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## Teething Problems in the Academy: negotiating the transition to large-class teaching in the discipline of history

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### Abstract

In this paper we provide a template for transitioning from tutorial to larger-class teaching environments in the discipline of history. We commence by recognising a number of recent trends in tertiary education in Australian universities that have made this transition to larger-class sizes an imperative for many academics: increased student enrolments in the absence of a concomitant rise in teaching staff levels, greater emphasis on staff's research and service, and governmental and institutional pressures to maximize resource efficiency. All this, of course, taking place in an environment where staff are required to engage with discipline-specific pedagogies in teaching and learning to ensure that their departments, faculties and institutions successfully meet and maintain standards of quality in the delivery of higher education. The main challenge historians face here, we argue, is to ensure that the 'higher order thinking skills' associated with the discipline are developed in a learning environment often deemed incompatible with doing so. Dealing with this issue requires a particular approach to curriculum design, one that systematically unpacks the signature skills of historical thinking/writing/reading and engages with the pedagogy of large-class teaching environments. What follows is an account of our foray into unfamiliar territory, which, we hope, can act as a guide to academics moving in a similar direction.

### Keywords

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## **Teething Problems in the Academy: negotiating the transition to large-class teaching in the discipline of history**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we provide a template for transitioning from tutorial to larger-class teaching environments in the discipline of history. We commence by recognising a number of recent trends in tertiary education in Australian universities that have made this transition to larger-class sizes an imperative for many academics: increased student enrolments in the absence of a concomitant rise in teaching staff levels, greater emphasis on staff's research and service, and governmental and institutional pressures to maximize resource efficiency. All this, of course, taking place in an environment where staff are required to engage with discipline-specific pedagogies in teaching and learning to ensure that their departments, faculties and institutions successfully meet and maintain standards of quality in the delivery of higher education. The main challenge historians face here, we argue, is to ensure that the 'higher order thinking skills' associated with the discipline are developed in a learning environment often deemed incompatible with doing so. Dealing with this issue requires a particular approach to curriculum design, one that systematically unpacks the signature skills of historical thinking/writing/reading and engages with the pedagogy of large-class teaching environments. What follows is an account of our foray into unfamiliar territory, which, we hope, can act as a guide to academics moving in a similar direction.

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## Introduction

The Australian higher education sector is currently facing a revolution in terms of its funding, enrolments and course structures. The 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (hereafter, Bradley Review) recommended lifting the cap on student enrolments to improve access to tertiary education and to ensure a more educated workforce. The Review also recommended greater Federal government funding for the nation's universities to meet this demand. Although the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments have allocated larger portions of their budgets to this purpose, higher-education providers in Australia, as in the United Kingdom and North America, continue to face ever-increasing financial pressures on their activities, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis. In addition, and in response to developments in Europe (through the Bologna Accord most specifically) and the United States, Australian universities have been paying close attention to how their courses are structured, with new moves to more closely monitor the alignment and interrelation of modules within particular disciplines and degrees. In the midst of such seismic shifts, universities and their teachers must continue to maintain and improve teaching quality and learning outcomes, even as the student-to-staff ratio continues to increase.

Faced with these challenges, and the expectation that pedagogical expertise be added to the list of one's specialties, teachers will have to change the ways in which they teach. Most higher-education institutions offer professional-development programs to help with this transition. Yet the teaching and learning strategies that these programs offer can be too generic for their smooth assimilation into current teaching approaches and curricula. In this article, the authors seek to provide a blend of both generic and discipline-specific strategies to help teachers negotiate the changing environment of the tertiary-level teaching of history.

One particular focus of the Bradley Review was the improvement of quality-assurance arrangements for the higher-education sector, as part of a broader framework of accreditation and regulation (2008, pp. xx-xxii). The Review recommended the establishment of 'indicators and instruments to directly assess and compare learning outcomes; and a set of formal statements of academic standards by discipline along with processes applying those standards' (p. xii). In recognition of this advice, the Rudd Government announced in 2009 that it would introduce legislation to set up the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) during 2010 (although this has been delayed until autumn 2011). TEQSA will extend the reach of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (established in March 2000) to regulate the entire Australian higher-education sector. The Rudd Government outlined its strategy for reform in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* (2009). In this document, the Government indicated its aim to collaborate with members of the academic community to formulate new, discipline-specific criteria for quality assessment. 'Discipline communities will "own" and take responsibility for implementing academic standards ... within the academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and, importantly, academic autonomy' (2009, p. 32).

Following this emphasis on discipline-specific guidelines, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) commenced a Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project in 2009 to demonstrate the processes by which academic standards might be defined for a particular academic community. The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities recommended that history and geography would be ideal disciplines to participate in this project, which was supported at the ALTC National Standards Forum in February 2010 (ALTC 2010a). The following month, the Discipline Scholar, Professor Iain Hay of Flinders University, appointed a Discipline Reference Group (DRG) to prepare a draft of threshold learning outcomes (ALTC

2010b, p. 5). The outcomes were ‘intended to represent the minimum standards of achievement for Bachelor degree graduates with a major in the discipline of History’ (ALTC 2010b, p. 6). These draft guidelines have been circulated within the discipline community, shared with the Geography DRG and revised to reflect feedback. In early December 2010, the History DRG released its History Standards Statement for ‘quality assurance and to Australia’s historians’, so that these guidelines might be incorporated into such areas as curriculum development and benchmarking (ALTC 2010b, p. 8). The Statement outlines eight Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) that focus on the skills of knowledge, research, analysis, communication and reflection (see Table 1). Meanwhile, an ALTC-funded project is underway to develop guidelines for the implementation of these TLOs in History curricula across the higher-education sector.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Threshold Learning Outcomes (ALTC 2010b, pp. 10-11)**

