In search of the middle-ground: Maintaining high teaching standards in large-class teaching environments

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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.

Introduction: Trends in higher education

If a doctor, lawyer, or dentist had 40 people in his office at one time, all of whom had different needs, and some of whom didn’t want to be there and were causing trouble, and the doctor, lawyer, or dentist, without assistance, had to treat them all with professional excellence for nine months, then he might have some conception of the classroom teacher’s job (Quinn).

While the above situation may have been foreign to those teaching in the humanities a decade ago, with academics far more familiar with small-group tutorial teaching than with high-school class sizes, Australian universities have been ‘compelled to cope with huge increases in student numbers and dramatic reductions in funding levels’ (TEDI, 2001a). One consequence of this trend has been the gradual increase in the size of tutorial groups, and in some cases, where the push to maximize resource efficiency has made it necessary, the replacement of tutorials with seminars, workshops and lectures (Beidatsch & Broomhall, 2010b).

Governmental and institutional pressure to increase class sizes has coincided with a greater emphasis being placed on maintaining standards of quality in the delivery of education (TEDI, 2001a). The most recent set of ‘teaching quality’ indicators for historians to take note of are the draft ‘threshold learning outcomes’ prepared for the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (‘TEQSA’); a set of discipline-specific capabilities that history undergraduates should possess at the completion of their degree (see Table 1).
Table 1: TEQSA: Draft history threshold learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upon completion of a Bachelor degree with a major in <strong>History</strong>, graduates will be able to:</th>
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While the intention to cultivate these kinds of capacities no doubt informs the teaching practice of most historians teaching in tertiary institutions across the nation, the ability to teach the ‘higher order thinking skills’ – synthesis, evaluation, critical reflection – and the ability to adduce evidence that these skills are successfully being taught becomes more difficult as class size increases, or so a great deal of scholarship would suggest (Kember, 2007). Given that the trend toward larger class-sizes in history is unlikely to ease, and given the regulatory capacities TEQSA will have in monitoring tertiary teaching standards, it is incumbent upon history staff to consider new approaches to curriculum design and develop new teaching materials to ensure that the signature skills of the historian – critiquing, evaluating, synthesizing, narrating – can be developed in large-class teaching environments.

**Context**

Various institutional pressures combined with high student enrolments in an upper level American history unit have made the delivery of small-group teaching environments impractical. The decision was made to replace tutorials with two workshops, each comprising approximately 35 students. Each workshop was further divided into four groups with students allocated evenly between them. These groups had stable memberships throughout the semester and sat in the same section of the lecture theatre each week. Following Smith (1996), keeping these groups stable throughout the semester was aimed at promoting cooperative learning; familiarity intended to promote interdependence and accountability among group members. This also made it possible to fairly distribute responsibility for recording and presenting the group’s findings in class each week. In addition, group’s had their own online folders to access, as a number of times during semester groups were given different primary source materials to critique in front of the class. The online facility also allowed us to monitor who was actually accessing the online materials. Finally, while groups functioned as the primary incubators for discussion in class, groups were also required to operate outside of class in preparing for the workshops and in preparing one of their major assessments: a twenty minute group presentation to the rest of the class.

In a typical class, students were expected to have prepared by reading a number of articles or chapters to familiarise themselves with the themes to be discussed as well as viewing, listening to, or reading primary source materials that would be critiqued during class. At the beginning of

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1 In providing feedback for the unit through the SPOT survey (Student Perceptions on Teaching), students were requested to comment on the following statement: ‘a class atmosphere conducive to learning has been maintained.’ Students could choose to Strongly Agree (5 points), Agree (4 points), remain Neutral (3 points), Disagree, (2 points), or Strongly Disagree (1 point). We received an average response of 4.41 from forty-five student responses, suggesting that students who provided feedback viewed group-work within the workshop format in a very positive light. No student expressed neutrality in respect of this statement and no students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.
the workshop, the teachers would reiterate the expectations for the task to be completed, whether this was to facilitate familiarity with primary or secondary source critique, to debate key points of a historical discussion, to develop awareness of the analytical themes of social history and so on. These introductions were not more than five minutes in duration and included an indication of how the task could be tackled. For example, if the object was to furnish three arguments in favour of abolishing prisons or three arguments in support of building more prisons for a subsequent debate with other groups and to produce a set of notes that could be used by the group spokesperson and assessed by us, we indicated how we would go about producing a set of notes: start by brainstorming all the relevant points gleaned from the readings, match these points to the author(s) responsible for them, try to group these points under broader themes/arguments, determine the three strongest themes, determine which order they would be presented in, figure out how the debate/presentation could be introduced and concluded in a set of bullet point notes.

