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## Historical Thinking in Higher Education: An Overview

*This article provides an overview of the results from a Historical Thinking in Higher Education questionnaire given to 1455 Australian first year and upper level history students. The questionnaire was part of a project that was funded by the Australian Teaching and Learning Council. It was shaped by collaboration of History lecturers led by Marnie Hughes-Warrington (MQ), Jill Roe (MQ)<sup>1</sup>. The research was undertaken by Adele Nye (MQ). This research report examines the second question of the questionnaire and looks at activities that students believe develop their historical thinking. The national data largely reflected a surprisingly consistent pattern of responses demonstrating shared perceptions of the discipline. In particular two options; using secondary sources and engaging in discussion with academic staff in the classroom; were ranked as the most popular by a majority of students. However, there were also some results that reflected difference in views. This was primarily evident when examining results of first year students, later year students and those from NSW who had studied History Extension in the Higher School Certificate. The findings raise questions about accessing and understanding evidence, assessment strategies and the engagement in a disciplinary dialogue.*

## Introduction

When students enter university and the discipline of History, they must learn to orientate themselves, the sources and historical theory so that they might produce textual interpretations of their own and engage in historical debates. This process requires the development of historical consciousness or thinking. This project was developed to conceptualise and evaluate this process on a national scale. This provided an opportunity to engage with students and academic staff and identify both national trends and individual diversity.

In the latter part of 2008, 1455 questionnaires and 50 interviews were conducted at twelve Australian universities. The study focused on historical thinking in higher education, its meaning and the ways in which it is developed. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed.

This paper looks at how Australian undergraduate history students ranked 13 different educational practices on the basis of their importance in their own development of historical thinking. The quantitative data from this question, the second of three questionnaire tasks, revealed emergent trends through the following categories: nation wide student population, individual institutions, academic year, subject area, blank

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<sup>1</sup> Project Leaders: Assoc Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Emeritus Professor Jill Roe. The Steering Committee: Penny Russell (USYD), Mark Peel (Monash), Desley Deacon (ANU) and Amanda Laugeson (Flinders).

selections, NSW Higher School Certificate History extension students and gender. The findings are supported by some of the qualitative data from interviews with lecturers and the written sections, question one and three, of the student questionnaire.

The consistency with which the students appointed their rankings was unexpected and raised questions about the students' perceptions of evidence, assessment strategies and engagement in a disciplinary dialogue. In some cases, particular groups differed from the national trends and in turn highlighted teaching innovations, progression through the academic years, and the impact of having studied History Extension in High School.

## **PART ONE: Background and Methodology**

### *Background*

This project aimed to examine the nature of historical thinking in higher education through a broad scoping investigation on Australian universities. It posed general questions about definitions of historical thinking, its practice and consequences from the student's point of view and aimed to produce data from which we might raise further pedagogical questions, as well as identify effective and innovative teaching practices that assists and evaluates the student's development in historical thinking.

As a preliminary stage of the Historical Thinking in Higher Education project, Matthew Bailey undertook a review of the literature of the skills required for historical thinking<sup>2</sup>. He highlighted Wineburg's discussion engagement with sources<sup>3</sup>, Seixas' description of the engagement and practice of historical study<sup>4</sup>, Ashby and Lee's work on empathy<sup>5</sup>, and Levstik's view that historical thinking is a social act rather than an individual one<sup>6</sup>. Bailey concluded that evidence based inquiry is crucial for the development of historical thinking. Where "sources are found interpreted, critiqued and contextualized", and in turn the student's historical empathy is developed, they learn to engage in a disciplinary conversation. This analysis can be located within Jorn Rösen's stages of the ontogenetic development of historical consciousness: traditional, exemplary, critical and genetic categories (see Appendix) and his proposal of a disciplinary construct where orientation of the self and the past can be regarded as a crucial axis for change and intellectual progression for students of history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Bailey, "Research Review: The Development of Historical Thinking," (Forthcoming):para 8

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts " *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 7 (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Seixas, ed. *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,2006).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Empathy, Perspective Taking and Rational Understanding.," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies.*, ed. Davis. O L, Yeagher. E A, and Foster. Stuart (Lanham Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Linda S Levstik, "Crossing Empty Spaces: Perspectives Taking in New Zealand Adolescents Understanding of National History, ," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, ed. Elizabeth A. Yeager O.L. Davis, & Stuart J. Foster (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Jorn Rösen, *History: Narration Interpretation Orientation Making Sense of History* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005).pp:11-12

The research also reflects a curiosity about the impact of the disciplinary epistemology on the students' development and was an opportunity to look at current teaching practices and the philosophies that underpin them. Since the 1980s interdisciplinary approaches and postmodernist thinking have in varying degrees infiltrated history departments<sup>8</sup>. Debate raged about the protection of the discipline and some commentators worried that any closing of disciplinary ranks would, as Booth suggested, provide "little incentive to explore pedagogical issues"<sup>9</sup>. Or as Sarah Mann warned, that students might be 'disciplined into docility' through stringent empiricism.<sup>10</sup> In the post-postmodern climate it is timely to examine the current shape of the discipline, the influences of interdisciplinary and postmodern approaches, and to see what aspects of modern empiricism have proved resilient.

### *Methodology*

Between August and October 2008, history students, attending twelve Australian universities were offered the questionnaire by Dr Adele Nye. The timing of the visits was shaped around differing academic calendars and lecturers and their classes were identified through departmental web sites and sent an invitation to participate in the research. (see Appendix)

Most questionnaires were given to students in their course tutorial. In some cases, where course numbers were very small, the questionnaire was distributed during their lecture.

The researcher's task was to present the project as a worthy vehicle for the students' voice on the teaching in the discipline of History. It was important that their opinions were seen to be valid and that the results had an audience. Time is precious, surveys tend to be boring. A quick introduction that emphasised choice was presented, highlighting that there were no right answers to these questions and that students were welcome to challenge the survey or myself over any issue or question that worried them.

To emphasise the ethics that underpin the consent forms, students were reminded that as history students they may well undertake oral histories or interviews in the coming years of their own study. This was a deliberate attempt, firstly, to ensure the conduct of ethical research and secondly, to encourage the students to see themselves as soon-to-be historians and researchers and foster confidence.

