report recommended that academics be given better support for using visual and new media in their teaching and assessment activities.³² Such support would also need to be extended to students but, where adequate facilities and training are available, university History teachers should consider how they can improve the learning experience of their students using such technology. This relates especially to external students.

Another difficulty with teaching History online is



Heather Riley, *The flag-raising*, 1985, oil on canvas, depicting the ceremony held in Darwin to mark the official transfer of the Northern Territory from South Australia to the commonwealth on 1 January 1911. This is one of the sources available to view on the Museum of Australian Democracy's 'Documenting a Democracy' website. COLLECTION OF MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, GA 714

The report recommended that academics be given better support for using visual and new media in their teaching and assessment activities

meeting learning outcomes concerning the identification and analysis of primary material. For example, for many years my university has offered courses in North Australian History. Before the advent of online learning, all our students were based in Darwin. Assessment always included the requirement to write a major essay based on primary sources. This was possible because our university's library possesses an admirable special collection devoted to North Australia; the Northern Territory Library has a similar collection. There is also a branch of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) in Darwin, and our own Northern Territory Archives Service, as well as archives and libraries belonging to organisations such as the National Trust. With these resources undergraduate students produced some excellent material, much of which was subsequently published. Obviously, such outcomes are difficult to achieve if students are based in, say, Hobart or Longreach, or even overseas. What can be done?

Two of my colleagues came up with ways that students can engage with primary materials online and produce assessable results. Professor David Carment used the NAA's 'Uncommon Lives' website and the documents featured there relating to the case of Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda, the first Indigenous Australian to have a case heard in the High Court. Carment proposed that students read the documents available on the site, and other relevant materials they could find, and use them to explain how Dhakiyarr's case came to attract national and international attention.³³ Professor Alan Powell used documents displayed on the Museum of Australian Democracy's 'Documenting a Democracy' website, asking students to examine four specific documents and explain how they illuminated Northern Territory history and what important issues they do not reveal. This required wider reading for students to place the documents in context.³⁴

The two websites mentioned and a host of others that feature primary source materials could be used to support a range of courses. Historians will always prefer to access physical documents where possible, but by directing students to sites where documents are available digitally those who may not otherwise have the opportunity to view primary source materials can nevertheless analyse them and draw their own conclusions – and these activities can be assessed.

Conclusions and recommendations

Using the material described above I make the preliminary conclusion that the best assessment methods to be utilised in History in higher education in Australia are:

- » essays
- » essay plans
- » presentations, both in class and online, if technology and skills allow
- » annotated bibliographies
- » précis.

All the above should to be provided with timely and appropriate feedback. The first three items could also include peer assessment and self-assessment.

These methods, I argue, are best suited to gauge and help improve students' skills in research, analysis, justification, argument and communication: all essential in the discipline of History. I argue against examinations, but where it is considered they should be used they must demand an understanding of the concepts and processes of History and not mere factual recall.

I recommend the use of websites that display primary source documents and other material to be



Dhakiyarr (left) at Fannie Bay Gaol, Darwin. This image is available on the NAA's 'Uncommon Lives' website.

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES, WILSON.
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used in the assessment of online students. I also note that the *HTHE* report recommended that universities collaborate with the Australian Historical Association (AHA) and the History Teachers' Association of Australia (HTAA) to develop repositories of good examples of learning activities and assessment tasks,³⁵ but it appears that this has not occurred.³⁶ This idea should be revisited and such repositories established. I also recommend that further studies be made about assessment practices for History currently used in Australian universities.

I conclude by admitting that my suggestions may prove inadequate in the new regulatory environment. At the time of writing, standards for the teaching of

History were still to be determined. Although it had been assumed that the learning outcomes established in the *HLTASS* would form the basis of the standards, the new regulatory body TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency) has indicated it may begin anew. Whatever standards result, it is obvious they will require specific assessments to demonstrate that the stated outcomes and standards have been achieved. However, TEQSA's vague statements have raised fears that it may consult bureaucrats and educational theorists rather than discipline practitioners in establishing those standards.³⁷ It is to be hoped that this scenario is not realised and that historians continue to shape the values and standards of our discipline.