<i>Knowledge</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Demonstrate an understanding of at least one period or culture of the past.</li> <li>2) Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of conceptual approaches to interpreting the past.</li> <li>3) Show how history and historians shape the present and the future.</li> </ol>
<i>Research</i>	4) Identify and interpret a wide variety of secondary and primary materials.
	5) Examine historical issues by undertaking research according to the methodological and ethical conventions of the discipline.
<i>Analysis</i>	6) Analyse historical evidence, scholarship and changing representations of the past.
<i>Communication</i>	7) Construct an evidence-based argument or narrative in audio, digital, oral, visual or written form.
<i>Reflection</i>	8) Identify and reflect critically on the knowledge and skills developed in their study of history.

## Methodology

This section describes our research into how academic staff have responded to these political, economic and institutional pressures on their teaching practice, noting a number of typical difficulties, and offers insights into how engagement with the discipline-specific scholarship of teaching and learning in history might facilitate a transition to large-class teaching that does not undermine the quality of the teaching and learning experience. This research is a composite of two projects completed pursuant to our separate involvement as interns in the university’s Postgraduate Teaching Internship Scheme (for details on the scheme, see Fox 2009; Long 2009).

The first project, undertaken in 2009, examined how a small community of academics experienced

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<sup>1</sup> DRG member and UNSW Associate Professor Sean Brawley is leading the ALTC-funded Priority Project, ‘After Standards: engaging and embedding History’s Standards using international best practice to inform curriculum renewal’.

the transition to larger class sizes.<sup>2</sup> Due to the relatively small number of faculty in the History discipline, the first project used a simple survey and interview method to gather their views on the transition to larger class sizes. The participants of this study included the 16 History academic staff, of whom eight were women. The project scope did not include sessional staff, as they are generally not responsible for designing course structures. The survey took the form of an anonymous questionnaire of 28 questions, which were designed to assess a number of factors relating to the shift towards larger class sizes and group work. These factors included understanding of the pedagogical issues involved in teaching larger classes; opinions on why the transition to larger classes was underway; how teaching larger classes aligned with their personal beliefs about teaching and learning; the extent to which they had changed their style of teaching to suit larger classes; and their impressions of the implications of larger class sizes for student learning after implementation. On their questionnaires, four staff nominated themselves for individual interviews during which they could state their personal views on the transition to larger class sizes. Foremost among their concerns were that larger class sizes and the necessity for increased emphasis on group work had the potential to diminish the quality of their teaching, and that competing pressures on their time affected their ability to make this transition effectively.

The findings from this project led to a subsequent study in 2010, which sought to engage with both the discipline-specific scholarship of teaching and learning in history and the generic pedagogy of group work to offer strategies and teaching materials to help academics adjust to the new teaching and learning conditions. The main thrust of this research was to identify pedagogical best practice in undergraduate history teaching and to identify the challenges that large-class teaching and group-work learning posed to approaching best practice. With these challenges in mind, the next objectives were to design curricula and teaching materials capable of disarming dissatisfaction with large-class teaching and group work and to develop a range of activities and teaching materials that would consistently encourage students to develop and practice the higher-order thinking skills associated with the discipline. First, we locate the faculty concerns learned from the 2009 project in terms of the broader scholarship on teaching and learning, particularly with regard to the challenges posed by group work and large-class teaching. We then consider ways that academics can manage the transition to large-class teaching environments and foster the development of 'historical thinking' in a group-work format, in accordance with the latest quality-assessment standards.

### **Section 1: Teething problems**

As student enrolments have grown and staffing levels have remained steady, and as universities struggle to maintain current teaching workloads, the size of traditional tutorials in undergraduate history units has become problematic. Tutorials of around 10 students are becoming a thing of the past. Classes of between 16 and 25 students are now more common, while the incorporation of workshops of between 30 and 40 students, as replacements for tutorials, are also featured in a number of undergraduate units. For many, these are unfamiliar teaching environments and present a range of challenges to the quality of the student learning experience. In our survey, the responses of academic staff to this situation were, unsurprisingly, mixed: some argued that it was opening up new teaching possibilities, while others were more skeptical, suggesting that diminished staff-to-student ratios would negatively affect teaching quality. The scholarship of teaching and learning suggests the legitimacy of both hope and skepticism.

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<sup>2</sup> This survey and interview process took place in August 2009. During this time, there were ongoing discussions among faculty and administrators regarding the nature and impacts of university-wide course restructuring.

Skepticism about making an effective transition to larger class sizes was based, to a large extent, around time. With the pending implementation of new degree structures at the university and concomitant changes to workload models, a great deal of time was, and is, being allocated to the committees and working parties that manage these changes. At the same time, expectations to research and publish have continued to increase. All these factors place pressure on a healthy work/life balance. Not surprisingly, the time to engage with pedagogy appropriate to large-class teaching, redesign curricula and develop new teaching materials has been very hard to come by (though institutional assistance does exist).