### *Anomalies in the Data*

There were two aspects of the data that reflected a skewness of results. Firstly, despite clear instructions, a surprising number of students chose to assign their own value system

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<sup>8</sup> Adele Nye, "Perspectives of Women as Historians: An Exploration of Women's Learning and Historical Practice." (University of New England, 2007).p.37

<sup>9</sup> Alan Booth, "Rethinking the Scholarly: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching History," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 3, no. 3 (2004).p.259

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Mann, "Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: Alienation and Engagement.," *Studies in Higher Education* 26 (2001).p.14

to the ratings, selecting numbers 1, 2 and 3 and applying them multiple times. Secondly, another group chose to use ticks rather than numbers. All of these were not taken into account in the final analysis. Thirdly, the students were given the choice as to how many boxes they numbered. The boxes left unmarked were regarded as “blanks” in the analysis process. As an absence or a ‘non-choice’ they do provide another form of data; where an activity has not been deemed significant enough to earn a rating. The regularity with which this occurs is illuminating though the specific motivations behind them might be variable and largely unknowable. Table 10 demonstrates how the statistics regarding blank selections can confirm trends found in the valid (numbered) selections.

## **An Overview**

### *The Options*

Question two of the survey asked students to rank which activities they felt played a part in the development of their historical thinking. The choices they were given are shown below.

1. Working Online (using the internet or email).
2. Watching and discussing film and television.
3. Reading books and journal articles.
4. Engaging in discussion with academic staff in the classroom.
5. Informal discussions with academic staff outside of the classroom.
6. Engaging in discussion with fellow students outside of the classroom.
7. Engaging in discussion with fellow students in the classroom.
8. Working on an essay or assignment.
9. Receiving feedback on assignments.
10. Making a classroom or online presentation.
11. Attending a lecture.
12. Having conversations with others who have very different opinions or values.
13. Archival work, handling material evidence or engagement in field work

### *The Universities*

Invitations to participate in the project were sent to 19 Australian universities, of those, 12 agreed. The subsequent data offered a broad spectrum of the current body of undergraduate history students and their lecturers on a national scale. Questionnaires were distributed in 40 classes. Currently, 50 history lecturers have been interviewed and several more have agreed to participate in interviews in the coming months. Ideally, a larger contribution from the non-eastern Australian states would give a stronger balance to the national picture. The data does however offer researchers the opportunity to undertake a comparative analysis from a diverse range of perspectives.

## PART TWO: Results

### Results

For the purpose of this article seven categories have been utilised to interpret the raw data. In this paper most rankings have been represented as a statistical average.

- a) **National Rankings:** includes results from all universities from which general assertions can be made.
- b) **Rankings by institutions:** allows comparative analysis and can reflect the impact of structures or philosophy of particular universities on student response.
- c) **Rankings by year:** provide important information about student progress, their expectations and assumptions and their daily experiences.
- d) **Standard Deviation:** showing the degree to which students shared particular views and where they markedly disagreed with each other.
- d) **Rankings by subject:** offer an insight into the particular genres or subject specific epistemology and philosophies. These rankings can also highlight the impact of some of the specific teaching innovations employed by individual lecturers and identified in the interviews.
- e) **Blank selections:** the data showing students who left an option blank These are the non-choice results, or the absences. They are the activities that rendered such little acknowledgement from students that they receive no ranking at all.
- f) **Gender:** showing the proportion of female and male students and allowing for gendered analysis.

#### a) **National results:**

The clear national trends were not anticipated at the outset of the project yet it is evident that students across the country largely hold shared perceptions about the particular activities that assist in the development of their historical thinking. Students share similar views on the means for accessing history, the tools they use, their interaction with lecturers and their peers, and the teaching practices employed by lecturers in universities.

Table 1: Top Three Rankings

The three activities most privileged by all students were clearly represented in the data.

#### **Top three rankings**

- 1) Option 3: Reading books and journal articles (20%)
- 2) Option 4: Engaging in discussion with academics in the classroom (17%)
- 3) Option 8 Working on an assignment and Option 11 Attending a lecture (10% for each)

#### **Highest Rankings**

A consistent national trend is seen in the top three rankings by students. Option 3 was clearly privileged by all groups of students. Given that this option represents secondary sources, further research questions can be raised over the lower relegation of primary sources and the tools the students feel most comfortable using.

The second highest ranking was assigned to engagement with academic staff in the classroom. This reaffirms the great importance of the teacher student relationship and the classroom as a learning environment.

Table 2: Lowest Three Rankings

The three activities students regarded as the least valuable to their learning.

#### **Lowest three rankings**

- 1) Option 10: Making a classroom or online presentation (17%)
- 2) Option 1: Working online (using the internet or email) (16%)
- 3) Option 9: Receiving feedback on assignments (12%)

#### **Lowest Rankings**

The national trend placed the above activities securely in the bottom three rankings. The activity that attracted the lowest ranking, making a presentation, is a performance based activity. It raises questions about expectations of course requirements. Did the students expect more textual assessment strategies such as essays and exams? In turn do they feel uncomfortable undertaking the embodied performance of a presentation?

More significantly, low ranking of online work, which was evident in the two lowest ranking activities, raises important questions about the current student population as a technically savvy generation enthusiastic for online interaction. Clearly, this is not translated in the results of this project. For History students, online work is not a highly valued educative tool.

#### **b) Rankings by Institution**

The current data provides a broad national picture with students largely following a similar response pattern. It is possible, however, to draw some conclusions on institutional trends. Universities and schools are not neutral or entirely homogenous sites of learning. As Stearns, Seixas and Wineburg argue:

Each ‘teaches’ students about the certainty (or uncertainty) of historical knowledge; each conveys messages about the student’s agency in the face of historical knowledge; each guides students towards a particular conception of what counts in framing historical argument – even whether argument has a place in history.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p.3

Table 3: Rankings by Institution: reflecting the national trend.

