



LEARNING ABOUT STUFF OUTSIDE THE BOX

ANNA CLARK INVESTIGATES WHY AUSTRALIAN HISTORY JUST MAKES STUDENTS WANT TO CRY.

For many Australian school students, learning about their nation's history is about as bad as history gets – and they're not afraid to say so.

Amber's in Year 12 at a senior college in Canberra and reckons Australian history isn't exciting "because it's just here, it's all around".

"Like, I'm fascinated with European history," she explains, "but with Australia, it's like, *bleurgh*, because it's always going to be here."

In a Darwin public school, Natalie finds the subject just as dull. "Australian history just makes me want to cry. It's so boring and I can't stand it."

"I have to agree," says her classmate Tani. "I do find it more boring than all the European history."¹

These students were interviewed in 2006 as part of a comparative study into history teaching in Australia and Canada. They weren't tested on their historical knowledge, or asked to name their country's first prime minister (although many of them did anyway). Rather, the project aimed to get a sense of how students and teachers engage with their national history in the context of pervasive public debates about the subject. Groups of high school students from the two countries were interviewed to get a sense of what they *think* about the nation's past. What do they like about it? What don't they find interesting? Do they think it should be mandated in school? If so, how should it be taught?²

These interviews produced over 300 000 words of transcripts that range across students' and teachers' attitudes to topics such as local history, Federation, Indigenous history, the nation at war, and recent political history in the two countries. There's probably enough research material to wade through for years.

But it's the way students describe what they like and don't like about learning history that has highlighted a telling absence in current debates – the voices of the students themselves. Nothing quite prepared me for their honesty and bluntness as they discussed learning history in school. Their unapologetic critique of the subject was striking. For many of them, it seems, learning their nation's story has simply been bland and uninspiring. As Zoran from Canberra explained, "I'm doing a lot of history now that deliberately isn't Australia-based."

"Yeah," said his classmate Jade, "and it's actually a lot more interesting too."

Yet it's precisely this sort of attitude that heightens public anxiety over the state of young people's national knowledge, an anxiety reinforced by repeated studies confirming their apparent ignorance. In 1997, a national survey showed that only 18 per cent of those interviewed knew Edmund Barton was Australia's first prime minister; in 2006, a report on the state of civics and citizenship showed only 23 per cent of Year 10 students knew Australia Day celebrated the arrival of the British in 1788.³

Such results have prompted a number of public and political interventions to strengthen the status of Australian history in schools. Paul Keating promoted a civics and citizenship education program in response to the dire levels of political and historical knowledge uncovered by the Civics Expert Group in 1994. In New South Wales, Labor Premier Bob Carr was even moved to mandate a hundred hours of Australian history, explicitly forcing students to engage with their nation's past.⁴

More recently, John Howard's campaign for a "root and branch renewal" of the subject led to the

release of his government's comprehensive *Guide to the Teaching of Australian History in Years 9 and 10* on the eve of the 2007 federal election. The prime minister had earlier decried the way Australian history was taught and called for restoration of the subject in the nation's schools: "In the end, young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history."⁵

Howard's history push struck a chord with a number of commentators and voters, many of whom supported the national effort to consolidate Australian history education. The north Queensland academic, Mervyn Bendle, quickly backed the prime minister: "Not only is a comprehensive knowledge of history essential for a sense of national identity, it is also essential for students seeking a broad education."⁶ Miranda Kelly wrote to the *Australian*, asking: "How can we, as a nation, possibly expect to compete on the world stage if Australian history – warts and all – is not taught as a compulsory subject in our schools? If not, we face the tragic reality that our future leaders will have no idea how our nation developed."⁷

Support for Howard's history revival was not across the board, nor were the endorsements he received completely unqualified.⁸ But there was significant popular approval. Many Australians do worry about what 'our children' know about 'our history' such is the level of public concern and debate that we might be forgiven for thinking such concerns reflect a uniquely Australian anxiety – it certainly fits neatly into those endless 'history wars' over the representation of the past. Yet, despite the narrowness of this anxiety, with its inward-looking, parochial discourse and its preponderance of collective pronouns, similar concerns reverberate around the world.

When, for example, the Canadian Dominion Institute published the results of its 1997 Canada Day Youth History Survey, it too generated alarmism. Young Canadians had "failed" the test on their nation's past, explained the press release – and the headlines that followed proclaimed that Canada's future was itself under threat.

"How can a country survive without celebrating its past, without pride in its achievements, without its own national mythology?" asked one editorial in the *Edmonton Journal*.