Since Boyer's (1990) emphasis on the value of improving the quality of tertiary teaching in the early 1990s, higher-education providers have introduced programs to facilitate training in this area. At the authors' university, the Teaching and Learning Centre was established in 1995, which later became CATL (Robson 1995). Since its inception, it has successfully promoted greater awareness of teaching and learning scholarship throughout the university, fostered reflective teaching practices and encouraged the adoption of new and/or alternative teaching strategies to improve learning outcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Bodies like CATL have an important role to play in helping academics negotiate the new demands and expectations of tertiary teaching, though, as mentioned previously, meeting the TEQSA threshold learning outcomes will require discipline-specific (as opposed to teacher- or unit-specific) changes to teaching strategies and curriculum design. The generic focus of CATL professional-development activities (eLearning, time management, academic portfolios, equity and diversity, assessment and feedback) combined with the relative dearth of scholarship of teaching and learning related specifically to history (and lack of familiarity with it), has made navigating the transition to large class sizes a challenging proposition.

Our interviews revealed that compounding these difficulties was a sense shared by many faculty members that regardless of engagement with teaching and learning scholarship, increased student-to-staff ratios would negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning. The foreseeable problems were not related to the ability to transmit knowledge (TEQSA 1-3), but centered on the ability to develop higher-order thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, critique. With reduced personal contact between staff and students, staff were also concerned that students would feel 'short-changed'. In spite of these concerns, a teacher who had phased out tutorials in favour of workshops found that many students flourished with greater autonomy and teamwork. Further research revealed that other members of the History discipline, who had not been interviewed for the author's project, had found similar positive results in their experiences with the workshop-teaching format, such as group discussion and the sharing of ideas between groups (see Beidatsch 2007).

Despite evidence of some success with the introduction of workshops in the History discipline at the authors' university, there remains much conjecture in the scholarship of teaching and learning about the quality of learning outcomes in large classes. These concerns centre largely on the role of small-group learning in the workshop format. Under workshop conditions, students are commonly divided into small groups, which become the locus of learning through interaction and participation (Beidatsch 2007). Numerous studies identify a raft of problems with group work, while a host of others trumpet its benefits. The aim of the first research project was to determine what factors would ensure that students received the positive benefits of group work. The second sought to determine what factors were necessary to promote one specific objective: the development of the signature skills of the historian in reading, researching, thinking and writing.

In terms of the difficulties associated with group work, the literature shows that a number of complaints surface repeatedly (Habeshaw, Gibbs & Habeshaw 1992). Perhaps the most serious of these is that large-class teaching environments are not conducive to stimulating and developing high-order thinking skills, such as analysis, evaluation and critical reflection (McKeachie 1980). A key issue here is the implication of diminished teacher-student interaction for the ability of teachers to monitor student participation, and for both students and teachers to provide feedback on the other's performance (McKeachie 1999). This is because, as Booth has suggested, 'learning the discipline knowledge and the patterns of disciplinary understanding occurs through interpersonal activity – discussion, exploration, thinking out loud, modeling approaches, and personally demonstrating historical method' (Booth, in Booth & Hyland, 2000, p. 35). Where the potential for tutor-student interaction diminishes, as it does in large-class learning environments, the argument follows that the extent to which the high-order skills of the discipline can be taught is reduced (Booth 2000). While this straightforward relationship between staff-student ratio and quality of teaching has become problematic (Gibbs, Lucas & Simonite 2006; Williams, Cook, Quinn & Jensen 1985), it cannot be ignored.

A related concern with group work has been that a lack of supervision would lead to a lack of direction and focus in class (Gibbs & Jenkins 1992). Students have also registered concern that their individual marks will depend on the work of other students. If teachers do not closely supervise their work, they fear that the quality of their contributions will not be rewarded (Burdett 2003; Goldfinch & Raeside 1990). This can lead to feelings of frustration, powerlessness and anonymity (Tiberius 1995). Likewise, in the absence of close supervision, individual opinions might be lost amidst louder voices (Sarkisian 1990), and some students might slack off (Payne & Monk-Turner 2006) while others refuse to delegate (Tiberius 1995). Failing to manage these problems can diminish incentives to participate and negatively affect student attendance rates. Compounding these problems are those associated with the geography of large-class learning environments (TEDI 2001a) and assessing the performance of large numbers of students (TEDI 2001b). Importantly though, research also suggests that quality preparation circumvents class size as the primary determinant of a quality learning experience (Gibbs Lucas & Simonite 1996).

## **Section 2: Negotiating the transition to large-class teaching environments**

With these observations in mind, the second research project sought to offer insights into managing the transition from small- to large-class teaching environments with a focus on group work in such a way that increased class sizes did not diminish students' ability to learn and develop the 'signature skills' of the historian (the phrase is from Clarke 2009).

The first aim was to consult the discipline-specific scholarship of teaching history at the tertiary level to provide a basis for interpreting the generic threshold learning outcomes in the TEQSA draft history standards. If teachers and discipline groups are required to demonstrate how these standards are being met, we felt it important to clearly elaborate what these outcomes meant, to show how our approach to curricula design, development of teaching materials and teaching practices contributed to achieving them. While we discuss the necessity and value of asking these kinds of questions in the first part of this final section, more specific interpretations of the TEQSA standards are outlined in the section's final part. The second aim was to provide insights into how the various pitfalls of group-working could be avoided; particularly, what strategies could be adopted to ensure learning environments conducive to the development of high-order thinking skills. The third aim was to develop a set of materials that might act as guides to others in managing the transition to large-class teaching. Excerpts from these materials are included to

indicate our own foray into managing the transition to large classes in which group work functions as the primary incubator for discussion and preliminary critique of materials.

