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## The undergraduate as informed layperson: Issues in teaching prehistory to geography students

### Abstract

This paper arises out of my experience in teaching a single prehistory subject within the Department of Geography. It was first presented to a conference of the Australian Archaeological Association, in a session concerned with presenting Archaeology to the general public. I initially felt that many of the issues I face might be common to those involved in communicating Archaeology to a wider audience. Discussions at the conference and subsequently have made it clear that some of these difficulties are felt more widely by teachers of undergraduates, even at universities with much higher entrance requirements than the University of Wollongong.

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*Lesley Head describes her investigations of the approaches her students took in studying prehistory within a geography degree. She examines the difficulties posed by teaching a single course which aims to give students an overview of a complex area. She argues that students must be encouraged to examine their own attitudes to historical issues before they can appreciate the main theoretical positions, and reports some interesting findings on her students' information-gathering patterns.*

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## **The Undergraduate as Informed Layperson: Issues in Teaching Prehistory to Geography Students**

**Lesley Head**

**T**his paper arises out of my experience in teaching a single prehistory subject within the Department of Geography. It was first presented to a conference of the Australian Archaeological Association, in a session concerned with presenting Archaeology to the general public. I initially felt that many of the issues I face might be common to those involved in communicating Archaeology to a wider audience. Discussions at the conference and subsequently have made it clear that some of these difficulties are felt more widely by teachers of undergraduates, even at universities with much higher entrance requirements than the University of Wollongong.

All the problems discussed here are exacerbated by increasing class sizes and static or reduced resources. Since this situation seems likely to deteriorate in the foreseeable future, one way to increase our productivity is clearly to exchange ideas about successful and unsuccessful strategies in the classroom. I hope an outcome of the paper will be a constructive interchange that might improve both teaching and lay communication.

After summarising the course I teach and broad characteristics of the student group, I discuss three themes which seem to be the most problematic. I then analyse the information-gathering habits of the students in more detail, concluding that they are probably similar to those of the informed layperson. There are important ways, however, in which we expect our students to be more than informed laypeople. I conclude by sharing some successful and less successful classroom experiences.

### **Environmental prehistory in Geography at Wollongong**

The subject to which I refer is called 'Environmental Prehistory of Australia' (GEOG214), a second year Geography subject which, in the words of the calendar description, 'examines the prehistory of Australia with special attention to the interactions between Aborigines and their environment.' In coverage it is probably similar to most introductory courses in Australian prehistory, but with more emphasis on the methods and evidence for examining changes in past environments. Class contact involves two 1 hour lectures, one 2 hour practical and one 1 hour tutorial per week. The subject draws on a long tradition within geography enquiry of examining the relationships between humans and their environment, now being revolutionised by the application of new scientific techniques such as radiometric dating methods. The rationale for its introduction was the growing need for environmental managers to deal with the management of

cultural heritage. As potential environmental decision-makers, Geography students need to know how to deal with archaeologists and archaeological evidence. The subject is an option in the Bachelor of Environmental Science degree, and those students comprise about 20% of the enrolment (table 1)<sup>1</sup>.

Degree enrolled in	Percent
BSc	55
BEnvSc	20
BA	12
BEd	2
BSc/Law	2
Postgrad	2
American Exchange	8

Table 1 GEOG214 students, degree of enrolment, 1992. (N = 51)

Source: University enrolment records

The subject does not train archaeologists, but it does attempt to train people to work with archaeologists and critically assess archaeological information. For archaeologists in Australia today issues such as the ownership of cultural heritage, the political implications of knowledge and the need for cross-cultural sensitivity are part of daily life. Professional codes of conduct and, in most states, legislation require negotiation with Aboriginal communities as an integral part of research programs. So, prehistory uses natural science methods increasing in sophistication and specialisation. The questions it asks are ones that social scientists have long asked about contemporary peoples. And it is being carried out in a social and political context of continual change and challenge. For its practitioners, these creative tensions are precisely what makes the field so fascinating; for many students they also make it frustrating and difficult.

Of course most GEOG214 students will never have to go and negotiate with remote Aboriginal communities in order to excavate archaeological sites. They will have to apply the skills and knowledge gained from this subject in more general contexts. There has been no systematic follow up of graduate career paths, but a number of graduates are working in land management bodies (National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Water Board), other public service departments and teaching. An increasing number of professional contexts today require people to be aware of cross-cultural issues, and the ability to understand at least some of the processes of social change is vital to such day to day

decisions as choosing a career path. One former student managed a McDonalds restaurant where Aboriginal art is the decorative theme.