"It is not the students but Canadian history cours-

es in our high schools that have failed," lamented Joanne Harris Burgess in the *Globe and Mail*. "And it is this failure we as a nation cannot afford."⁹

Like the concerns in Australia, the response to revelations of Canadian children's poor national knowledge reveals a profound popular anxiety that students' ignorance threatens the future of the nation itself – that's why any hint of historical apathy generates such profound disappointment. As Charles Frank put it in the *Calgary Herald*, "Our young people know virtually nothing about the history of the country they are about to inherit."¹⁰ Yet a quick examination of the argument again highlights an underlying paradox: the pervasive parochial rhetoric is profoundly transnational, with 'our children's' national ignorance the stuff of headlines and historical debates the world over.¹¹

The irony is that, amidst such *paradoxical parochialism*, students themselves prefer something quite different: they want a history education that's expansive and comparative rather than inward-looking. In their interviews, students maintain that they're much more likely to disconnect from history when the focus is too content-driven and prescriptively national. Unlike that popular and political insistence on a nationally affirming history education, the view from the classroom is much more critical and open-ended.

This isn't a superficial rejection of national history by cynical teenagers. From their interviews, it's clear that they do believe in the importance of the subject, but they want it to be relevant and interesting. When I asked students at a multicultural public school in Vancouver whether there was anything they would like to change about their history classes, Sam suggested including a broader international perspective.

"I think they should teach it from other points of view," he said, "other than just the Canadian point of view, to avoid bias."

Asked the same question ("Would you change anything about the way history is taught at your school if you could?"), students at another Vancouver public school responded similarly.

Ju: "More world history."

Melody: "Maybe during elementary into high school you should make it less repetitive."

Ju: "Yeah, maybe you should have the younger grades in elementary learn about Canadian history, and when you're older you can decide whether

you want to continue on and branch out and do other things.”

In contrast to the anxious public debates, these students find the obsession with national history a bit of a turn-off. I wonder whether, at one level, we’re witnessing a generational and cultural tension between these outward-looking students, many of whom come from migrant families, and an older, more traditionalist belief in the purpose of teaching history for national cohesion.

Australian students displayed similar sentiments. When I asked a group of Year 10 students at an independent girls’ school in Canberra whether they would change anything about their history lessons, Annie responded like her Canadian peers. “I think that we need to move away from the Australian perspective because we are *not* the only country in the world,” she insisted, “whatever they might have us believe.”

Caitlin, a Year 10 student at a Melbourne independent school, also thought the subject might be more interesting if it was extended internationally. “I don’t like Australian history because I think there’s too much focus on Australia as a nation,” she explained. “I can understand why you study it, because it’s our country, but I resent the amount of time we’ve spent on a country that’s actually not important.”

“Are there any other historical topics you would like to learn about if you had the opportunity?” I asked a group of girls at a Brisbane independent school. Again, the students didn’t want additional emphasis on Australian history.

Erica: “I think maybe Australian schools need to learn more about Middle Eastern conflict. Like we did the Israeli–Palestinian conflict last year as part of Grade 11, but I don’t think actually that many schools do it. And, with the whole terrorism issue, it’s such a pivotal part of, like, world peace at the moment and what’s going on that maybe we need to study that a bit more. Like the whole Lebanese–Israeli conflict at the moment, we can see the bombs on TV, but we can’t understand the background to all of that.”

Harriet: “I’d love to do a unit on like Third World politics or something, but I kind of think the history syllabus is designed to have a distinctly Australian focus, in senior anyway, so I don’t see that being integrated into it.”

This isn’t to say that students disregard the

importance of learning the ‘nation’s story’. It’s just that they say they connect best with the subject when it steps outside the shores of their own national past. A group of Toronto Year 10 public school students spoke about the subject in precisely those terms – acknowledging the significance of learning Canadian history on the one hand, and hoping the subject could extend beyond that national focus on the other.

Do you think Canadian history should be a mandatory school subject?

Shara: “I think it’s important.”

John: “I think it should be mandatory.”

Ahmed: “Yeah, up to a certain point.”

Shara: “See, the thing is, they go over the same thing, like, every year, and at grade school and in middle school it was the same thing, over and over. And it was just really boring. I think that was kind of overkill. I think just the one class in high school is good, but they should make it more interesting for middle school.”

John: “And vary it up a bit.”

Shara: “Yeah, so it’s not the same thing every year.”

Seth, a Year 11 student at another Toronto public high school, also agreed that Canadian history should be mandatory. But then he added: “A more global history would be better. I mean, I don’t see why it has to be focused purely on Canadian history. It just seems to limit our scope of knowledge, I guess, if we’re only studying Canadian history.”

Similarly, in the eastern province of New Brunswick, public school students did not dispute the need to learn Canadian history. “But it’s better to learn about stuff outside the box,” Evan added. “Like I’d rather learn about things other than North America.”