## Teaching and learning in history

As Jennifer Clark has identified, teaching history is a complicated business, one in which it is not always easy for historians to make explicit to students the various assumptions, skills and conceptual frameworks that they bring to their reading, research and writing (2009). This is not made any clearer by the generic standards and expected outcomes listed in the preponderance of course outlines that students are given, nor in the often vague criteria of marking rubrics. A similar vagueness characterises the 'draft history standards' prepared for TEQSA that will be used to assess the quality of teaching and learning in history faculties around the nation. While the generic nature of the latter is desirable, as it allows history staff and faculties flexibility in the delivery of history units, it becomes problematic for students if the specific skill sets are not made explicit to them (in unit outlines, rubrics, lectures, tutorials, workshops and so on). The less explicit they are, the less likely these skills will be *systematically* modeled, practiced, developed and assessed.

What are the implications, for example, of summaries of 'historical skills and qualities of mind' that include, as a critical component, 'the ability to read texts and sources critically and empathetically' (Timmins, Vernon & Kinealy 2005, p. 99). Generic statements of this kind are found in unit outlines for history courses around the nation and remain meaningless to the extent that they remain generic. Yes, reading secondary sources 'critically' is important, but what exactly does that mean? As Wineburg has noted, the kinds of things historians do when they read texts, the kinds of processes they go through when critiquing sources and the complex reasoning skills involved is often a great mystery to undergraduates (2001; Clark 2009). Why is it that historians pay special attention to the acknowledgements or plough through footnotes in the manner they do? What kinds of notes do they take when reading, and why? If these habits or dispositions are common and represent particular ways that historians engage with (rather than simply read) texts, how can these habits be taught? If we do not break up generic outcomes statements into specific kinds of skills that can be modeled, practiced, assessed and improved, outcomes statements will remain uninformative and unhelpful.

Teaching these specific skills, or, the 'historian's way of thinking' through the *systematic* modeling and practicing of certain skills is relatively new, at least in the discipline's scholarship on teaching and learning (Clarke 2009; Richlin & Witman 2007), if not in academics' actual practice. Jennifer Clark provides a useful summation of the literature that does exist, and draws several key principles for the practical delivery of units designed to teach 'history-specific skills (2009).' First, these skills must be '*explicitly* taught within the context of content,' with each element of the historian's approach to doing history' identified, explained and taught purposefully (2009, p. 8). Clark suggests that 'no element of the historian's practice of research, selection of relevant material, reading deeply into historical documents, developing an argument or constructing a written account should be implicit in the teaching or taken as assumed knowledge (2009, p. 8).' The second principle is that skills should be taught incrementally through task-based activities, with the various elements of historical thinking identified and located within the broader processes of researching, reading and writing in history. As Clark suggests, each skill should be 'isolated, presented, taught, and practiced,' whether this be in the approaches one takes to primary source criticism, engagement with secondary sources or communicating one's findings (2009, p. 8); more on this shortly. The third principle is that assessment should be tied to learning outcomes, a foundational principle of teaching and learning pedagogy, but one that needs to be revisited in light of the principles previously mentioned (2009, p. 8). To these principles we would add a fourth: the need to cater to the teaching and development of these skills for the context in which

teaching and learning takes place. The main obstacle here has been to determine an effective means of teaching students to ‘think historically’ in a large-class teaching environment where groups function as the primary incubators for debate, discussions, analysis, evaluation and critique.

### **Group work in large-class teaching environments**

If we expect groups to operate as a primary site for the development of ‘historical thinking,’ and if we expect to satisfy quality-control standards such as those introduced through TEQSA, it is incumbent upon us to both design group-based tasks that develop the evaluative, analytical and critical skills of the historian, *and* help students develop the teamwork skills (such as, cooperation, delegation, collaboration and conflict management) to create learning environments conducive to developing those critical skills. This, of course, requires significant pre-course preparation of materials that many historians may be unfamiliar with. Successful classes require more than the careful selection of readings. It is also necessary to develop materials and tasks that encourage students to work effectively in groups (TEDI 2002). For time-poor academics, this kind of groundwork can look distinctly unappealing, though it is exactly what is needed to circumvent the major complaints students register in relation to group work (as outlined in Section 1).

### **Disarming dissatisfaction**

Following Stevens and Levi (2005), we decided to involve students in the collaborative construction of a ‘Class-Participation Rubric.’ Our aims were to familiarise students with the unit outline and the assessment task and criteria, and to give them a voice in determining how their class participation would be assessed. Research suggests that collaborative processes like this are very effective in familiarising students with course objectives and contributing to a sense of student ownership of the course (Lewis, Berghoff & Pheeney 1999). This was crucial for us, as we wished, right from the beginning, to allay students’ fears about: (1) their powerlessness/lack of a voice in a large-group learning environment; and (2) our ability to allocate marks for participation in a fair and reasonable way.

We proceeded with a general introduction to rubrics. The first question we asked students was, ‘What do assessment rubrics tell you about the assessment?’ Displaying an assessment rubric for the major Research Essay assessment, we sought to elicit the following responses: (1) rubrics outline the different assessable components of an assessment; (2) rubrics detail the mark allocation for each assessable component; and (3) rubrics outline the criteria matched to a certain level of achievement. With these foundational (but rarely articulated) basics established, student groups were directed to consult the unit outline and generate a list of assessable components for workshop participation. Collectively, the eight groups in the two workshops identified what we thought should be the key components of assessment: attendance, group work (general contributions to the group, notes produced by group), group presentations (both five-minute mini-presentations and the 20-minute major presentation) and individual contributions.