The time allocated to this process would vary depending on the task. If each group was required to produce a five minute presentation on their material, then twenty minutes would be allocated for putting the presentation together and twenty minutes for the presentations themselves. The remaining time in a fifty minute workshop would be dedicated to teacher-led introductory and concluding remarks. There are, of course, myriad formats of tasks and time that can be set, but, whatever the task, the aim was to have groups function as the primary incubators for discussion, to have teachers circulating and facilitating or problematising discussions, to have groups produce a set of notes or a presentation that could be assessed (formally or informally), and to provide our own insights into the themes we had been tackling.

In terms of the geography of the teaching space, workshops were held in lecture theatres. No other venues were large enough. This was problematic on two fronts; firstly, seating in these venues is tiered and the tables fixed, so the most comfortable and appropriate conditions for doing group work were absent. Secondly, the noise level generated by 35 students can impair the ability to hear exactly what is going on. Offsetting these problems were the ability for teachers and students to make use of the audio-visual facilities in the lecture theatre.

Assumptions

Our own attempt at making the transition from tutorials to workshops has been informed by a commitment to discipline-specific scholarship in teaching and learning, and was based on the following three assumptions. Firstly, that historians bring a particular set of skills to their reading, researching, critiquing and communicating; secondly, that these skills are best developed separately and cumulatively through task-based activities; the third assumption is that particular techniques of managing large classes must be a fundamental component of curriculum design and the development of teaching and learning materials. Most significantly, this has required an engagement with the specific techniques and methods of teaching and learning in groups.

In the first section of the paper, we introduce the idea of what it means to ‘think like an historian,’ drawing on the work of Jennifer Clark (2009) and others (Cowan, 1996), highlighting the specific skills which ground generic outcomes-based objectives such as ‘critical thinking.’ In this section, we also outline some of the major criticisms of large-class teaching and learning environments, and how these potentially impact on the ability to develop these skills. In the

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2 In providing feedback for the unit through the SPOT survey, students were requested to comment on the following statements: ‘the teacher has given clear and understandable explanations’ and ‘class sessions have been well organised.’ Students could choose to Strongly Agree (5 points), Agree (4 points), remain Neutral (3 points), Disagree, (2 points), or Strongly Disagree (1 point). No students Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed with these statements, with each statement returning a mean result of 4.30 and 4.31 respectively. This suggests that by consistently modeling how we thought groups could go about their tasks was effective in promoting effective group-working environments.
second section of the paper, we provide an insight into how we attempted to avoid these pitfalls through curriculum design and the development of various teaching materials. In the third section, we outline at greater length how learning objectives, workshop tasks and student assessment were aligned.

Section 1: Pedagogical issues in the teaching of history and teaching large classes

Generic outcome statements as an impediment to ‘thinking historically’

As Jennifer Clark has correctly 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, their research and their writing (2009). This is not made any clearer by the generic standards and expected outcomes listed in the preponderance of course outlines students are given nor in the often vague criteria seen in 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, allowing history staff and faculties flexibility in the delivery of history units, it becomes problematic for students if the specific skill sets needed to satisfy these outcomes are not made explicit to them (in unit outlines, rubrics, lectures, in tutorials, in workshops and so on). The less explicit they are, the less chance there is that 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, plough through footnotes in the manner they do, or circle thesis statements in red? What kinds of notes do they take when reading? 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, then outcomes statements will remain uninformative and unhelpful to students. This is an issue of particular concern when teaching in large-class environments, as we address shortly.

Teaching 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 (Richlin & Witman, 2007). 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 ‘must be isolated, presented, taught, and practiced,’
whether this be in the approaches one takes to primary source criticism, engagement with secondary sources, or in communicating one’s findings (2009, p. 8). 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 lieu of the principles previously mentioned (2009, p. 8). These principles should inform curriculum development, as well as the development of teaching materials.