## Dilemmas and issues

In my experience there are three themes, summarised below, with which students have to come to terms before they can really engage with the prehistory. The weakest never manage this, and the ability to cope with all three clearly delineates the strongest, of whom there have been many. The large group in the middle are the ones with whom most of this discussion is concerned, and to whom the strategies are directed. The themes are certainly not mutually exclusive. In fact they are all part of what most of us would hope typifies the undergraduate endeavour; the critical evaluation of knowledge and the means by which it is acquired.

### *'Real Aborigines'*

There is a strong feeling that, whatever it is that constitutes 'real' Aboriginality, ceased to exist in 1788. In the minds of these students, the tainted present is contrasted with a pristine past. The notion of ongoing cultural change scarcely exists; if cultural evolution exists it does so in terms of 'progress' leading inevitably to the way the world is at present. Science students in particular are ill-equipped to analyse their own society with any rigour, much less very different societies. This has a number of implications for the attitudes they take to the subject itself, and to issues such as land rights and cultural heritage management.

Yet there is a lot of interest in finding out more about 'Aboriginal culture'. When I surveyed the students at the start about their expectations of the course, the majority expressed a desire to better understand Aboriginal culture, even if they thought of it as something that no longer existed. For most students, even BA students, there is no other course in their degrees where they are likely to encounter any of this material.

### *'If the experts can't agree, how can you expect us to decide?'*

This attitude is of course the first refuge of the lazy student, but the more optimistic view is that there is a level of genuine frustration here. It is expressed most often during discussion of topics such as the causes of extinctions of giant fauna in the last 100,000 years and the role of Aboriginal burning in transforming

the Australian landscape. The theme encompasses views about the nature of research, the role of experts and the authority of written material. In its most virulent form it renders students incapable of reconciling the differences between something written in 1950 and something written in 1990. A more widespread version is expressed as, 'Flood said it so it must be right.'

### *'Just give us the facts'*

Related to 'the experts can't agree', this theme arises at the interface between the natural and social sciences. Many of the methods discussed in the course (dating, palynology, sea level reconstruction, etc) are 'hard' science, but they are discussed here in the context of questions posed by social scientists. In my experience it is rare for arts students to have trouble coping with the science content of the course. It is much more common for science students to have very unsophisticated views about cultural change, historical issues and cross-cultural analyses. Worse, they often do not recognise these issues as problematic, and deserving of reading and reflection. Science students in particular lack humility about the state of their knowledge.

## Students and the way they work - a closer look

### Method

Going beyond the problems discussed above means, for the student, reading widely and critically. For many this is a difficult and unpleasant task. In this section I draw on the results of two questionnaires to examine more closely the attitudes of the students and what I refer to as their information-gathering habits. By this I mean the range of media they use in their daily lives to discern what is happening in the wider world. I will argue that this information needs to be considered when we think about how they gather information for their studies.

The first questionnaire is part of the formal teaching evaluation conducted by the University's Centre for Staff Development (CSD). It is administered in the lecture time during the last few weeks of the course, in the lecturer's absence. There were 37 respondents of a possible 51. Only two of the questions, relating to the age of the students and the hours spent outside class time, are discussed here. The second questionnaire

was compiled by me, and was also administered in lecture time. Twenty-eight of the fifty-one enrolled completed it<sup>(2)</sup> As this was the final lecture of the year and the contents of the coming exam were under discussion, it could be assumed that this represents the keener part of the class. As well as comments on specific parts of the course, they were asked about their news-gathering habits and reactions to different books used. A summary of the questions asked is in Appendix 1.

### Results

The CSD questionnaire shows that 73% of the students are under 22 years old (table 2).

Age (yrs)	Number	Per cent
17-21	27	73
22-30	6	16
31-40	4	11

Table 2 GEOG214, age of students, 1992.

Source: CSD teaching evaluation questionnaire

The university's assumption behind the credit point weighting of the subject is 7 hours work per week outside class time. When asked to complete the sentence 'outside of class in an average week I work on this subject for...', 79% admitted spending less than 5 hours per week (table 3).

Time (hrs)	Number	Per cent
less than 2	4	11
2-4	25	68
5-7	6	16
8-11	1	3
over 12	1	3

Table 3 GEOG214, average time spent outside class per week, 1992.

Source: CSD teaching evaluation questionnaire

The second questionnaire showed that half the sample read a newspaper every day, fairly evenly divided between tabloids and 'quality' papers. Seventy-five per cent read the Sydney Morning Herald at least weekly (table 4). Eleven per cent read the Australian at least weekly. Twenty-one people (75%) watched television news daily, mostly on commercial stations (table 5). Nineteen (68%) listen to radio news each day, most commonly on commercial FM stations. Four people listen daily to ABC radio news.