This exercise was followed by a discussion of how each should be weighted. This process was, as mentioned, designed to give students a sense of ownership over that element of large-group teaching likely to engender the greatest dissatisfaction (McKeachie 1999). Students were encouraged to reflect on the importance of attendance to the functioning of the workshops, to assess the extent to which they thought they could make contributions to class through their groups and individually, and to suggest a relative weighting (subject to our final say) for each component. From discussions with students during and after this process, it was clear that the ability to discuss the role of individual contributions to the whole class and de-emphasise the importance of these contributions allayed student concerns over the assessment of participation. Of course, the value of

individual contributions to the class remained important, but it was impractical to assign such contributions a high proportion of marks given the impracticality of giving *all* students an opportunity to participate in discussions involving 35 to 40 people.

The final part of this exercise was to introduce students to the criteria for assessing contributions made individually or on behalf of their group (as opposed to their contributions to group work). This was designed to: (1) familiarise students with our expectations of them; (2) to break down psychological barriers against making contributions in large-class learning environments by providing a framework for those contributions (Horton-Smith 1992); and (3) to illuminate discipline-specific conventions that are rarely given explicit emphasis, or explicitly linked to class-participation assessment (Clark 2009). These conventions relate to the accurate citation of authors and their texts as a prelude to a discussion of those texts. Table 2 provides an example of the ways in which students were expected to conform to discipline-specific conventions when speaking in class.

**Table 2: Guide to Speaking in Class – Talking like an Academic**

<p><b>1. General discussions:</b></p> <p>...</p> <p><b>2. Introducing the findings of your group to the class:</b> When charged with the responsibility for discussing the findings of your group on the week's readings, how should you introduce these findings?</p> <p><u>Excellent:</u> "I'm Tim from 'the Hippies', and our group was tasked with exploring the ways ideas of race were used in the various readings. I am going to draw an example from each of the texts to highlight the different ways these authors think about race – as biological fact, as historical category, as formative process – to show how these approaches have shaped interpretations of the Civil Rights movement...."</p> <p><i>Gives name and group name, tells audience the group's task, tells the rest of the class how the group's findings will be explained.</i></p> <p><u>Good:</u> "I'm Tim from 'the Hippies' and we have been talking about ideas of race in the readings. In Robert Self's chapter on 'Black Power,' the author explores ideas of race in 1960s Oakland...."</p> <p><i>Very brief introduction; no real framework for discussion established before correctly directing class attention to author, text and argument.</i></p> <p><u>Average:</u> "In the first text, the author explores the issues of race and masculinity by looking at the Black Panther response to police brutality in West Oakland."</p> <p><i>Dives straight in, with no mention of author or text. This will not interfere with good points being made, but it only indirectly refers the class to the text you will be discussing and doesn't provide a general framework for that discussion.</i></p> <p><u>Poor:</u> "Our group didn't get to look at many of the sources, but we think some of the following issues might be important."</p> <p><i>Prefaces any good points that might be made with acknowledgement of poor preparation and time management. Don't alert people to your ignorance, it will speak for itself.</i></p> <p><u>Disastrous:</u> "I'm Tim." Tim panics and runs away. Complete silence follows.</p>
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## Building group-working skills

With a diminished opportunity for teacher-student interaction in large-class learning environments, developing high-order thinking skills becomes a more difficult proposition (Grimm, Soares, Agrawal & Law 2007). Where the level of student-student interaction through group work increases and the group becomes the primary unit for the task-based development of the historian's skills, it is incumbent upon us to ensure students can operate effectively in groups. To initially promote awareness of the skills needed to ensure effective group work, we had students outline the qualities of the ideal group member: perfect attendance, solid preparation, initiates discussion, facilitates discussion, listens well, compromises well, keeps the group focused on its task. Doing so provides students with a model for monitoring their performance and the performance of others in their group, and, while these attributes may seem fairly obvious, they are rarely explicitly outlined, modeled or consciously developed in class.

After detailing these attributes, students were given the opportunity to put them into practice in the second workshop of the semester. The workshop was dedicated to developing the skills involved in primary-source critique (TEQSA 2). To prepare, students considered a range of primary sources on wartime propaganda, *and* were required to read two workshop guides: 'Working in Groups' and 'How to Critique a Primary Source' (excerpts are included in Tables 3 and 4 respectively). Both guides aimed to break up generic skills – 'teamwork' or 'critiquing source material' – into a set of phrases that could be used to facilitate group work, or a set of the kinds of questions that could be asked of source material. In our experience as history undergraduates and postgraduates, we had only once come across the first in class, and had never come across the second.

**Table 3: Guide to Working in Groups**

<b>Working in Groups Managing and Transitioning Between Different Stages</b>	
<b>Issue/Objective</b>	<b>What to Say</b>
STEP 1 - Orienting the discussion - Assigning roles - Delegating tasks	- My understanding of what we have to do is this...do we all agree? - I think we could probably break this task up. Who wants to tackle this source/article/aspect of the task? - We're going to need a set of notes to work off at the end. Who wants to act as the scribe? - For larger tasks: who wants to record what we have discussed, what we decide, what we plan to do next?
STEP 2 - Sharing and encouraging ideas (ensuring everyone has a voice) - Concept checking - Brainstorming	- Let's take a minute or two to hear everyone's views. - Let's spend the first five minutes getting everyone's thoughts down. - Let's list our ideas and clarify them, and then we'll move on to evaluating them. - It seems that you're saying this...is that right? - We'll discuss these ideas after everyone's had a chance to contribute. - Hold on! We can deal with disagreements in a second, but let him/her finish first. - Are there any final thoughts/suggestions/interpretations before we move on?
STEP 3	- Okay, we've got a lot of ideas here. Let's sort them into a few