The idea that national history should be the subject’s sole focus also caused some resentment among Australian students. When I asked a group at a public school on the New South Wales central coast whether Australian history should be a compulsory subject, Cal agreed, but then added this qualification: “I think you should make it compulsory, but not like just looking at Australian history, like Australia’s history in relation to the rest of the world.”

In Hobart, public school student Julia also thought history should be compulsory but that “it should be world history, probably. Australian

history's good, but it's also good to learn what's happening on the other side of the world."

At a country public school in southern New South Wales, students discussed the prospect of compulsory Australian history along similar lines.

Do you think Australian history should be a compulsory school subject?

Tristan: "It's good to learn, but we should also be learning a bit more international."

Leo: "Yeah."

Tristan: "We've focused a bit too much on Australian history without learning about conflict and stuff. And we only tend to get things from one side. We don't get the other side of the argument."

Despite the public and political obsession over the state of national history education, these student voices sound a dire warning about any parochial restoration of the subject: they simply don't want more of the same. As Pia from a Sydney public school says, learning Australian history is important, but "we do it a bit too much. Like, we learn about it in primary school – most schools do – and then in younger years at high school you learn about it, but it's basically going over the same thing."

There's no shortage of contributors to these public debates over national history education. As politicians and pundits argue over the subject, we're repeatedly assured that the future of the nation itself is at stake. For the students themselves, however, it's what lies beyond the nation that holds history's future. And so I finish where I began, with Amber from Canberra, who rubbished Australian history for being "like, *bleurgh*", then later offered this piece of advice: "Our teacher was saying that there are never enough numbers to make up an Australian history elective at college because no-one's interested. Maybe they've got to approach it in a different way."

These students aren't deaf to the importance of history – far from it – but their comments suggest that pleas to teach the nation's story miss the mark, at least when it comes to generating genuine historical interest within the classroom.

- 1 All notes from student interviews are in possession of author. The names of students have been changed.
- 2 In all, 182 high school students ranging from Years 9 to 12, along with 43 history teachers and 21 curriculum officials from all 8 Australian states and territories, were interviewed for this research (246 in total). A smaller, comparative set of interviews with 78 participants (56

students, 17 teachers and 5 curriculum officials) was conducted in four Canadian provinces (British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick).

- 3 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 'Civics and Citizenship Years 6 and 10 Report 2004', Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne, 2006, <www.mceetya.edu.au/verve/_resources/Civics_and_Citizenship_Years_6_10_Report.pdf>, p. 35; Tony Taylor, 'Disputed Territory: Some Political Contexts for the Development of Australian Historical Consciousness' (paper presented at Canadian Historical Consciousness in an International Context: Theoretical Frameworks conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2001), <www.cshc.ubc.ca/pwias/viewabstract.php?7>.
- 4 Civics Expert Group, *Whereas the People: Civics and Citizenship Education*, AGPS, Canberra, 1994; Bob Carr, 'Speech by the Hon. Bob Carr, Premier of NSW, Minister for the Arts, and Minister for Ethnic Affairs, at the 75th Anniversary of the Thirroul Railway Institute, 10 December 1995', *Labour History*, no. 70, 1996, pp. 191–7.
- 5 John Howard, 'Prime Minister John Howard's Address to the National Press Club on January 25, 2006', *Age*, 25 January 2006.
- 6 Mervyn Bendle, 'Letter', *Australian*, 21 July 2006.
- 7 Miranda Kelly, 'Letter', *Australian*, 19 August 2006.
- 8 See, for example: Annabel Astbury, 'A Lesson in History', *Age*, 6 February 2006; Nick Ewbank, 'Reviewing History: Whose Interpretation Do We Go By?', *Crikey*, 27 June 2007; Stuart Macintyre, 'The Lessons of History Teachers Ignored', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2007.
- 9 Editorial, *Edmonton Journal*, 2 July 1997; Dominion Institute, Canada Day Youth History Survey 1997, <www.ipsos-na.com/news/pressrelease.cfm?id=871>.
- 10 Joanne Harris Burgess, 'Low Marks in Canadian History', *Globe and Mail*, 4 January 1997.
- 11 Charles Frank, 'Does Anyone Know What It Means to Be Canadian?', *Calgary Herald*, 28 June 1997.
- 12 Anna Clark, *Teaching the Nation: Politics and Pedagogy in Australian History*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2006; Linda Levstik, 'Articulating the Silences: Teachers' and Adolescents' Conceptions of Historical Significance', P.N. Stearns, P. Seixas and S. Wineburg (eds) *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 284–305; Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2001; G. Gary Nash et al., *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997; Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2002; Robert Phillips, *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State: A Study in Educational Politics*, Cassell, London, 1998; Burton Bollag, 'A Confrontation with the Past: The Japanese Textbook Dispute', *American Educator*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2001, pp. 22–7.

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