The most commonly read magazines include Australian Geographic (5 people), Tracks (4), Cleo, National Geographic, Ecos and Time (3 each).

No compulsory text is used in this course, but the three references in table 6 are recommended for reading by all students. I try to emphasise that they are a lead in to the journal literature rather than sufficient in themselves. Much higher proportions clearly find Flood's *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* (an illustrated book aimed at a general audience, without systematic referencing) both easy to read and more interesting,

media, in the sense of it being more part of their daily lives. They are audiovisual in their news-gathering habits, and draw predominantly on commercial sources.

I was somewhat surprised that most had occasional contact with what we might call 'quality' written media: only five of the twenty-eight do not read magazines regularly. I expected to find that they were not readers at all. Clearly they are readers, but of a

Paper	More often than weekly	Weekly	Less often than weekly
Illawarra Mercury	46	2	29
Sydney Morning Herald	32	43	21
Telegraph Mirror	18	11	64
Australian	4	7	75

Table 4 Frequency of newspaper reading, as per cent of total sample (N=28). Source: author's questionnaire

Station	Watched Daily
Commercials	54
ABC	14
SBS	7

Table 5 Stations watched for TV news, as per cent of total sample (N=28). Source: author's questionnaire

by comparison with White and O'Connell's *A Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul*, and Dodson's *The Naive Lands. Prehistory and environmental change in Australia and the Southwest Pacific*, both of which are more academic.

## Discussion

As might be expected, these children of the electronic age are more familiar with electronic than written

Author	Easy to read	Difficult to read	Interesting	Useful for Course
Flood	93	0	63	67
White and O'Connell	44	12	35	56
Dodson	56	16	38	64

Table 6 Respondents' attitudes to references (as per cent of total sample). (E.g. 'interesting' = the top two of five points between very interesting and very boring) Source: author's questionnaire

particular type of literature. I suspect that in these characteristics they are similar to (or at least no more in touch than) the 'informed layperson'.

The concept of the informed layperson implies both self-education and a high level of enthusiasm. Perhaps unrealistically, we generally expect our students to be better informed than such a person, and we would be delighted if they were as enthusiastic.

The informed layperson of course has

none of the pressures of assessment which can dull the keenness of even the most enthusiastic undergraduate. In overview subjects like GEOG 214 there is an emphasis on breadth of coverage of the course material. Some of this comprehensiveness may need to be sacrificed to allow the students to engage topics in greater depth. It is always a fine line to tread, but in any case exam scripts testify that coverage does not necessarily equate with either comprehension or retention.

Students' attitudes to the references may surprise no one who is familiar with those books, and I make no comment on their relative qualities, except to say that the most 'popular' is the one with the most obscure referencing system. Whether this is the reason for its popularity is not clear from this information. I know from essays that students find it difficult to distinguish Flood's interpretations from the findings and

interpretations of the individual researchers she refers to. Or perhaps they do not even try - the format of referencing in a book for a general audience makes it easy for lazy students to avoid any contact with the original sources.

It is all too easy to criticise textbooks, and that is not my intention at all.

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There is an important role for each of the three mentioned in this course. The problem is when the students use the texts as the endpoint rather than the beginning of their reading. That the percentages finding the three references 'useful for the course' are much more even, suggests that students know what is good for them, even if they do not particularly enjoy it.

## Successes, failures and suggestions

In this section I share some of the strategies I have developed, successfully and unsuccessfully, to cope with the situation as presented. In 1992 I decided for the first time that I had to explicitly confront students' attitudes to Aborigines and Aboriginality, even though it is not strictly part of the course. I devoted half the tutorial schedule to tutes specifically on these themes. It should be noted here that for science students, tutorials (small group reading and discussion sessions) have virtually disappeared with the burgeoning student numbers. Even in geography, several of my colleagues expressed surprise that I was attempting to run them. There is increasing pressure to run large group pracs only. These tutes were designed to be controversial, and to generate discussion. Topics covered included Aboriginal perceptions of land and space, land rights (looking particularly at the Mabo case), changing definitions of hunter-gatherers and 'who owns the past?' Aboriginal speakers contributed. The success of these tutes, as measured by the amount of discussion generated, was variable. Some of the best discussions occurred in the one group containing an Aboriginal student prepared to talk about her Aboriginality. Just meeting her was clearly a learning experience for many of the others.