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evaluating ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>categories. What are some of the common themes?</li> <li>- We're going to present some of these ideas a bit later; why don't we try to rank them in order of importance?</li> <li>- We're a bit divided on this idea/issue. Let's do some brainstorming and figure out the pros and cons of the idea/approach.</li> </ul>
<p>STEP 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moving forward/making decisions</li> <li>- Mediating disagreements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- OK, I think it's fair to say we've agreed on the following points so far....</li> <li>- Any objections if we proceed with these two ideas/develop these ideas further?</li> <li>- We've still got some reservations about proceeding this way. What do we need to do to make this approach more acceptable?</li> <li>- Let's stop for a second and try and figure out what our major points of disagreement are. We don't have to force a decision now.</li> <li>- We're running a bit short of time, so, what about registering our disagreement during the presentation and moving ahead with ideas 1-3? (registering disagreement demonstrates that some debate has occurred.)</li> </ul>
<p>STEP 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preparing to present material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How are we going to introduce the material?</li> <li>- How are we going to present the material? How are we going to frame the presentation?</li> <li>- Who feels like presenting the material? Who hasn't presented yet?</li> <li>- How are we going to conclude the presentation? What points do we need to recap?</li> </ul>

In class and prior to the groups setting out on their task – contextualising and critiquing primary source materials – we modeled our own approach to the task. We highlighted four key components of the task: (1) determining the kinds of questions we needed to ask of each propaganda source; (2) how we would delegate tasks within the group; (3) how long we would allocate for each task; and (4) how we would record and share information. While these seem to be fairly simple instructions, they are important to promoting autonomous student learning in large-group environments and to setting up an environment conducive to tackling difficult or unfamiliar tasks without consistent supervision. The intended aim of such preparation was that the group-work process itself should enable the development and honing of higher-order thinking skills.

The following approach consistently guided our curriculum design: (1) development of materials to structure group work; (2) identification of the specific skills we were seeking to build (reading, writing, thinking, communicating in certain ways); and (3) the development of group-based tasks to build those skills.

**Table 4: Critique of Primary Sources**

<b>Critical Commentary of Primary Sources (excerpt)</b>
<p>A good critical analysis of an historical source requires a willingness and ability to ask questions of the material. Your capacity to ask meaningful questions will reflect, firstly, your knowledge of the historical context in which the source was produced; and secondly, the intellectual frameworks you can use to interpret a source (categories of analysis such as class, gender, race, nation).</p> <p><b>Historiographical Knowledge</b></p> <p>The source materials you interpret will reflect, to varying degrees, the social, economic, political, religious, moral, medical, intellectual and geographical conditions in which they were produced. That is, it may be a document created during slavery, depression, political upheaval, religious revival, moral panic, epidemic, period of discovery or invention, time of environmental crisis etc.</p> <p>Does the author/artist/photographer reflect or repudiate social/political/economic etc. views that were widespread at the time? Is the author part of an intellectual, political or religious tradition or movement? Is the document unique or is it typical of the time?</p>

### **Aligning learning objectives, workshop tasks and student assessment**

In what follows, we provide a truncated account of how we have translated a range of TEQSA ‘threshold learning outcomes’ into sets of skills, approaches or processes that historians adopt when engaged in the business of reading, researching and writing history. We focus specifically on ‘reading like an historian’, ‘formulating historical problems’ and ‘constructing and supporting an argument in written form’, outlining the constituent skills of these generic proficiencies, the tasks developed to build these skills and the assessment mechanisms employed to test and advance skills development.

#### **Book Reviewing: How to read like an historian**

The second ‘threshold learning outcome’ from the TEQSA draft history standards requires students when they graduate to be able to ‘...identify, analyse, contextualise and synthesise a wide variety of...secondary materials.’ In short, graduates must be able to read and think like historians, approaching texts with the same kinds of skills and objectives. This approach should become habitual. Reading for content remains important; TEQSA 1 requires that students ‘possess knowledge of one or more periods of the past.’ However, satisfying TEQSA 2 requires that students appreciate the mechanics of the text – they must be able to identify the thesis statement, note the lines of argument used to support the thesis and the evidentiary base that supports that argument, discern the analytical framework that shapes the critique (TEQSA 5) – and have an appreciation of the text’s purpose: what scholarly conversation is the author engaged in (Clark 2009)? Who is the author addressing, or to whom is the author responding (Wineburg 2001)?

Preparation was again crucial. To highlight the skills we wanted students to develop and to show students how historians read the work of other historians, they were tasked with reading book reviews of the week’s readings from leading journals in the discipline. In addition, students were required to read Rael’s ‘A Guide to Reading Secondary Sources (2004)’. Both the reviews and the guide were designed to shape the way students took notes on the readings. In class, the workshop groups broke up into smaller teams; one sub-group identified thesis statements, another identified

key analytical concepts and how they were put to use (race, gender, class, space etc.), a third identified the bodies of literature the scholar was speaking to and a fourth identified the kinds of sources the author drew upon to advance the thesis. Following the completion of these delegated tasks, the groups came back together and compiled their notes on each source. Finally all groups were brought together for a general discussion. To formally assess the extent to which students could dissect the texts they read and to provide feedback on their progress, students were required to write a book review on one of the readings for the following week, allocating a paragraph to each of the four elements discussed above (TEQSA 2 & 5).

### **Annotated Bibliographies: Formulating historical problems**

The fourth TEQSA draft threshold requires that students be able to ‘formulate historical problems and propose and review means for their resolution in a timely fashion.’ In order to translate this generic requirement into a set of skills that could be developed and practiced in class, we asked the following questions: ‘What processes do historians go through in formulating historical problems?’ (Pace & Middendorf 2004); ‘What conventions of style guide how those historical problems are communicated?’; ‘How can we practice these processes and develop these conventions of style in class?’; and ‘How can we assess those processes and conventions of style?’

