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## Using multimedia in teaching: CAL HIST 121

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### **Abstract**

CAL HIST 121: Dispossessed, Diggers and Democrats, Australia 1788- 1880s, is a CD unit that contains sixteen topics covering various aspects of the first century of European settlement in Australia. In 1997, it was released nationally by Allen and Unwin. When Jim Hagan and I began work on what came to be known as CAL HIST 121 in 1992, flexible delivery had not even entered the University's vocabulary. We set out to produce a computer assisted learning (then current parlance) teaching aid. Indeed, the birth of the project was almost accidental. I had the misfortune to volunteer the information that I had just finished some elaborate statistical analyses of the social characteristics of men from North Eastern Victoria who had volunteered between 1914 and 1918 on a steam driven Commodore (remember them?) database when I arrived here in 1991. I was strongly encouraged (perhaps coerced) into applying for a National Priority Reserve Fund grant for the development of a computer assisted learning project for nineteenth century Australian history. It succeeded.

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CAL HIST 121 had three major objectives.

The first was to introduce students to one of the basic tools of historiography – the use, evaluation and interpretation of documents. Too often, documents, because of their age, and the emphasis this society places on the written word, have an air of authority which they simply don't deserve. This was challenged simply by having students read the documents and answer a series of questions ranging from those testing comprehension to those inviting interpretation. And it was challenged by setting accounts of the same event by antagonists cheek by jowl. For example, students were faced with a real dilemma when it came to the Rum Rebellion. *Who was telling the truth – the deposed governor, William Bligh, or his enemies, John Macarthur or George Johnstone?*

The second was to provide an aid that would both supplement the lectures and act as part of the preparation required for tutorials. This freed up the lectures considerably. I was no longer as constrained as I had been in the past to ensure that a certain amount of detail was included. And it provided a bridge to the tutorials by offering additional information and introducing students to the notion of interpretation.

The third was simply to produce a tool that students could use at their own pace in their own time. It was, in essence, a form of self-directed learning (one of the cornerstones of flexible delivery). In the early trial

stages of the project, held in 1994, this was hampered somewhat by the simple fact that the units in the program had to be networked on less than adequate equipment. There was no way, for example, that the Faculty's system could hold all 16 topics at the same time, considering the demands made on it by the Faculty as a whole. And students had to come in to either the Faculty Laboratory, or the Library, to use CAL HIST 121. The solution was found with the pressing of the first trial CD in 1995 and the production of a CD as normal issue in 1996. However, the 1996 CDs used the Apple format which created problems for those with IBM compatible machines. In 1997, a version was produced that would work with both systems.

In the end, then, the project's aims determined the media. In 1992, CDs were seen as rather fanciful and expensive. By 1994, they were an option. By 1997, they were the only medium to choose because they gave us the chance to fully realise the third aim. It is intriguing to note that the process has turned what began as a 'teaching aid' into a 'stand alone' product. It is currently being marketed as such.

The aims I've elaborated above suggest that from 1992, Jim Hagan and I had a clear sense of how the project would develop. It would be misleading to suggest that this is an accurate summary of the setting up process. In the early stages, Jim and I had rather different views of what the beast should be about. For Jim, the documents were paramount and he basically wanted to produce an electronic document booklet with questions and answers that could be, if necessary, electronically marked. I had reservations about a CAL project that simply duplicated, and far less effectively, the traditional form of a book. And, to be honest, I was flashier in my aspirations. I wanted supplementary information, maps, simulation games, 'bells and whistles': I wanted to utilise the potential the medium held. Of course, neither of us had the faintest idea about the technology itself. And this proved to be an advantage. Rather than approaching the project from the perspective of what the technology was capable of

producing, we approached it from the perspective of what we wanted it to do. Above all, I felt that the finished beast had to be interactive, it had to engage the students: a passive product would have simply ignored what the technology could do.

With trial and error, the project began to take on more focus and our divergent views began to coalesce. The documents remained (and still rightly remain) the core of CAL HIST 121. But other elements were added: time lines to spell out a chronological narrative, graphs and charts to supply new information, illustrations as interpretative historical tools, lessons from a nineteenth century textbook and simulation where students were (to paraphrase an eminent historian) defied to stay on their selection. Just as importantly, I felt it was important that within each topic, the subsections should vary in length and structure to avoid monotony.

As noted earlier, neither Jim Hagan nor I had any real idea about the technology involved. The key to bringing this project to fruition was provided by Helen Carter and her team in CEDIR. Helen was with the project from the outset and her contribution was, quite simply, crucial. From the beginning, she accepted the approach we had adopted. She was largely responsible for translating ideas into the form these took on the computer screen.

It is difficult to evaluate the experience. CAL HIST 121 was a 'first' (to use the vernacular). There were no models for us to look at, no previous attempts to produce a computer assisted learning project that approached history with the objectives described earlier. There were some historical databases on the market which were basically electronic reference works. These grew in sophistication by the mid 1990s, but they remained passive reference tools which students 'accessed' for information, much as they once pulled down an encyclopaedia from the library shelves. The project took a prodigious amount of my time, much to the detriment of my own research. Funding was a nightmare from the beginning, a function of ignorance

on our part and also, I suspect, on Canberra's part (the funding body). The initial grant was for \$30 000. The project was completed only after additional funds had been secured through a Challenge Grant, funds from the Department of History and Politics and funds secured by Jim Hagan to trial computer assisted learning programs for secondary school students. None of the funding included a 'buy-out' of teaching time, a more recent innovation that I heartily applaud. Copyright for the illustrative material used was a major problem in the final stages of the project – and became very expensive. Long gone are the days when public institutions allow the reproduction of material free of charge. And negotiations with our national distributors were, sometimes, prickly.

Yet, I'm left with the overriding impression that CAL HIST 121 works. The younger undergraduates, who are far more computer literate than I will ever be, took the CD in their stride. The mature age students closer to my own age were wary at first, but found the CD easy to use and adopted it with enthusiasm. I was more than a little surprised to find our international students (especially those from the United States) claiming that CAL HIST 121 was innovative and unknown on their own campuses. But the best indication I have that CAL HIST 121 works comes in tutorials. Students constantly use it as a reference point in discussion. This can sometimes take on a personal dimension.

One of the most difficult topics to teach in Australia's nineteenth century history is selection. It has political, social, economic and cultural implications. It has links with bushranging, the Australian Impressionists, folklore and bush literature. At its heart lies the success or failure of ordinary men and women taking up land. CAL HIST 121 contains a primitive simulation game dedicated to selection. Its principal antagonist is squatter Watson. I knew the process was working when one student stomped into class one evening and said, 'Do you know what that bastard Watson did?'. And he was greeted with a litany of Watson's 'crimes' from other students.

I was asked during the flexible delivery morning last year what I thought the major issues were in any attempt to create an FD unit. I cannot remember the answer I gave, but the question has stuck with me. However, it seems to me that there are two principle elements involved. The first is a clear idea of what the project is supposed to achieve. Is it to be a supplement to existing classes, like video links or booklets of readings? If so, it implies a strong connection with the main campus. Is it to be a self guided, 'stand alone' unit? If so, it suggests a very different way of teaching on both the main campus and its satellites. The second is far more prosaic, but I would argue, equally important: ensure that you have the funding available to complete the beast!