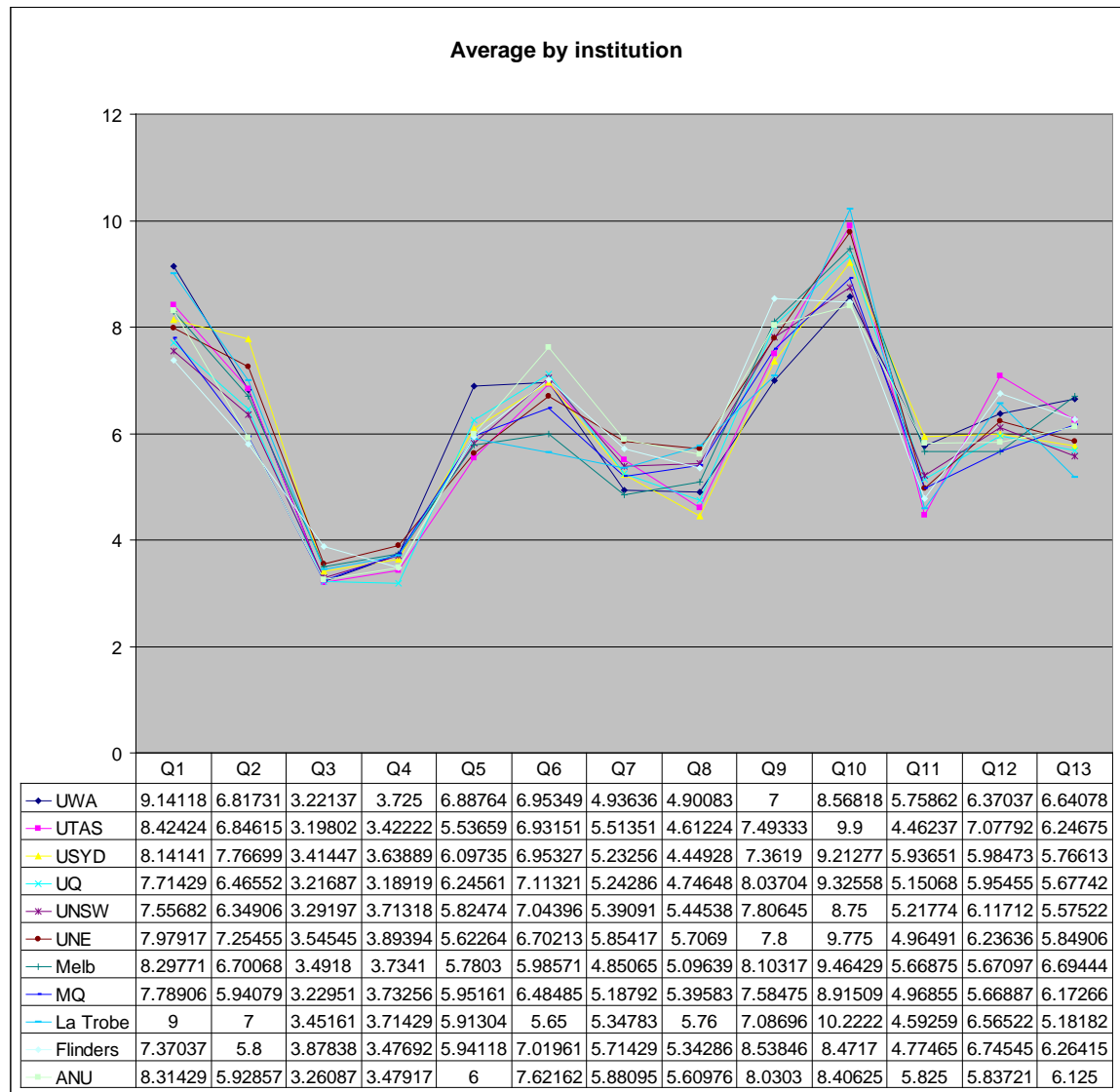


Table 3 shows which universities gave the highest ranking to activities that fostered their historical thinking on a scale of one to thirteen. A ranking of 1 is the highest and therefore the most useful while a ranking of 13 is the lowest, and indicates the least useful. Further investigation of the data, including lecturer interviews is worthwhile and more detailed findings will be presented in forthcoming reports focusing on the qualitative data of this project. Initially, some conclusions about student perceptions of university wide teaching strategies can be drawn from this table.

Engaging with academic staff in the classroom was most often rated highly by the University of Queensland students. Engaging with academic staff outside the classroom was most highly rated by students of the University of Tasmania. These results might raise questions about university structures, requirements and timetables and the

subsequent accessibility of staff. Equally, these might reflect innovative teaching practices or culture of an individual school, cultivated by the head of school.

Table 4.Highest Institutional Ranking by Activity

Options	Highest Rankings	Lowest Rankings
1. Working Online (using the internet or email).	Flinders	UWA
2. Watching and discussing film and television	Flinders	USYD
3. Reading books and journal articles	ANU	Flinders
4. Engaging in discussion with academic staff in the classroom.	UQ	UNE
5. Informal discussions with academic staff outside of the classroom.	UTAS	UWA
6. Engaging in discussion with fellow students outside of the classroom.	La Trobe	ANU
7. Engaging in discussion with fellow students in the classroom.	Melbourne	ANU
8. Working on an essay or assignment.	USYD	La Trobe
9. Receiving feedback on assignments.	UWA	Flinders
10. Making a classroom or online presentation.	ANU	La Trobe
11. Attending a lecture.	UTAS	USYD
12. Having conversations with others who have very different opinions or values.	MQ	UTAS
13. Archival work, handling material evidence or engagement in field work	La Trobe	Melbourne

### c) Rankings by Year

Understanding the development of a student through the academic years is a process that is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of teaching strategies as they impact on student learning. It is a means by which we can measure the changing views of students as they progress from first year students to later (second or third year) studies. Starting university is marked by anticipation, expectations and assumptions. According to Rösen's description of the development of historical consciousness within the discipline, students begin to appreciate forms, representation, methods and theory.<sup>12</sup> So that by the later years students will have begun to develop their own perceptions of History, its definitions, meaning and their place in the academic dialogues.

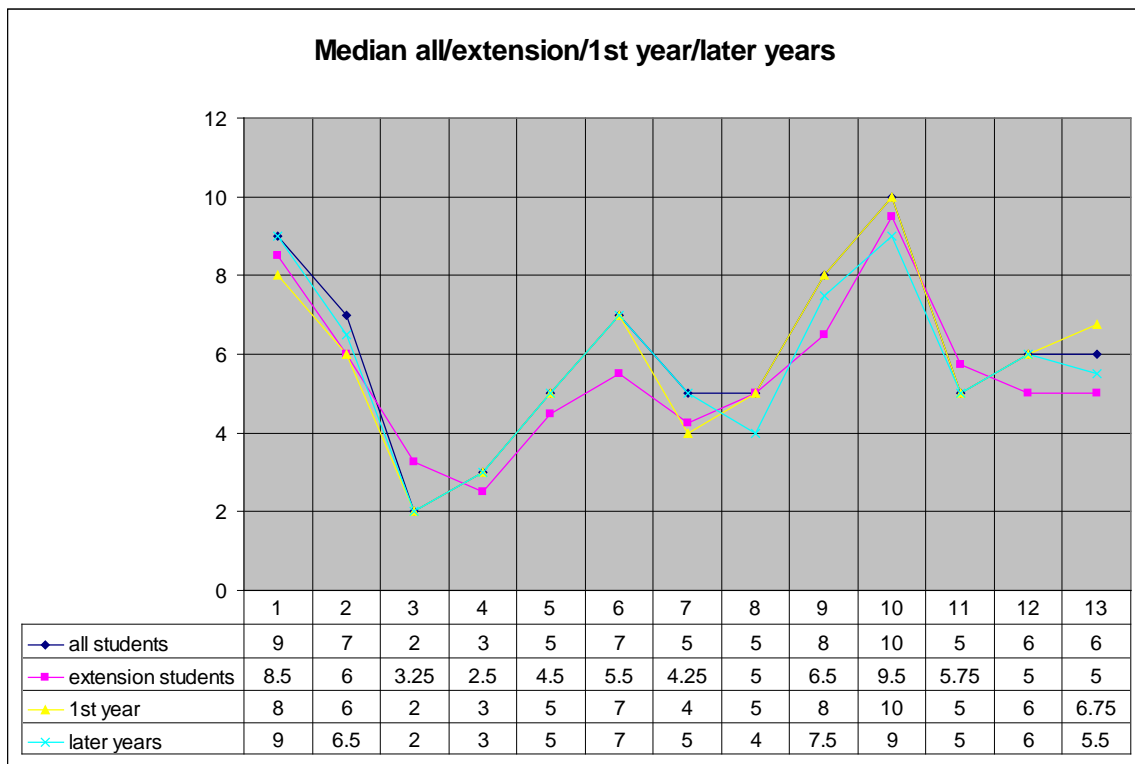
<sup>12</sup> Rösen, *History: Narration Interpretation Orientation* p.133