The first of these questions is incredibly complex (Wineburg 1991; Wineburg 2001). For our purposes here, it is sufficient to indicate that we wanted students to bring their knowledge of some of the major analytical themes of social history – gender, class, race and nation – and use this knowledge in a workshop to consider how a variety of cigarette advertisements (1920-1980) conveyed meaning through their visual imagery and textual content. Did the commercials play on ideas of sexuality, masculinity, freedom, race, class to promote desire for the product, and if so, what does this mean, what does this tell us about the past? In short, we wanted students to use their background knowledge and personal experience to ask as many questions of the sources as possible (TEQSA 1 & 2) and to share their insights with their groups and the class.

We also wanted students to become familiar with the process of taking general insights and queries and framing them into research questions, as well as with the process of turning those questions into thesis statements (TEQSA 4). To facilitate this process, students read ‘Guide to Thesis Statements’ prior to class. To practice these skills, we designed a mock annotated bibliography task to complete in class, requiring groups to analyse historical cigarette advertisements, generate research questions and a thesis statement based on those sources and provide feedback on each other’s work: was the thesis too broad, too narrow, too simple, too obvious? Could the thesis be argued, could it be challenged? Did it require words/phrases/concepts that required further elaboration? Was there a time reference in the thesis? Finally, this task was designed as preparatory for the ‘official’ annotated bibliography and the major research essays, both of which provided the opportunity for students to further develop their skills in formulating historical problems, and provided the means for us to assess those skills.

### **Peer review: How to construct and support an argument in (oral and) written form**

The submission of poorly written and poorly structured assessments is a constant source of consternation for markers; poor assignments take longer to mark, and, given a limited amount of time, the potential to remedy defects in written expression can often appear insurmountable. While there are now services available to students who have difficulty in producing written arguments, this should not absolve lecturers and tutors from introducing students to the discipline-specific conventions of historical writing at university. While this will never amount to a protracted course

in developing written-communication skills, the opportunity always exists to refer students to the use of thesis statements, conventions of introductory paragraphs, the use of referencing, the structure of paragraphs or the role of the conclusion in the various readings they are given. These conventions should be introduced, modelled, practiced and assessed so that texts are not simply viewed as sources for information, but as learning aids.

The annotated-bibliography workshop and assessment played an important role in this process of modelling, practicing and assessing adherence to conventions of style in academic writing; the peer review of essays played another. Research indicates that the process of student-student peer review is effective in making students more aware of assessment criteria, course objectives and the disciplinary skill required to satisfy these criteria and outcomes (Brown, Rust & Gibbs 1994; RMIT 2008). Peer review also encourages students to reflect on the extent to which they are working toward and meeting these objectives (Topping 1996), as critiquing the work of others is effective in building greater awareness of the strengths and problems in one's own work (Zariski 1996). Remedying student suspicion of the peer-review process requires that students have a comprehensive understanding of the ambit of their responsibilities (RMIT 2008): what are they supposed to be reviewing, on what terms, and how should they provide feedback?

To prepare for class, students traded the most recent drafts of their research essays with two members of their workshop groups. This was done at least a day before the workshop, which meant that students provided feedback on two essays and received feedback from two students on their own effort. Students were directed to review the drafts with reference to the following: (1) the research essay marking rubric; (2) the guide to peer review; (3) the guide to thesis statements (Appendix 1); (4) the guide to topic sentences and paragraphs (Appendix 2); and (5) the guide to Oxford Referencing in the unit outline. Collectively, these guides provided the framework for students to give constructive feedback on skills that were assessed in the major research essay, and further familiarised students with the mechanics and conventions of introducing, framing, reiterating and referencing ideas.

**Table 5: Guide to Peer Review**

<u>Preparation:</u>	Read the full 'Guide to Peer-review of Essays' (this outlines the pedagogical rationale for peer review as a formative assessment, one that builds on feedback from the previous assessment: the annotated bibliography).
<u>Aims:</u>	This workshop is designed to: (1) increase awareness of the assessment criteria for the research essay; (2) encourage you to reflect on the extent to which you are working toward, or meeting those criteria; (3) identify areas where your essay might be improved. Specifically, this means we want you to concentrate on the following areas:
<i>1. Introduction</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there a clearly identified thesis statement?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Is the thesis statement too broad, too narrow or too obvious?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Does the introduction provide a road map for how your essay progresses?</li> <li>- Does it indicate the sort of material or evidence you will be using?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are time references used? Do you give the reader a sense of the time frame (as well as the issues) you will be looking at?</li> </ul>
2. Paragraphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are paragraphs headed and framed by topic sentences?</li> <li>- Do the topic sentences relate to the thesis statement?</li> <li>- Do the remaining sentences in the paragraph relate to the topic sentence?</li> <li>- Is there one main idea per paragraph?</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shared our research into how academics have responded to political, economic and institutional pressures on their teaching practice. We have offered insights into how an engagement with the discipline-specific scholarship of teaching and learning in history might facilitate a transition to large-class teaching that does not undermine the quality of the teaching and learning experience. With class sizes growing and pressures on preparation time increasing, many academic staff are concerned that the teaching and learning environment is becoming incompatible with providing students with a quality learning experience. One of the challenges historians face is to ensure that the 'higher-order thinking skills' associated with the discipline are developed through group work in large-class settings. We believe that addressing this issue requires a particular approach to curriculum design, one that systematically unpacks the skills of historical scholarship and engages with the pedagogy of large-class teaching environments.