To these principles we would add a fourth; the need to cater the teaching and development of these skills to 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. Searching for the middle ground has been important here as numerous studies identify a raft of problems with group work, while a host of others trumpet the benefits. Common to findings on both sides of the divide is the importance of preparation: quality preparation circumvents class size as the primary determinant of a quality learning experience (Gibbs, Lucas & Simonite, 1996), while in the absence of extensive preparation and quality instruction, the benefits of collaborative learning will not materialize and the choice to have students work in groups will not be justified (Williams, Cook, Quinn & Jensen, 1985).

**Teaching history in large-class learning environments**

In terms of the difficulties associated with group work, 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: analysis, evaluation, critical reflection (McKeachie, 1980). A key issue here is diminished teacher-student interaction impacting on the ability of teachers to monitor participation and provide feedback on performance (McKeachie, 1999). This is because, as Booth has suggested, ‘learning the discipline knowledge and the patterns of disciplinary understanding occurs though interpersonal activity – discussion, exploration, thinking out aloud, modeling approaches, and personally demonstrating historical method’ (Booth, in Booth and 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 been problematised (Gibbs, Lucas & Simonite, 2006; Williams, Cook, Quinn & Jensen, 1985), it cannot be ignored.

If we expect groups to operate as a primary site for the development of ‘historical thinking,’ it is incumbent upon us to both design group-based tasks that develop evaluative, analytical and critical skills, and, to help students develop the skills required – cooperation, delegation, collaboration, conflict management – to create quality learning environments conducive to the completion of the tasks, problems, or assessments set. 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, 2001b). For time-poor academics, this kind of groundwork can look distinctly unappealing.

Yet this kind of groundwork is exactly what is needed to circumvent many of the major complaints students register in relation to group work and group presentations. These include concerns that groups will lose direction and focus in the absence of tutor supervision, detracting from the learning experience (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992); that individual marks will depend on the work of other students (Burdett, 2003; Goldfinch & Raeside, 1990); that the quality of one’s contributions will not be registered by tutors, leading to feelings of frustration, powerlessness and anonymity (Tiberius, 1995); that individual opinions will be lost amidst louder voices (Sarkisian, 1990); and that some students will slack-off (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006) while
others will refuse to delegate (Tiberius, 1995). Failing to deal with these problems can diminish incentives to participate and impact negatively on attendance rates. Compounding these problems are those associated with the geography of the learning environment (TEDI, 2001d) and assessing the performance of large numbers of students (TEDI, 2001f). We detail our responses to these potential pitfalls in the following section.

Group work and task-based activities, when well-prepared and orchestrated, however, bring numerous benefits. Granted, some of these benefits are associated with the need to market degrees to potential future employers: a proven capacity to work in teams (and degrees that provide this skill) are attractive in the employment marketplace. Studies have also shown that group work can enhance student learning through the process of collaboration; students learn from each other, challenge each other and are provided with opportunities to test their understanding of concepts in low-risk environments (CSHE, 2002), a process that can make passive students active in class (Kraft, 1985). Finally, and most importantly, group work can offer an effective way to ensure ‘active student learning’ in large-group learning environments (Burdett, 2003), which, in turn, facilitates the transmission of high-order thinking skills (Meyers & Jones, 1993). The trick for us, as you will have gathered by now, has been to blend the signature pedagogy of teaching history with the pedagogy of large-class/group teaching.

Section 2: Working in groups

After consulting scholarship on the pedagogical problems and benefits of group-based learning and assessment, we began to develop materials and design workshop tasks for the curriculum that were intended to diminish student dissatisfaction with group work and promote the benefits of active and collaborative learning. The final section of the paper addresses the tasks created to promote the kinds of skills we identified with historical thinking and the historian’s practice and below we outline our approach to diminishing dissatisfaction and building the skills required to function effectively in groups.

