Teaching history at the University of Wollongong

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Abstract

When Liz Ellis asked me to write a short article on teaching, I initially baulked. The literature on the nature and purpose of teaching is vast; indeed, 'education' is an academic field in its own right. I also believe that teaching is a highly idiosyncratic process, especially at tertiary level. What works for one lecturer may not work for another. So, what follows is a personal view of teaching history at the University ofWollongong. The article is divided into three sections: what I see to be the major aims and objectives in teaching history across the undergraduate spectrum, approaches to teaching that I have found to be successful and the links between individual research and teaching.

Teaching History At The University of Wollongong

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When Liz Ellis asked me to write a short article on teaching, I initially baulked. The literature on the nature and purpose of teaching is vast; indeed, 'education' is an academic field in its own right. I also believe that teaching is a highly idiosyncratic process, especially at tertiary level. What works for one lecturer may not work for another. So, what follows is a personal view of teaching history at the University of Wollongong. The article is divided into three sections: what I see to be the major aims and objectives in teaching history across the undergraduate spectrum, approaches to teaching that I have found to be successful and the links between individual research and teaching.

Aims and objectives

My primary teaching goal is to interest undergraduates in history as an academic discipline and to share the enthusiasm I feel for history with them. That enthusiasm is based not only on the academic rigour of the discipline, nor just the personal sense of achievement that comes with research. It also reflects a firm belief in the relevance of history in any attempt to explain contemporary society. History can be as much concerned with the present as the past. Undergraduates who have studied late nineteenth century Australian history with me over the last five years have been struck by the similarities between the 1880s and 1890s and the 1980s and 1990s. Issues that were alive and well a century ago have returned to the contemporary social and political agenda. It is a great pity that our political masters know so little of their own national history.

Teaching history at undergraduate level in a university also involves the development of the intellectual and technical skills required of historians. These I see as being structured, with new skills being progressively acquired at each level. By third year, students should be familiar with history as an academic discipline and with the basic historical methodological processes which rely heavily on the critical evaluation of argument and the use of evidence; and they should also be equipped with the basic skills needed to write history. A brief summary of the basic objectives I've implemented in my own teaching at each level is appropriate here.

100 level: This is the most important year, laying the foundation for the years that follow. Teaching objectives at this level fall into two basic categories: intellectual and technical. Intellectually, a 100 level subject should meet three main objectives. It should introduce students to the place of interpretation through the use of selected historiographical controversies (the reasons for the British deciding to establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay is a good example). It should encourage students to read widely and critically, using the secondary literature. And it should introduce students to primary source material through the use of carefully selected documents which can be used to answer, in part, tutorial questions. Technically, a 100 level subject should also meet three major objectives. It should develop essay writing skills, familiarising

students with the structure of essay writing and conventions governing the writing of history. It should develop the ability of students to argue a point of view orally through tutorial discussion. And it should introduce students to the Library and its holdings (for example, I give students the name of an Australian explorer and they are expected to provide a brief report on the explorer after finding relevant material in the Library). By the end of first year, students should have a rudimentary grasp of the basics of historical argument and the technical skills required to present a written argument.

200 level: A 200 level subject should refine the basics set out for 100 level subjects. Here the emphasis should lie more on the intellectual objectives. Greater prominence should be given to the place of interpretation in historiographical inquiry with a greater emphasis being placed on 'why' rather than 'when'. Similarly, greater emphasis should be given to theoretical elements although these need to be handled with some care. Primary source material should play an important part in subject design although greater emphasis should be given to the nature and limitations of such sources (even at 200 level, documents for some students retain a certain air of authority). And the technical skills noted for 100 level should be consistently developed.

300 level: By the time students undertake a 300 level subject, they should be familiar with the use of secondary sources, aware of the place of interpretation in history, aware of the use of theory as a means of historical explanation and aware of the types of primary sources available for the writing of history and their limitations. They should also be competent in essay writing skills, feel at ease when it comes to arguing a point of view in tutorials and be familiar with the Library and its resources. This allows greater emphasis to be placed on methodological and theoretical aspects of the discipline in third year. More importantly, a 300 level subject should include as part of its assessment, an individual research project where a student is required to use primary source material to write a major essay. In other words, students are required to 'write' history in much the same manner as professional historians, albeit on a more limited scale. (I have found that the students respond particularly well to the research projects, the project often being their best piece of work.)