Our own approach has focused on providing a rationale for incorporating changes into particular units. However, a real opportunity exists, in the context of broader structural changes to course and degree structures across the Australian tertiary sector, for teaching academics to include unit-specific discussions of curriculum design. Opportunities also exist for the development of teaching materials within broader requirements to articulate the interrelation of units and demonstrate the sequential alignment of units within courses. Placing the spotlight on the specific skills that need to be developed in order to satisfy the generic outcomes of the TEQSA threshold learning outcomes should facilitate this kind of dialogue, encourage the sharing and adaptation of teaching materials across units and facilitate the incremental development of the signature skills of the historian over the duration of a course.

In the second section of this article, we have offered insights into managing the transition from small- to large-class teaching environments with a focus on group work. To foster the development of 'historical thinking' in a group-work format that satisfies quality-assessment standards, such as those introduced through TEQSA, we designed group-based tasks to develop the evaluative, analytical and critical skills of the historian, *and* help students develop the teamwork skills that fostered learning environments conducive to developing those skills. In this approach, the process of collaborative learning was used to hone the kinds of skills we were seeking to develop in students. While we hesitate to suggest the direct applicability of this approach to other disciplines, there is no doubt that academics using group work should be cognisant of the many problems associated with it (as outlined previously). If group work has the potential to impede the development of higher-order thinking skills and contribute to student dissatisfaction with their learning experience, what, then, is its value?

The strategies that we have advocated emphasise the importance of clear, open and timely verbal and written communication between teachers and students, and between students and their peers. It

is through such levels of communication that students develop the discipline-specific skills of the historian and the ability to work effectively in group-learning environments. Academic staff would also benefit from discussing with their peers the approaches that they have undertaken to manage their transition to largeclasses. Through the sharing of ideas and fostering of further research into the teaching and learning scholarship of the History discipline, teachers can learn and develop strategies to negotiate their transition to large-class teaching. The changing role of academics from specialists in their fields to experts in pedagogy demands this kind of dialogue and the sharing of this kind of research. Our own reflections on this process, coupled with the insights and feedback of peers and students, will undoubtedly lead to many adjustments and refinements in our approach in the future.

## Appendix 1: Thesis statements

<b>Thesis Statements</b>	
<p>You are required to develop a thesis statement for your annotated bibliography, one that you will continue to develop and refine as you continue to research and write your research essay.</p>	
<p><b>What is it, what does it do?</b></p>	<p>A thesis statement does a number of things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It provides your answer to the question you have been investigating. This may have been the reasons for the Civil War, in which case your subject would be the Civil War and the thesis statement might be something like:</li> </ul> <p><i>'While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government.'</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It makes a claim, telling the reader how you have interpreted the subject matter under discussion.</li> <li>- It tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper: convincing arguments in support of the claim(s) you make in the thesis.</li> <li>- It provides a claim or interpretation that might be disputed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Where does it go?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the annotated bibliography, it will be explicitly stated and designated as your 'thesis statement'.</li> <li>- In your research essay, it should be incorporated into your introductory paragraph(s).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Is it any good?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is it overly simplistic or too obvious to be meaningful: 'The North and South fought the Civil War for different reasons'?</li> <li>- Does the thesis statement lend itself to argument or mere summary?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Can it be challenged?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Does it make a claim that you actually go on to support paragraph by paragraph in your essay? This consideration is obviously more applicable to your research essay than the annotated bibliography.</li> <li>- Is the thesis statement too vague? A tight focus allows for critical interpretation, the major purpose of a research essay and a useful skill to develop.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2: Topic sentences

<b>Writing Your Research Essay: Topic Sentences and Paragraphs</b>	
<p>In your research essays you should be seeking to justify/advance your thesis statement, paragraph by paragraph. This requires you to have a firm idea of what you are arguing and the discipline to stick to that argument throughout the paper.</p> <p>The following information on topic sentences and paragraphs is fairly basic, most likely stuff you already know, but absolutely essential to remind yourself of every time you sit down to write an essay.</p>	
<b>1) Paragraphs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each paragraph should have a clear, singular focus to it. A paragraph is a discrete unit of thought and should be used to expand one specific idea, not three or four. New idea, new paragraph.</li> <li>- Each paragraph should help to justify your thesis. While one idea/thought/concept should be the focus of the paragraph, in order to present a clear, unified train of thought to your reader, you must make sure each paragraph follows the one before it and leads to the one after it through clear, logical transition.</li> <li>- Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence.</li> </ul>
<b>2) Topic sentences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topic sentences organise your paragraphs and introduce the idea/thought to be discussed.</li> <li>- Think of a topic sentence as working in two directions simultaneously. It relates the paragraph to the essay's thesis, and thereby acts as a signpost for the argument of the paper as a whole, but it also defines the scope of the paragraph itself.</li> <li>- Topic sentences often act like a tiny thesis statement. Like a thesis statement, a topic sentence makes a claim of some sort. As the thesis statement is the unifying force in the essay, so the topic sentence must be the unifying force in the paragraph. Further, as is the case with the thesis statement, when the topic sentence makes a claim, the paragraph that follows must expand, describe or prove it in some way. Topic sentences make a point at the beginning of the paragraph, and the following sentences give reasons or examples to support it.</li> </ul>
<b><i>For example, consider that last paragraph.</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The first sentence introduces the idea, stating that a topic sentence is like a 'tiny thesis statement.' The following sentences explain why this is the case, demonstrating the similarities between the thesis statement and the topic sentence.</li> </ul>

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