Equally, it is possible to make connections with changing teaching and assessment practices. For example, the later year students rated writing an essay or assignment much higher than first year students. This indicates a shift in appreciation of writing and becoming more familiar and confident with constructing text, resulting in an increased likelihood to see the value in this form of assessment. Another form of assessment, option 10: giving presentations, was markedly disliked by first year students although later year students gave it a slightly better rating.

This data also shows that students who studied History extension in the NSW HSC acknowledged the significance of option 6: engaging in conversation with students outside the classroom more than their peers. Further, they gave option 4 and 5: focused on engagement with academic staff, higher rankings than any other student group. This suggests that the students enrolling in a degree with more prior knowledge of the discipline are more likely to value personal engagement with their lecturers and tutors than other groups of students. Learning about the past and constructing opinions is largely dependant on engaging in a disciplinary discourse. One might argue that history extension students have come to recognise this need for dialogue and in turn seek out their lecturers for assistance and affirmation.

Table 6: Rankings by Academic Year (note: 1 is the highest ranking and 13 the lowest ranking possible)



## Standard deviation

The data showing the national trend by institution and by academic year have already established a national pattern. To explore this further and identify areas of difference, we look to the data on the standard deviation among student responses. This is the degree to which students agree with or hold significantly different views to each other and reflects the strength of a disciplinary hegemony.

A high rating reflects considerable disagreement while the lower the ranking, the more the students agreed with each other. Again four types of students are measured; first year students, later year students and those who had studied History extension in the NSW HSC.

In this graph it is evident that the first year students settled into a predominantly shared position but the later year students varied markedly in their views in particular areas. It might be assumed that by later years students are more familiar and comfortable with forming opinions that they are more willing to challenge hegemonic views and take up an individual standpoint.

The two areas in which later year students could not find agreement were option 1: online work and option 10: making a classroom or online presentation. Again, this underlines the questions about the use of online work as an educative or assessment tool. From the evidence provided by lectures in the interviews, it is still somewhat in its infancy in history schools and departments. It would seem that some students are embracing online work and others hold a strong aversion. Similarly, disagreement over giving a presentation in the classroom indicates that for some students this performative task is a useful form of engagement in the tertiary setting. For others, it is considered an unpalatable task. It would be useful to undertake further exploration of presentations and their effectiveness as part of the assessment regime.

The broadest agreement among all types of students occurs in the options relating to evidence, option 3: journals and articles and option 13: using archives and doing field work. This student hegemony adds weight to the reliability of the data to inform the discussion put forward by Bailey on evidence based teaching.<sup>13</sup>

It was interesting to see where the NSW students who did history extension in their HSC diverged from the national trend. The most significant difference was in option 12: having conversations with others who have very different opinions and values. This option sits within the disciplinary discourse that relates to contextualization. It asks students to consider the other, in relation to themselves as well as the past. It is an advanced stage in Rüsen's ontogenetic development of historical thinking and in locating themselves and others as subjects of the historical discourses, the students are faced with the constructions of 'normatively determined' and 'value laden' boundaries.<sup>14</sup> In considering their own engagement with others and their difference, the students must take

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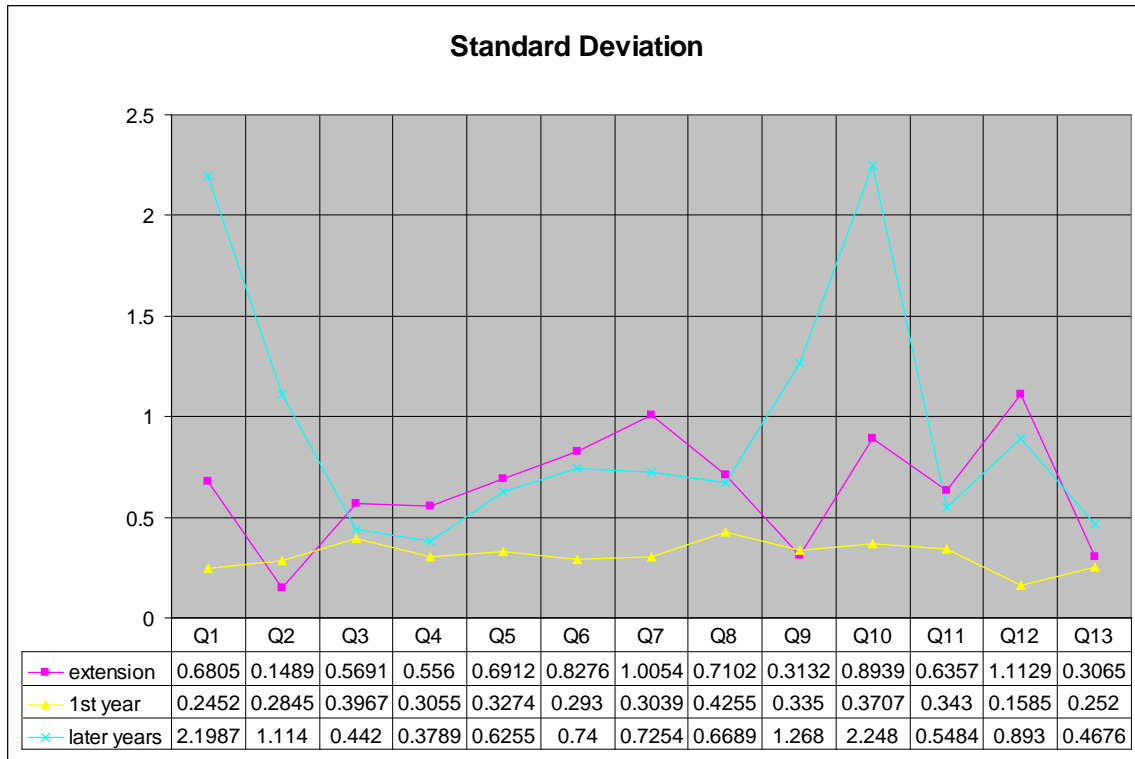
<sup>13</sup> Bailey, "Research Review: The Development of Historical Thinking."