In the other half of the tutorial program, students were asked to prepare a poster presentation on a topic of their choice. This was in part an attempt to bring out their supposedly visual way of operating, and in part an attempt to develop their poor presentation skills. Overwhelmingly, they found this the most difficult task of the entire course. The number of 'grandmothers' funerals' and 'medical conditions' occurring on the presentation days was significantly higher than for any of the other deadlines in the course. In particular they found it difficult to choose a topic, difficult talking in front of a (small) group

and difficult to have their work displayed in front of their peers. As well as some surprisingly good presentations and discussions, there was the usual quota of dead silences, excruciating shyness and embarrassingly poor presentations.

My impression was that the students found the tutorials pretty close to disastrous, but this did not come out in the questionnaire at all. They were more likely to find other people's presentations interesting (59%) than boring (22%). When asked for their suggestions on how to structure tutorials, there was strong support for the way we had done it; combining traditional discussions of set readings with the poster presentations. There was, however, one major difference, which comments like these highlight:

*'give weekly homework to make us look up information and learn it, and to hand it up to be marked.'*

*'punish those who don't do readings'  
'make us read more'*

That is, they liked the way the tutes were structured and they valued the opportunity for discussion, but they want to be forced to do the work. They are uneasy investing effort in something that has only an indirect link with their final result. Fundamentally, they will do nothing, including reading, unless there are marks in it. This reflects a wider trend in the commodification of education. Many students seem to feel that what they are (now) paying for is information, and since they are a client group, the responsibility is on the provider to force it into them. Many teachers would see our role as teaching them how to think, whether about archaeological or geographical or chemical evidence. There is a mismatch of expectations here that teachers must constantly address. And the option to address it by, say, marking weekly summaries, even if that were educationally desirable, is not viable in the current climate of resource constraints. In fact there is strong pressure to go in the other direction, for example to use computer-marked tests.

## Conclusion

The issues that I have discussed are strongly influenced by the needs and problems of science students. It remains to be seen whether this reflects the experience of people teaching prehistory in the humanities. One

suggestion is that there is a market for papers written with the undergraduate (and their teachers) in mind. It is relatively difficult to find up to date, well-referenced reviews of particular themes that are accessible to the average undergraduate. Certainly we want them to get into the 'real' literature eventually, but for these students there is a yawning gap between an illustrated book for a general audience and the latest issue of the leading journals in the discipline. In line with the increasing recognition of teaching in the tenure and promotion process, we might need to recognise writing specifically for this audience. Like all academics coming to terms with accountability, Australian prehistorians are learning to communicate in different ways to different audiences, from local Aboriginal communities to the Australian public as a whole. It is important that undergraduates and their specific needs are included in this discussion.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Belinda Meakins for assistance in compiling questionnaire results.

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### Notes

- (1) The figures in this paper are all for 1992
- (2) As not everyone answered this question, the numbers on which the percentages are based are often slightly less than 28.

## References

- Dodson, J.R. (ed.) 1992 *The Naive Lands. Prehistory and environmental change in Australia and the Southwest Pacific*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire
- Flood, J. 1989 *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*. Sydney: Collins
- White, J.P. with O'Connell, J.F. 1982 *A Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul* Sydney: Academic Press.

## Appendix 1

Questions asked in author's questionnaire. The questions were laid out in such a way that students had to simply tick one or more boxes or circle a

number, except where further comment was requested.

1. How often do you read the following newspapers?  
Illawarra Mercury/SMH/Telegraph Mirror/  
Australian/Other Daily/2-3 times week/Weekly/  
Less Often/Never
2. How often do you watch the following TV news?  
Win/Prime/ABC/9/7/10/SBS  
Daily/2-3 times week/Weekly/Less Often/Never
3. How often do you listen to radio news? Specify station.  
Daily/2-3 times week/Weekly/Less Often/Never
4. What magazines do you read on a regular basis, if any.
5. Did you find the preparation of the poster too difficult/too boring? (Circle on a five point scale)
6. Did you find the presentation of the poster too difficult/too boring? (Circle on a five point scale)
7. Did you find other people's presentations mostly interesting/mostly boring? (Circle on a five point scale)
8. What were the most useful aspects of the poster exercise?
9. What were the least useful aspects of the poster exercise?
10. What did you learn from the poster exercise?
11. What do you think is the best way to structure tutorials?
12. How do you rate the following references?  
(circle on a five point scale)  
Read it cover to cover/Never looked at it  
Easy to read/Difficult to read  
Very boring/Very interesting  
Very useful for course/Not useful for course

### The references were:

- Flood, J. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*
- White, J.P. and O'Connell, J. A. *Prehistory of Australia, New Guinea and Sahul*
- Dodson, J. (ed.) *The Naive Lands. Prehistory and Environmental Change in Australia and the Southwest Pacific*
- Frankel, D. *Remains to be Seen*