Letters Patent annexing the Northern Territory to South Australia, 1863. This is another of the sources available on the Museum of Australian Democracy's 'Documenting a Democracy' website. STATE RECORDS OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, GRG 224/131

Notes

- ¹ Derek Rowntree, 'Designing an assessment system', SFU Business, Simon Fraser University, n.d., p.1, available at, http://www.sfubusiness.ca/files/PDF/teaching_facilitation/designing_an_assessment_system.pdf, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ² Paul Ramsden, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, RoutledgeFalmer, London and New York, 2008, p. 182.
- ³ David Boud and Associates, Assessment 2020: seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education, Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), Sydney, 2000, pp. 1–2, available at, <http://www.olt.gov.au/resources>, accessed 7 June 2013; Paul Hyland in Alan Booth and Paul Hyland (eds), *The Practice of University History Teaching*, Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 233–4; Graham Gibbs and Claire Simpson, 'Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning', *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, issue 1, 2004–05, pp. 3–31.
- ⁴ Booth and Hyland, loc. cit.
- ⁵ Rowntree, op. cit., pp. 23.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- ⁷ Ramsden, loc. cit.
- ⁸ Rowntree, op. cit., pp. 5, 7–8.
- ⁹ Ramsden, loc. cit.
- ¹⁰ Iain Hay, *History Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Statement (HLTASS)*, ALTC, Sydney, 2010, pp. 1–2, available at, http://www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/altc_standards_HISTORY_080211_v2.pdf, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 8.
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹³ Ramsden, op. cit., pp. 178–80.
- ¹⁴ Rowntree, op. cit., p. 12.
- ¹⁵ Ramsden, op. cit., pp. 183, 185.
- ¹⁶ Phil Race, 'Assessment Compendium', 2008, pp. 15–16, available at, <http://phil-race.co.uk/>, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ¹⁷ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Jill Roe, Adele Nye, Matthew Bailey, Mark Peel, Penny Russell, Amanda Laugeson, Desley Deacon, Paul Kiem and Faith Trent, *Historical Thinking in Higher Education (HTHE)*, ALTC, Sydney, 2009, p. 28, available at, <http://www.olt.gov.au/resources>, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ¹⁸ Gibbs and Simpson, op. cit., p. 17.
- ¹⁹ Race, op. cit., pp. 19–20.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ Rowntree, op. cit., p. 17.
- ²² Hyland, op. cit., p. 235.
- ²³ Gibbs and Simpson, op. cit., p. 24; Rowntree, op. cit., pp. 4, 8; Ramsden, op. cit., p. 186.
- ²⁴ Boud, op. cit., p. 2.
- ²⁵ Race, op. cit., p. 21.
- ²⁶ Hughes-Warrington, op. cit., pp. 31–2.
- ²⁷ Student email, 10 May 2013, held by author.
- ²⁸ Race, op. cit., p. 22.
- ²⁹ Hughes-Warrington, op. cit., pp. 32–3.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 33.
- ³¹ *ibid.*
- ³² *ibid.*, pp. 33–4.
- ³³ Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda, available at, <http://uncommonlives.naa.gov.au/dhakiyarr-wirrpanda/index.aspx>, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ³⁴ Foundation Documents NT, available at, <http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au>, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ³⁵ Hughes-Warrington, op. cit., pp. 32, 34, 36.
- ³⁶ Paul Kiem, HTAA President, informed me via email on 18 April 2012 that he was unaware of any repository being developed. At the time of writing, neither the HTAA nor AHA websites mentioned such repositories. See <http://www.historyteacher.org.au/>, accessed 7 June 2013; and <http://www.theaha.org.au/>, accessed 7 June 2013.
- ³⁷ Sean Brawley, Jennifer Clark, Chris Dixon, Lisa Ford, Leah Grolman, Shawn Ross and Stuart Upton, 'Applying standards to tertiary-level history. Policy, standards and the After Standards Project', *History Australia* vol. 8, no. 3, 2011, p. 187. See also Sean Brawley, Jennifer Clark, Chris Dixon, Lisa Ford, Shawn Ross, Stuart Upton and Erik Nielsen, 'Learning outcomes assessment and History: TEQSA, the After Standards Project and QA/QI challenge in Australia', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* vol. 12, no. 1, 2012, available at, <http://ahh.sagepub.com/content/12/1/20>, accessed 7 June 2013.