<sup>14</sup> Jorn Rüsen, ed. *Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate.*, Making Sense of History (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002). pp.1-2

up some of the more difficult and complex philosophical questions about the self and about society.

Examining the disputed territories amongst student responses raises as many questions and again further exploration of the emergent hegemony as well as the divergences would be pertinent.

Table 6: Standard Deviation



#### d) Rankings by Subject

It was clear during the interviews and in the classroom that teaching and assessment practices throughout the country are diverse. These practices are influenced by the lecturer, their personal philosophy, experience and education background, the university guidelines, and by a broad disciplinary epistemology. They are also influenced by another cultural and epistemological layer, that of the subject or genre. This is a problematic approach. It is, in part, reminiscent of Juliet Gardiner's 1980s categorization<sup>15</sup> and of the earlier the notion of periodisation.<sup>16</sup> It does however recognise that some of the generalized and embedded narratives occupy particular genres. In the interviews with

<sup>15</sup> Juliet Gardiner, ed. *What Is History Today?* (London: MacMillan Education Ltd, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> David Phillips, "Comparative Historical Studies in Education: Problems of Periodisation Reconsidered," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 50, no. 3 (2002).

lecturers it was evident these narratives are largely derived from interdisciplinary intrusions on the history discipline. For example, the Controversies in Australian History unit is influenced by sociology, popular culture and masculinity courses by cultural studies, gender and psycho-analysis and history theory courses by philosophy.

During this project twenty six different subject areas were visited. Table 7 demonstrates the level of diversity. Clearly, there are a number of subject areas that were not included in this study. This was due to logistical constraints and lack of opportunity in this particular project. Of particular note is that very few Ancient History classes were visited in comparison with later period classes. Ancient History students accounted for only 8.3% of the total number of student participants. The data does however offer some perspective of what courses are currently running across the country.

Table 7: Shows the diversity of classes visited.

Genre	Units
Ancient History	Ancient Rome Barbarian Europe Early Europe
European history	Modern Europe Witchcraft British History
Asian History	Asian History South Asian History
American History	American Civil War
Australian History	Colonial Australian History 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Australian History 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Australian History Controversies in Australian History Australian Indigenous History Australian Military History Local Australian / Public History
History Theory	History Theory Writing History Narrative History
Thematic	Film and History Popular Culture Women's History Memory and Difference Imperialism to Globalisation World History Church History Colonialism

### Contrasting Rankings by Individual Classes

Table 8 provides a more telling picture on the subject specific data. Some subjects clearly lean towards particular mediums or educative tools. By looking at the results for each option and identifying the individual class that gave each one the highest or lowest proportion of rankings, we can shed light on particular genres of history.

Table 8: Shows the individual subject areas that ranked each option the highest and lowest.

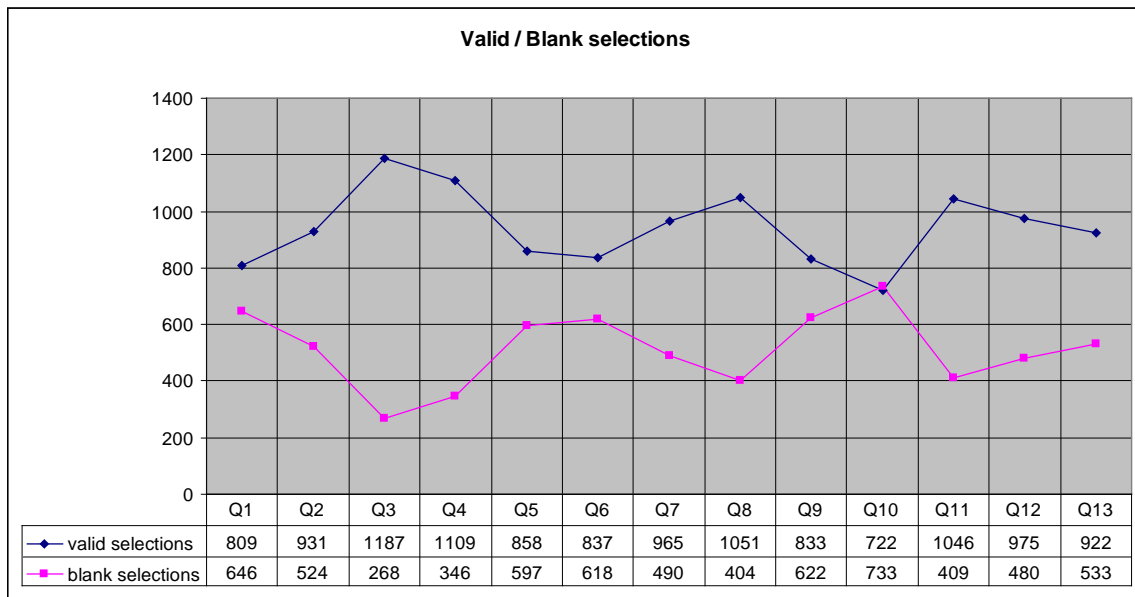
Options	Highest Rankings	Lowest Rankings
1. Working Online (using the internet or email).	Modern Europe	Church History
2. Watching and discussing film and television	Popular Culture	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Australian History
3. Reading books and journal articles	Ancient Rome	Church History
4. Engaging in discussion with academic staff in the classroom.	Church History	Film and History
5. Informal discussions with academic staff outside of the classroom.	Church History	Popular Culture
6. Engaging in discussion with fellow students outside of the classroom.	Ancient Rome	19 <sup>th</sup> Century Australian History
7. Engaging in discussion with fellow students in the classroom.	Asian History	Ancient Rome
8. Working on an essay or assignment.	19 <sup>th</sup> century Australian History	Film and History
9. Receiving feedback on assignments.	Ancient Rome	South Asian History
10. Making a classroom or online presentation.	European Colonialism	Popular Culture
11. Attending a lecture.	Asian History	Women's History
12. Having conversations with others who have very different opinions or values.	Masculinities	Women's History
13. Archival work, handling material evidence or engagement in field work	Early Europe	Church History

### e) Blank Selections

The blank selections are not included in the broader statistics; however, the statements students make by choosing to leave blanks project another narrative throughout the analysis. For example, as seen in Table 1, option 3: reading books and journals was consistently the most popular choice of activity for all students. Only 18% of students left

this blank while 82% chose to rate it. In contrast the most poorly rated activity in the national trend was option 10: making a classroom or online presentation. In this case, the number of blank selections (50.2%) actually outnumbers the number of students who chose to rank it (49.6%). In this way the number of blanks can be used to confirm the findings and identified trends of the valid selections.

Table 9: Valid and Blank Selections



### e) Gender

The proportion of female students consistently outnumbered that of the male students for all participants, on a national level and for the academic year.