Class participation: Alienation, motivation, awareness, empowerment

Following Stevens and Levi (2005), we decided to involve students in the collaborative construction of a ‘Class Participation Rubric.’ Our aims were to familiarize students with the unit outline, assessment and assessment 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 familiarizing students with course objectives and contributing to a sense of student ownership over the course (Lewis, Berghoff & Pheeney, 1999). This was crucial for us, as we wished, right from the beginning, to allay any fears that students may have had in relation to: (1) their powerlessness/lack of a voice in a large-group learning environment;³ (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 a an assessment rubric for the Group Presentation, 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. The intention was to direct students to an awareness of our expectations for attendance, the emphasis that would be placed on group work, the group tasks to be

³ Interestingly, in the course feedback survey, only one student commented on the difficulty of participating in a large-class environment: “The workshops are great…I suppose the large number of people in the workshops deterred me from speaking but I still learnt a tremendous amount.” 73 students were enrolled and 45 Student Perceptions’ on Teaching (SPOT) surveys were returned.
completed in individual workshops, and the major group presentation to be completed. Collectively, the eight groups queried over the two workshops identified what we thought should be the key components of assessment: attendance, group work, group presentations, and individual contribution.

This exercise was followed by discussion on 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, in particular, to discuss the role of individual contributions to the whole class and de-emphasize the importance of these contributions allayed student concerns over the assessment of participation. Of course, the value of individual contributions to the whole class remained important, but it was impractical to assign such contributions a high proportion of marks given the impracticality of giving all students the opportunity to participate in discussions involving 35-40 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) familiarize 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. The most basic part of this guide is included below:

**Table 2: Guide to speaking in class: Talking like an academic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Discussions:</th>
<th>In general class and group discussions, how should I introduce key points from the week’s readings? How can I demonstrate good prep and attention to detail?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>“In <em>Land of Desire</em>, Leach makes the point that…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Both the text and author’s name cited accurately;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Focuses the rest of class/group on the material you will be drawing on;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>“In <em>Land of Desire</em>, the author suggests…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The text is cited accurately and should guide the rest of the class to the material you intend discussing;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>“In that article on <em>Desire</em>, I think the author is trying to say…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Text cited, but not correctly. No mention of author;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>“In one of the readings I think the guy was saying something about…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Very general: neither text nor author cited accurately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disastrous</td>
<td>“Some idiot was rambling on about…”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**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, and 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) and to prepare, students considered a range of primary source materials on American propaganda during the Cold War, and, two workshop guides: ‘How to Critique a Primary Source’ and ‘Working in Groups’ (extracts of both are included below). Both guides break up generic skills – ‘teamwork’ or ‘critiquing source material’ – into a set of phrases that can be used to facilitate group work, or a set of the kinds of questions that can be asked of source material.

Table 3: Guide to working in groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working in Groups</th>
<th>Managing and Transitioning between different Stages</th>
<th>What to Say?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STEP 1</td>
<td>Issue/Objective</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Orienting the discussion</td>
<td>'My understanding of what we have to do is this…do we all agree?'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assigning Roles</td>
<td>'I think we could probably break this task up? Who wants to tackle this source/article/aspect of the task?'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Delegating Tasks</td>
<td>'We’re going to need a set of notes to work off at the end? Who wants to act as the scribe?'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'For larger tasks: who wants to record what we have discussed, what we decide, what we plan to do next?'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| STEP 2            | Share and encourage ideas (ensure everyone has a voice) | 'Let’s take a minute or two to hear everyone’s views; '
| - Concept checking | 'Let’s list our ideas down, clarify them, and then we’ll move on to evaluating them;' |
| - Brainstorming   | '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;' |

In class and prior to the groups setting out on their task – contextualizing 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 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 our information. While these were fairly simple instructions, they are important in setting up an environment conducive for students to tackle difficult or unfamiliar tasks.

This 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical commentary of primary sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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 through which you interpret the source.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Historiographical knowledge**

- The source materials you interpret will reflect, to varying degrees, the social / economic / political / religious / moral / medical / intellectual / 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.
- 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?

For full guide, see appendix 3

Section 3: 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 the development of these skills.