By the end of a major, then, students would not only be familiar with history as an academic discipline,

they should also be capable of writing history themselves.

Approaches to teaching
Subject design is vital for effective teaching. If students have no real idea of the purpose of the subject being studied, they flounder and quickly lose interest. For each of the subjects I teach, students are issued with a booklet. The booklet contains a clear description of the subject's content, assessment requirements, attendance requirements, essay topics, lecture topics and tutorial questions. The tutorial questions are accompanied by a reading list and by selected documents.

Lectures and tutorials serve two very different purposes.
As an undergraduate, I endured, too frequently, self-indulgent rambles by lecturers apparently intent on demonstrating to a literally captive audience their own intellectual superiority. That shaped *my* own approach to lectures.

Lectures should provide basic information and act as a springboard for tutorial discussion. They therefore need to be carefully structured. Before each lecture begins, I display an outline of the lecture so that students have a clear idea of the issues that will be discussed; in a way, the outline sets out the bare bones of the 'story' that is to follow. I write my lectures out in full before giving them, but speak to the notes rather than read them. I also try to vary the 'texture' of the lecture by pausing for questions, inviting student participation for some issues and using anecdotes to reinforce a major point being made. I'm sure that most students who have taken Australian history will long remember the fact that John Macarthur died insane, locked in a room in Camden.

Tutorials are the heart of the teaching process and they belong to the students. It is the students who should dominate discussion and all students should participate. The *tutor's role is to direct discussion*, encourage all students to join in and, when necessary, to haul it back to the issues raised by the tutorial question itself. (Some student groups prove to be particularly adept at hijacking a tutorial topic.) The tutor should also create a sense of tutorial identity, of belonging within a tutorial group. This is no easy task, especially at 100 level where many students are overwhelmed by a new place, a different system and strange faces. But it is worth the effort. A sure sign that a tutorial group has established itself is what I

call the 'preliminary noise level'. When tutorials begin, a tutor frequently walks into a silent room. When a tutorial group has established itself, the tutor can hear the talk and chatter long before the tutorial room is reached. Any tutorial dominated by the tutor is wasted time.

'Chalk and talk' remains a central part of my teaching method. However, I also use a variety of other methods, depending on the topic being discussed.

For example, one of the hardest tasks facing anyone teaching history is to get students to *understand* value systems and beliefs that underpin actions and decisions taken in the past. Without that understanding, it is difficult to explain what happened and discussion is reduced to a series of politically correct and comfortable platitudes. For a limited number of issues, I have used role playing as part of the tutorial. Half the tutorial time is set aside for a debate. Students are assigned a 'part', research it and then present those views as part of the debate which is set firmly within the context of the time. Any students who use the benefit of hindsight are promptly 'sin-binned' and cannot participate in the debate for five minutes. At the end of the debate component of the tutorial, the topic is then discussed in a more conventional manner. I've found this to be a very effective means of dealing with some of the more controversial historical issues like slavery in the Ante-Bellum South, the 1916 conscription campaign in Australia and the place of punishment in the convict system in colonial New South Wales.

Fieldwork is also an important part of teaching practice. This usually works best at upper level where student numbers are smaller although I have used fieldwork techniques for larger first year subjects. I tend to use this approach when the imprint of the past on the landscape serves a pedagogical need: for example, analysis of local war memorials as a reflection of the impact of war on a local communities; reconstructing past mortality, ethnic and social patterns using local cemeteries; assessing community views of the past by examining the artefacts held by local museums; and reconstructing past urban or rural land use patterns in the field.

Other teaching strategies I have found effective include 'quizzes' as a means of alleviating late session 'blues'; introducing students to imaginative methods for reconstructing the past (for example, describe your street/house/interior as you step off a suburban

tram in the 1880s); the introduction of artefacts as a means of promoting discussion (for example Aboriginal grinding tools, the contents of a pocket book carried by a member of the First AIF on the day he was killed). I also use film and video material, more as a starting point for discussion than as a means of conveying information. *Gallipoli*, for example, is an excellent starting point for a tutorial discussion devoted to the place of the digger myth in Australian society.