Table 10: Gender Percentages

Gender	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Later Years	Total
Female	62%	63%	62%
Male	37%	36%	37%
Unstated	Less than 1%	Less than 1%	Less than 1%

This is relatively consistent with national trends of gender distribution at all universities according to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) figures although the dominance of female students is exacerbated. Figures from 2007 statistics Females made up 55.6% and males 44.4% of the student population<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Employment and Workplace Relations Department of Education, "Students 2007 [Full Year]: Selected Higher Education Statistics: All Students," ed. DEEWR (2008).

There is an opportunity to apply some gendered analysis to the data. Some individual classes were predominantly male or female and stood out in rankings of the options. For example, as seen in table 8 on rankings by subject, a later year course on masculinities consisted entirely of women. This class rated the option 12: having conversations with others who have very different opinions or values, higher than any other class in the study. Privileging this activity is an act that requires empathy and the ability to contextualise themselves and others. More gendered research would be useful to explore these women's preference for this option.

While an Ancient History class, where there was a ratio of 11 males to 3 females, rated option 7: engaging in discussion with students in the class room lower than any other class. This class also stood out as having rated option 9: receiving feedback on an essay or assignment, higher than any other class.

More analysis needs to be done on the project data to make strong claims about gender and its relationship to historical scholarship and practice in universities. For the purpose of this article it is interesting to note that the discipline attracts more women than men and this does not change as student progress through the undergraduate academic years.

### **Analysing a rich body of national data**

The large sample of students involved in this study provides an important opportunity to gain a snapshot of undergraduate history students in Australia. The questionnaire with three individual questions offers springboards from which we can ask a broad range of questions and draw conclusions. The interviews with lecturers provide an accompanying dialogue to the questionnaire as well as a significant source of data in their own right. In this article the focus has been on the second question, a quantitative perspective of activities students undertake. Table 3 showing the national trend by institution revealed a significant pattern while Tables 4-10 revealed the variations within it.

The subsequent quantitative and qualitative data offers potential for further examination on students' understanding of historical thinking and practice. Questions can be asked of the teaching and learning of methodology, historiography, history theory, disciplinary epistemology, and historical practice. Questions could also look at the institutional structure such as examining the relationship between the management of a large and diverse educational body and the daily practice within a relatively small discipline. It also highlights the students' expectations and academic progression through the institutional structure. In this article, the analysis and emergent questions will be limited to three areas: accessing history, assessment strategies and engaging in a dialogue.

## **PART THREE: Discussion**

Three broad questions have emerged from the analysis of the data.

- a) **Accessing History:** Why are students privileging secondary sources? What might the consequences be of this trend on the development of historical thinking?
- b) **Assessment Strategies:** How can we interpret student's lack of enthusiasm for assessment practices such as presentation and essays.
- c) **Engaging in a Dialogue:** If History is an ongoing conversation (global and local) how can we encourage students to see themselves as agentic contributors? What teaching practices, in lectures, tutorials and informal learning settings, are proving to encourage and affirm confidence, curiosity and academic rigour?

## a) Accessing History

### *Students Privileging Secondary Sources*

In light of the current literature and the interviews with lecturers, the national trend by students to privilege secondary sources over primary sources must be of concern.

Bailey demonstrated that evidence-based teaching is increasingly a focus of researchers.<sup>18</sup> Mucher for example created a disciplinary tool that would create a "culture of evidence" for children in schools and high schools.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Wineburg expresses a sense of urgency for re-evaluation of the way sources are used in High Schools<sup>20</sup>. As Booth has argued, there is no cohesive pedagogical progression between schools and universities<sup>21</sup>. The findings in this project confirm Booth's concern, the more complex engagement and location of the self as historian required for proper examination of primary sources appears less attractive than the ease of reading a secondary source.

During the interviews with lecturers, it was evident that they are already actively privileging the focus on evidence in their assessment structures. Learning the skills to identify the different types of evidence was a priority in first year students' development. Almost without exception students are required to undertake some type of exercise that teaches them to differentiate between primary and secondary sources in the first weeks into a course. The complexities of this binary are then introduced slowly over varying periods of time according to individual lecturers' requirements or theoretical position.

In relation to Rösen's ontogenetic categories of historical consciousness the students are reaching the critical and genetic stages in their development they are able to be discerning about evidence.<sup>22</sup> They are navigating forms and representations and when they are required to undertake a form of analysis, they are forced to locate themselves in the emerging narrative. They become active historians employing empathy and critical thinking.

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<sup>18</sup> Bailey, "Research Review: The Development of Historical Thinking."

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Mucher, "Building a Culture of Evidence through Professional Development" *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Sam Wineburg, "On Reading Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and the Academy.," *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991).p 518

<sup>21</sup> Alan Booth, "Worlds in Collision: University Tutor and Student Perspectives on the Transition to Degree Level History," *Teaching History* 121 (2005).p14

<sup>22</sup> Rösen, *History: Narration Interpretation Orientation* p.12



The disciplinary narrative lent heavily towards the discerning use of primary sources as the underpinning thread of practicing history. Yet this project has found that students are not embracing this view or at least not seeing it work in their daily practice.

Why do the students prefer a voice of interpretation and translation over the authentic materiality of primary sources? Is this simply laziness or a lack of confidence? Were the students confusing the unit hand outs and resource materials as books and journals? Was primary evidence a ‘taken for granted’ component of history? Were some of the students still struggling with the difference between primary and secondary sources as indicated by lecturers as being a major stumbling block for some students? Might some of the History extension students be caught in a quagmire of understanding the ideas of “history as myth”? Where they are exposed to the philosophy, but not given the tools and skills to apply them to the practice of history.

One way to look at the problem is to examine difference between first year responses as compared to later years and in particular those students enrolled in history theory and method courses as precursor to post graduate studies. These students should not have any problems differentiating the two types of sources indeed they would be versed to some degree of the problematic nature of all sources. Yet as Table 11 shows, while there is a small shift away from secondary sources by methodology classes, the weight of their rankings has obviously gone to other options. Primary sources remain at a steady midway ranking for all groups.

Table 11: The median rankings for Types of Sources (note 1 is the highest ranking and equates with “most useful” activity)

	First Year	Later Years	Extension students	Methodology Unit	Writing history
Primary Sources	6.75	5.5	5	5	6
Secondary Sources	2	2	3.25	4	3

These results show there must be more research on means for encouraging effective evidence based teaching practices. It was evident that there is already an ongoing debate in each of the universities this project visited.

A more effective way of looking for answers to this challenge might be to consider the processes of complex engagement with sources as argued by Wineburg<sup>23</sup>. Where innovative evidence based teaching practices lead to empathy and contextulisation as discussed by Bailey. As Seixas suggests, it is helpful to consider the use of postmodernist

<sup>23</sup> Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

approaches which emphasise the construction on the evidence and the “rhetorical and narratological strategies that serve present day purposes”<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly the students of the two courses predominantly using film as evidence gave primary sources the highest rating.