**Book reviewing: How to read like an historian**

The second ‘threshold learning outcome’ from the TEQSA draft history standards requires students to graduate 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; making this approach 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, the evidentiary base used to support that argument, and 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 are they 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 the leading journals in the discipline. In addition, students were required to read ‘a Guide to Reading Secondary Sources (Rael, 2004),’ which again identifies the kinds of things historians look for when reading works of history. Both reviews and guide were designed to shape the way students took notes on the reading. In class, the workshop groups broke up into smaller teams. One sub-group identifying theses statements, another group identifying key analytical concepts and how they were put to use (race, gender, class, space etc.), a third group identified the bodies of literature the scholar was speaking to, and the fourth group identified the kinds of sources the author drew upon to advance their thesis. Following the completion of these delegated tasks, the groups came back together,
compiled their notes on each source, before 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 (TEQSA 4)**

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: firstly, ‘what processes do historians go through in formulating historical problems?’ (Pace & Middendorf, 2004); secondly, ‘what conventions of style guide how those historical problems are communicated?’; thirdly, ‘how can we practice these processes and develop these conventions of style in-class?’ and fourthly, ‘how can we assess those processes and conventions of style?’

The first of the questions posed is an incredibly complex one to answer (Wineburg, 1991, 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 history – gender, class, race and nation – and use this knowledge to consider how a variety of cigarette advertisements 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 the class.

Secondly, we wanted students to become familiar with framing research questions and the process of turning those questions into thesis statements (TEQSA 4). To facilitate this process, students read a ‘Guide to Thesis Statements’ prior to class. Thirdly, to practice these skills, we designed a mock annotated bibliography task to complete in class, requiring groups to analyse sources, generate research questions and a thesis statement, and to 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 provide the opportunity for students to further develop their skills in formulating historical problems and provide the means for us to assess those skills.

Some feedback received on this class is included below. Comments were made in the ‘What aspects do you feel are best’ about the course – part of the written comments section of the course feedback survey:

- The annotated bibliography workshop was very helpful; good to go through the steps;
- The steps involved in the process of generating a thesis statement are clearer…gives me a better idea of how to create questions;
- Really liked the workshop on essay questions;
- Steps in generating a thesis statement are now clearer;
- The workshop was great for fine-tuning further studies;
- The stuff on developing a question into a strong thesis was helpful;
- The workshop helped to improve my annotated bibliography.

While the development of a more detailed, more specific feedback mechanism is required if we are to generate more robust generalisations about the effectiveness of our approach, the unsolicited feedback here is at least suggestive that the annotated bibliography workshop and
attendant ‘Guides’ were deemed useful by a number of students in building the kinds of skills that were subsequently assessed through the Annotated Bibliography assignment and in the major research essay.

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

The submission of poorly written and poorly structured written 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. Fortunately, there are now services available to students who have difficulty in producing written arguments, but 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 in writing introductions and conclusions, 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 plays 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). Remediating 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 prior to 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 4); (4) the guide to topic sentences and paragraphs (appendix 5); and (5) the guide to Oxford Referencing in the unit outline. Collectively, these guides provide the framework for students to give constructive feedback on skills that are assessed in the major research essay, and further familiarise students with the mechanics and conventions of introducing, framing, reiterating, and referencing ideas.

The next step, of course, is to build feedback mechanisms capable of indicating the effectiveness of the peer-review system. In order to do so at the undergraduate level, it will be necessary to focus on skills development as it relates to the mechanics of putting a research essay together, rather than with the quality or the originality of the argument. A big part of ensuring students are given every opportunity to develop these essay-structuring skills will be through the continued development, refinement and provision of the various ‘guides’ described above. While we haven’t collated specific information on the utility of these guides as they relate to the peer review workshop, other workshops and course assessment, we did receive feedback from students on the following: ‘teaching materials [for the workshops] were well prepared and chosen?’ Students could ‘Strongly Agree (5)’, ‘Agree (4)’, maintain a ‘Neutral (3)’ position, ‘Disagree (2)’, or ‘Strongly Disagree (1)’ with this statement. An average response of 4.36 was received, signaling that the majority of students ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that materials were
well prepared and chosen. While these responses do not specifically indicate the effectiveness of the peer-review system, they do suggest that the various guides were effective in signaling to students our expectations for them when completing various tasks, including the guide-focused critique of each other’s work.