I discovered early on in my teaching career that a major problem area for first year students lies in essay writing. Few students enter 100 level with the essay writing skills required by disciplines such as history. I've tackled the problem in four ways.

Firstly, a booklet is issued to students setting out the basic requirements for essays. It includes information on essay preparation, structure, the academic conventions required and format requirements. The booklet also explains the grading system used by the Department, setting out in general terms the reasons behind the allocation of a grade.

Secondly, two tutorials are set aside each session to discuss both how to write essays and the essay topics themselves. These tutorials are used to reinforce basic notions like read the question carefully, what is it asking of the student, what sources might best be consulted for the question and so on.

Thirdly, the essay questions themselves are devised to reflect an increasing level of difficulty. For example, at 100 level the first essay questions tends to ask 'what' or 'describe and explain' which allows students to demonstrate a grasp of the literature associated with each question. Subsequent essay questions demand more argument and analysis; they are couched in terms of 'assess' or offer a blunt statement that invited argument.

Fourthly, I pay particular attention to the marking and return of essays. Essays are heavily annotated with comments ranging from simple technical matters (often grammatical in nature) to suggestions that alternative views might be acknowledged, simple factual gaps, evidence that might have been considered. Comments are not always negative and annotations are as often positive as not. Essays are then returned on an individual basis, each student being taken over the written work and the reasons for the grade that was allocated. Students with major technical difficulties are either referred to Kim Draisma's unit (the Learning Development Centre) or

they undertake a series of exercises with me to help overcome some of the problems identified.

Too often, a university can present an impersonal face to students, particularly to first years. Availability to students is therefore also a critical part of my teaching practice. I make it very clear to students that they should feel free to contact me about any problems they may be facing. I post on my office door times when I will be available in the office for consultation. Those who find the hours inconvenient (like part-time students) can make an appointment to see me at any other mutually convenient time.

Research and teaching
The link between research and teaching is an important one, especially at upper level. As far as possible, I believe that 300 level subjects in particular should reflect the current research interests of the subject co-ordinator. Students at 300 level benefit from subjects based on the cutting edge of research and, if the aims and objectives outlined earlier in this article have been realised, they should be ready for the more sophisticated analysis of material that teaching a subject based on current research demands. Within the broader academic community, subjects based on the research interests of members of the Department also establish a specialist reputation for the Department which in turn attracts postgraduate students.

I have also found that teaching such subjects also acts as a spur for one's own research. More importantly, I found that it nudged me into writing up more of my own work, a process that is too often shelved in the post-Dawkins university environment where other pressing deadlines tend to push one's own research and writing well and truly onto the back burner.

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GRADUATE HOUSE

The Graduate Faculty...addressing the needs of postgraduates from an academic point of view...is keenly aware of the unique difficulties faced by postgraduate students. To alleviate these difficulties a house at 49 Northfields Ave to be known as Graduate House has been provided for postgraduate student use.

Graduate House
Graduate House is a unit of the University, managed by a committee seconded from many sectors of the campus community, including: Academic, Administrative and Postgraduate. The chair is currently occupied by Professor Bill Lovegrove, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research).
The house is staffed for the greater part with postgraduate volunteers. All Faculties are well represented by their postgraduates who find many of their needs met within a supportive educational and social environment.

An invitation is extended to all Faculties and Departments to book facilities at Graduate House for social or academic activities involving staff and postgraduates. The house and its facilities are made freely available in the interest of postgraduate welfare.

Regular lunch-time seminars are a popular activity with postgraduates and staff. Topics on offer this session have been: •Thesis Writing •Presentation Skills Supervision •Intellectual Property •EEO workshop •Basic Computer Literacy •Interview and C.V. writing strategies for Postgrads •English Conversation Groups.

Graduate House has:
•Seminar/audio-visual rooms which may be booked for group activities •Quiet study areas Spacious •BBQ/outdoor entertainment area (bookable •Microwave Oven, refrigerator, •free tea and coffee •Computer facilities •Laserwriter •Photocopier

We are currently in the process of analysing a recent survey of House usage and its overall value to the University and copies of results will be made available to all Faculties.

Opening hours: 9.30 am to 7.30 pm Monday to Thursday
10.30 am to 6.00 pm Fridays
We are willing to remain open during weekends if demand is high.