There is a clear need for lecturers to look for ways to help students make the transition from passive recipients of other’s opinions to active and confident thinkers who can contextualize themselves and the past as well as regard the past with an inherent empathy. They need to find ways for students to comfortably and confidently access evidence. It is not as one lecturer warned, an invitation to ‘bury the students in primary sources’ and see what emerges. It is equipping students with the skills to read and think deeply about the source. It is as Rüsen would argue the synthesis of orientation of the self and the past, of method and of representation.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, as Wineburg would suggest, it is the shift from everyday understandings of history and the entry into the disciplinary paradigm<sup>26</sup>.

It is apparent from the ranking trends in this project that more attention needs to be paid not just to the basic differences and qualities of sources but the skills needed to navigate the analysis process. In turn it is vital to look to assessment strategies as means for monitoring student development in this process.

## **b) Assessment Strategies**

### *Bleak ratings for Assessment*

It was a concern that students gave assessment strategies bleak rankings in the questionnaire on a national scale. Three options reflected assessment; writing essays (option 8), receiving feedback (option 9) and making a presentation (option 10). In Table 8 we see a national picture of student perceptions on assessment indicating that making a presentation is regarded as having little impact on students of all types.

Table 12: National Median results for Assessment (Scale 1-13)

Students	Essays	Feedback	Presentation
1 <sup>st</sup> Years	5	8	10
Later	4	7.5	9
Extension	5	6.5	9.5

<sup>24</sup> Peter Seixas, "Schweigen! Die Kinder! Or Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools?," in *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Stearns. Peter N, Seixas. Peter, and Wineburg. Sam (New York: New York University Press, 2000).p.21

<sup>25</sup> Rüsen, *History: Narration Interpretation Orientation* p.11

<sup>26</sup> Wineburg, 2001 cited in Bailey, "Research Review: The Development of Historical Thinking."p.3

There are four general sites for assessment: the tutorial, the lecture and online-assessment can take the form of text or oral work. There are many ways lecturers can shape and stylise their assessment strategies. Indeed there is much ongoing debate, committees and workshops occurring around the country specifically designed to think about better ways to implement assessment. In interviews lecturers talked passionately about assessment strategies that they had implemented in recent years. Some were inspired by their experience in working in particular universities in Australia, Britain or the US while others drew from their ideas from philosophical ideas and innovations.

Despite the commitment of lecturers to developing more effective strategies, they often stated they were limited by university-wide structures and requirements while some cited problems with the physical workplace logistics of implementing experimental approaches. As with the problems of accessing evidence, there is clear indication of a commitment towards better practice by the lecturers, the diverse and innovative strategies are available but we are not necessarily seeing a translation or connection with student perceptions.

#### *Writing essays and assignments*

Throughout the data collection period there was a constant concern about the students' ability to write. In both the interview settings and in informal discussions, lecturers consistently commented that students were not writing well, neither with enough regularity, nor with an epistemological comprehension. Essays remain at the centre of all assessment models.<sup>27</sup> In recent decades what constitutes an essay has become more diversified including minor and major, reflective, critical, and research essays. This is alongside a range of analysis exercises on documents or visual sources. Thus writing and constructing an argument remains a large proportion of assessment. Yet students have ranked this option with only moderate enthusiasm.

#### *Presentations*

Giving a presentation in a tutorial is a performance. It requires confidence, empathy with both the audience and the subject matter. In contrast an online presentation is less personal. Evidence from interviews with lecturers showed that few students are required to partake in online presentations or tasks. The frequency of tutorial presentations is much more diverse. Some lecturers have moved to other strategies citing tutorial sizes as rendering them impractical. Others persist citing the benefits of students positioning themselves as teachers and facilitators of discussion.

It is evident from the literature however that contextualizing the self as a thinker, writer and speaker on history is vital to the development of historical thinking. Making a presentation to one's peers is an important part of that organic process. This study therefore highlights the need for further exploration of more effective ways for using presentations. It would be useful to look for ways that the students are receptive to as well as working well within the current university structure.

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<sup>27</sup> Adele Nye, "Historical Thinking in Higher Education: "Why Study History?", Disciplinary Skills, and Assessment Strategies as Demonstrated in History Department Web Pages," (Forthcoming).

### *Feedback on assignments*

Feedback on assignments rated poorly yet lecturers, tutors and markers clearly indicated that time given to feedback was of major significance and commitment. Comments were thoughtfully constructed around the subject and the individual student's progress. Yet the constraints of many students' lives often mean that they will focus on the formula: what needs to be done to pass this course. The ideal of developing a cumulative knowledge of the subject area, through inter-connected assignments can become lost in the realities of their broader life. Instead talk in the corridors of universities around the country followed the vein of "I have three weeks and four essays to submit". But these are more assumptions and generalizations that clearly evident trends. Indeed, some anecdotal evidence suggests that many students are unclear as to what constitutes feedback. Some students in this study, from three later year classes, rated feedback considerably higher than most thus breaking with the national trend.

These results do not echo the national annual survey by Universities Australia where a higher degree of approval can be found. In the 2007 Graduate Experience Questionnaires the national rate on 'Appropriate Assessment' scale for by students who have graduated with a Bachelor in History, indicated that 34.8 % of students agreed that their assessment was appropriate. In addition 36.8% strongly agreed, only 8.7% disagreed and 3.7% strongly disagreed<sup>28</sup>. The reasons for this difference are difficult to discern. What is clear from these findings is that assessment strategies including the mechanics and impact of feedback, exam and essay requirements, and innovations in evidence based teaching all need further exploration.

### **c) Engaging in a dialogue**

#### *Confidence, conversation and the discipline: an organic process*

The all important shift in historical thinking is central to students taking up the challenge to engage with a disciplinary dialogue. While Carl Becker celebrated the idea of 'everyman a historian', others since have explored the personal contextualization that hurls a student from passive recipient of history narratives to a participant in the discussion.<sup>29</sup> Jorn Rüsen showed it to be the moving from "lebenspraxis" or daily life to a disciplinary arena of theories, methods and forms of representations in his disciplinary matrix.<sup>30</sup> Wineburg sees it as coming from engagement with primary sources.. (ref Matt's article.

The student's shift to being able to recognize the complex nature of history and to be comfortable to voice an opinion lies largely in the hands of the tutors and lecturers. When lecturers were asked in the interviews which theorists or philosophers from any discipline have shaped their thinking? most often they cited their own teachers, from when they

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<sup>28</sup> UniversitiesAustralia, "Graduate Careers Australia 2007 Course Experience Questionnaire Tables" (Canberra2008).

<sup>29</sup> Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932).