Table 5: Guide to peer review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guide to peer-review of essays</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation: 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).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aims: 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:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Is there a clearly identified thesis statement?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is the thesis statement too broad, too narrow, or too obvious?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Does the introduction provide a road map for how your essay progresses?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Does it indicate the sort of material or evidence you will be using?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 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?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraphs:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Are paragraphs headed and framed by topic sentences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Do the topic sentences relate to the thesis statement?</td>
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<td>- Do the remaining sentences in the paragraph relate to the topic sentence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Is there one main idea per paragraph?</td>
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Conclusion

The approach described above represents an initial foray into transitioning to large-group learning environments. Our own reflections on this process, as well as feedback from students and colleagues will spur further changes of approach and refinements in curriculum design. The next step in this process is to develop more systematic methods of acquiring feedback on the effectiveness of our teaching, as feedback so far remains very general in focus. In the unit feedback survey, for example, only one student out of the forty five who responded suggested that the tutorial format should be reintroduced in preference to the workshop model in ‘suggestions for change’, while seven students registered specific support for the workshop format in ‘what aspects do you feel are the best?’

Further evidence that the transition was in no way disastrous or deeply dissatisfying for the students may be discerned from responses to the following statements in the unit survey:

- (Q. 11) The teacher has given clear and understandable explanations: 4.30 / 5
- (Q. 12) Class sessions have been well organised: 4.31 / 5
- (Q. 14) I have been encouraged to take part in the sessions: 4.35 / 5
- (Q. 15) A class atmosphere conducive to learning has been maintained: 4.41 / 5

The above results indicate that the majority of students either ‘Strongly Agreed (5 points)’ or ‘Agreed (4 points)’ with the above statements. We can thus infer that students felt that well organised classes promoted an effective atmosphere for learning and that they did not feel that
class-size or the focus on group-work had detracted from their learning experience. Yet, this only tells us that students were not dissatisfied with the workshop format, as opposed to furnishing information on the effectiveness of the workshop tasks in developing the signature, high-order thinking skills of the historian. While we are well aware of the need to acquire this kind of information in the future, our initial concerns have been with using the discipline-specific scholarship of teaching and learning in history to guide our transition to a large-class teaching environment with an emphasis on group work. We hope, therefore, that our current work provides an insight into how the discipline-specific pedagogy of teaching history can be blended with the pedagogy of large-class teaching and group-work in a governmental and institutional environment in which upward pressures on class sizes does not look likely to cease anytime soon.

References


Teaching and Educational Development Unit (2002). The Large Class Teaching Guidelines, Brisbane, University of Queensland.
Teaching and Educational Development Unit (2001c). *What’s Different about Large Classes?,* Brisbane, University of Queensland.
Teaching and Educational Development Unit (2001d). *Administration and Management of Large Classes,* Brisbane, University of Queensland.
Teaching and Educational Development Unit (2001f). *Teaching and Assessment in Large Classes,* Brisbane, University of Queensland.
Appendix 1: Speaking in class

Guide to speaking in class: Talking like an academic

General Discussions: In general class and group discussions, how should I introduce key points from the week’s readings? How can I demonstrate good prep and attention to detail?

- Excellent: In *Land of Desire*, Leach makes the point that...
  - Both the text and author’s name cited accurately;
  - Focuses the rest of class/group on the material you will be drawing on;

- Good: In *Land of Desire*, the author suggests...
  - The text is cited accurately and should guide the rest of the class to the material you intend discussing;

- Average: In that article on *Desire*, I think the author is trying to say…
  - Text cited, but not correctly. No mention of author;

- Poor: In one of the readings I think the guy was saying something about…
  - Very general: neither text nor author cited accurately

- Disastrous: Some idiot was rambling on about…
  - Disrespectful

After any of these introductions, you may go on to make a great contribution, but introducing that great contribution is also very important.

Introducing the findings of your group to the class: When charged with the responsibility for discussing the findings of your group on the week’s readings, how should you introduce these findings?

- Excellent: 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…
  - 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.

- Good: 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 1960’s Oakland…
  - Very brief intro; no real framework for discussion established before correctly directing class attention to author, text and argument.

- Average: 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.
  - 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.

- Poor: Our group didn’t get to look at many of the sources, but we think some of the following issues might be important.
  - 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.

- Disastrous: I’m Tim. Tim panics and runs away. Complete silence follows.

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## Appendix 2: Working in groups

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working in Groups</th>
<th>Managing and Transitioning between different Stages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue/Objective</td>
<td>What to Say?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **STEP 1**        | - My understanding of what we have to do is this...do we all agree?  
| - Orienting the discussion | - I think we could probably break this task up? Who wants to tackle this source/article/aspect of the task?  
| - Assigning Roles | - We're going to need a set of notes to work off at the end? Who wants to act as the scribe?  
| - Delegating Tasks | - For larger tasks: who wants to record what we have discussed, what we decide, what we plan to do next? |
| **STEP 2**        | - Let's take a minute or two to hear everyone's views;  
| - Share and encourage ideas (ensure everyone has a voice) | - Let's spend the first five minutes getting everyone's thoughts down;  
| - Concept checking | - Let's list our ideas down, clarify them, and then we'll move on to evaluating them;  
| - Brainstorming   | - 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**        | - OK, we've got a lot of ideas here. Let's sort them into a few categories. What are some of the common themes?  
| - Evaluating ideas | - We're going to present some of these ideas a bit later, why don't we try to rank them in order of importance;  
|                   | - 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. |
| **STEP 4**        | - OK, I think it's fair to say we've agreed on the following points so far…  
| - Moving forward / making decisions | - Any objections if we proceed with these two ideas / develop these ideas further?  
| - Mediating disagreements | - We've still got some reservations about proceeding this way. What do we need to do to make this approach more acceptable?  
|                   | - 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.  
|                   | - 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.) |
| **STEP 5**        | - How are we going to introduce the material?  
| - Preparing to present material | - How are we going to present the material? How are we going to frame the presentation?  
|                   | - Who feels like presenting the material? Who hasn't presented yet?  
|                   | - How are we going to conclude the presentation? What points do we need to recap? |
Appendix 3: Primary source critique

Critical commentary of primary sources

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 through which you interpret the source.

Historiographical knowledge

- The source materials you interpret will reflect, to varying degrees, the social / economic / political / religious / moral / medical / intellectual / 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.
- 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?

Intellectual frameworks, intellectual toolkits

- When you query the meaning of a source or question how that meaning was generated, it is often useful to consider what assumptions are implicit in the material. An appreciation of the dynamics of race / ethnicity / gender / class / sexuality will often assist your interpretive capabilities.

Authorship/purpose, circulation of source

- Who is the author? From what strata of society do they come? Is the author a credible and reliable source? What biases does the author have?
- Is the author a member of a particular organisation?
- Is the author trying to promote a particular cause or idea? If so, in what way is this being done?
  o Is the author trying to inform, explain or influence?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How was the source circulated/disseminated to the intended audience?

Type

- What type of historical document is it? Is it a parliamentary or judicial document, a newspaper/periodical/journal article, an advertisement, an extract from a diary, an artistic work, a personal reflection on a situation?
- What is the significance of the kind of document you seek to critique?
  o Does it provide a view of history from above, a view from below?
  o Does the form suggest the objectivity of the document’s contents?
  o Was the document meant for public consumption, or was the document meant to remain private? What implications follow from this?
Appendix 4: thesis statements

Thesis statements

You are required to develop a thesis statement for your annotated bibliography, one that you will continue to develop/alter/refine as you continue to research and write your research essay.

What is it, what does it do?
A thesis statement does a number of things:
- 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:

  ‘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.’

- It makes a claim, telling the reader how you have interpreted the subject matter under discussion;
- 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;
- Provides a claim or interpretation that might be disputed.

Where does it go?
- In the annotated bibliography, it will be explicitly stated and designated as your “thesis statement”;
- In your research essay, it should be incorporated into your introductory paragraph(s).

Is it any good?
- Is it overly simplistic or too obvious to be meaningful: ‘The North and South fought the Civil War for different reasons’;
- Does the thesis statement lend itself to argument or mere summary?
  o Can it be challenged?
- 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;
- Is the thesis statement too vague? A tight focus allows for critical interpretation, the major purpose of a research essay and a pretty useful skill to develop.

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Appendix 5: Topic sentences

Writing your research essay: Topic sentences and paragraphs

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 on what you are arguing and the discipline to stick to that argument throughout the paper.

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.

(1) Paragraphs:
- 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.
- Each paragraph should help to justify your thesis, so, 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.
- Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence.

(2) Topic sentences:
- Topic sentences organise your paragraphs and introduce the idea/thought to be discussed;
- 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.
- Topic sentences often act like tiny a 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 which 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.

Consider that last paragraph:

- 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.