<sup>30</sup> Peter Lee, "'Walking Backwards into Tomorrow' Historical Consciousness and Understanding History," *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 4, no. 1 (2004).p.6

were students rather than the well known figures of academia. It was the inspiring and charismatic teachers taught and demanded the gritty nature of how to think about history, how to write a coherent paper or how to read sources in depth.

**Table 14: Median Rankings indicating engagement in a disciplinary dialogue**

	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Later	Extension
Engaging with lecturers in the classroom	3	3	2.5
Engaging with lecturers outside the classroom	5	5	4.5
Engaging with students in the classroom	4	5	4.25
Engaging with students outside the classroom	7	7	5.5
Conversations with other of different opinions	6	6	5

The second most privileged activity by all students was engagement with academic staff in the classroom. The lecturer or tutor is not only the guide or facilitator for the unit, they are also interpreters and the means by which the students bridge and contextualize the broader questions of history. They provide the answers to the question: “why do History?”

The lecturer or tutor is the vehicle through which students gain confidence to speak and write about history. They are available to be used as experimental sound boards by students. The students rarely see themselves as being skilled or having the knowledge to engage in original debate. In the response to Question 1 of the questionnaire, asking “what is historical thinking?” there were indications that even the more advanced students place limitations on their expectations. HSC extension student now completing a methodology course at UNSW stated historical thinking was:

Observing arguments, assessing sources (primary and secondary) and not necessarily making one’s own judgment (at this level of study) but being able to pinpoint methods and problems of other historians.

Shifting students from the passive learner to engaged thinker is a task that must occur in lecture theatres and tutorial rooms. For some lecturers this is thought of as some sort of disorientation process, one which disrupts the boundaries between student and historians. It rests upon the ability of the student to rethink the imagined past, the evidence and themselves, as readers, thinkers, writers and active participants in history. Lecturers described the process as “an imaginary leap”, a need to “develop a sense of a possibility of alterity” and as a sort of “relativistic empathy”. These views echo some of the arguments put forward by Levstik, VanSledright, and Yeager and Foster<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Levstik, "Crossing Empty Spaces: Perspectives Taking in New Zealand Adolescents Understanding of National History, .", B VanSledright, "From Empathetic Regard to Self-Understanding: Im/Positionality, Empathy, and Historical Contextualization.," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* ed. Davies. Ozro Luke, Foster. Stuart J, and Elizabeth Anne. Yeager (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield

More work is needed to explore this period of student transition and orientation, Results have shown that students are receptive to and value the engagement with academic staff. Yet as will be evident in the forthcoming report on the qualitative tasks in the questionnaire, there is also a sense of hesitancy and lack of confidence was reflected in the student responses. This can only be addressed by helping students through the contextualization of the self, the historian, the discipline and the imagined past.

## **PART FOUR: Conclusions**

Researching historical thinking in undergraduate history students has highlighted their perceptions of teaching, assessment and learning in history schools and departments. A remarkable national trend emerged from the data which showed that students across the country largely shared similar views. The main thrust of this national narrative suggest that students are privileging secondary sources over primary sources, they are less than enthusiastic about current assessment strategies, and only in varying degrees are they locating themselves in the disciplinary dialogue. Each of these three aspects, ways for accessing history, assessment and the epistemological discourse are crucial to a developing historical thinking in students. These findings offer comment on how students perceive the particular skills and associated tools history students must acquire to complete their degrees. By analysing these perceptions and locating them within current literature more ideas and teaching innovations can evolve.

From this exploration, there were few discernable differences between first and later year students. More research in each of the discussion areas would further illuminate the differences and the stages of academic progression. It would be useful to incorporate Rösen's disciplinary models and categories<sup>32</sup> into new research to further identify the stages of the development of historical thinking that progress consistently, as well as the situations where students find themselves intellectually and methodologically immobilized.

In addition, this exploration could be accompanied with a comparative study of particular innovations employed by individual lecturers. Throughout this study it was evident that many lecturers are regularly engaged in discussions, committee groups and experimental practices on their campuses. Both the motivation and innovation are already in place across the nation. Thus further exploration would be timely, to not only record and investigate the innovative ideas but to promote further thinking and experimentation among educators.

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<sup>32</sup> Rösen, *History: Narration Interpretation Orientation* p.12



## APPENDIX

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1. Overview of Research Undertaking
2. Information for staff and students and Consent Forms
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5. Graph: Q2 Results by Subject Area
6. An explanation of Jorn Rösen's Ontogenetic Categories of Historical Consciousness

#### 1: An Overview of Research Undertaking

University	Student Questionnaires	Classes visited	Lecturers Interviewed
Macquarie University	240	4	2
University of New South Wales	168	2	
University of Sydney	179	3	2
University of New England	79	5	4
La Trobe University	37	2	3
Monash University *			7
University of Melbourne	234	3	4
University of Tasmania	123	4	7
University of Queensland	107	4	4
University of Western Australia	143	5	7
Flinders University	93	6	7
Australian National University	52	2	3
Totals	1455	40	50

\* Participation was at times limited by timing and semester structures.

#### 2. Information for Staff and Students and Consent Forms

### HISTORICAL THINKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

#### Information for Staff



You are invited to participate in a study of Historical thinking in higher education. The purpose of the study is designed to map perceptions of historical thinking among staff and students in Higher Education providers.

The study is being conducted by Dr Adele Nye School of Modern History, Macquarie University, as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline-Based Initiative Project. The project is steered by a consultative committee with representatives from Macquarie University, The University of Sydney, Monash University, Flinders University, The Australian Historical Association, The History Teachers' Association of Australia and the Deans of Arts, Social Science and Humanities. They will oversee the implementation of the study and communication of results

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in an (approximately) one hour taped interview and allow access to first and third year classes .where students will be asked to complete a five minutes to complete a one page survey. Interviews and questionnaires will be largely undertaken between August and December 2008.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential. No individual will be identified in any publication of the results. Dr Adele Nye, A/Professor Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Emeritus Professor Jill Roe are the only people who will see the raw data for the project.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence. Transcripts will be available to participants on request.

If you are interested in the progress and findings of this research, reports will be presented at the Australian Historical Association (AHA) and the Australian Society for Classical Studies conferences.

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## **HISTORICAL THINKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Information for Students**

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Email: adele.nye@humn.mq.edu.au

### **Consent Form**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(block letters)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

Investigator's Name:  
(block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee (Human Research). If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact the Ethics Review Committee through its Secretary  
Telephone 9850 7854;  
Email [ethics@mq.edu.au](mailto:ethics@mq.edu.au)).

Any complaint you make will be treated in confidence and investigated, and you will be informed of the outcome.

**(INVESTIGATOR'S COPY)**

## Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understand the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, knowing that I can withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without consequence. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(block letters)

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

Investigator's Name:  
(block letters)

Investigator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

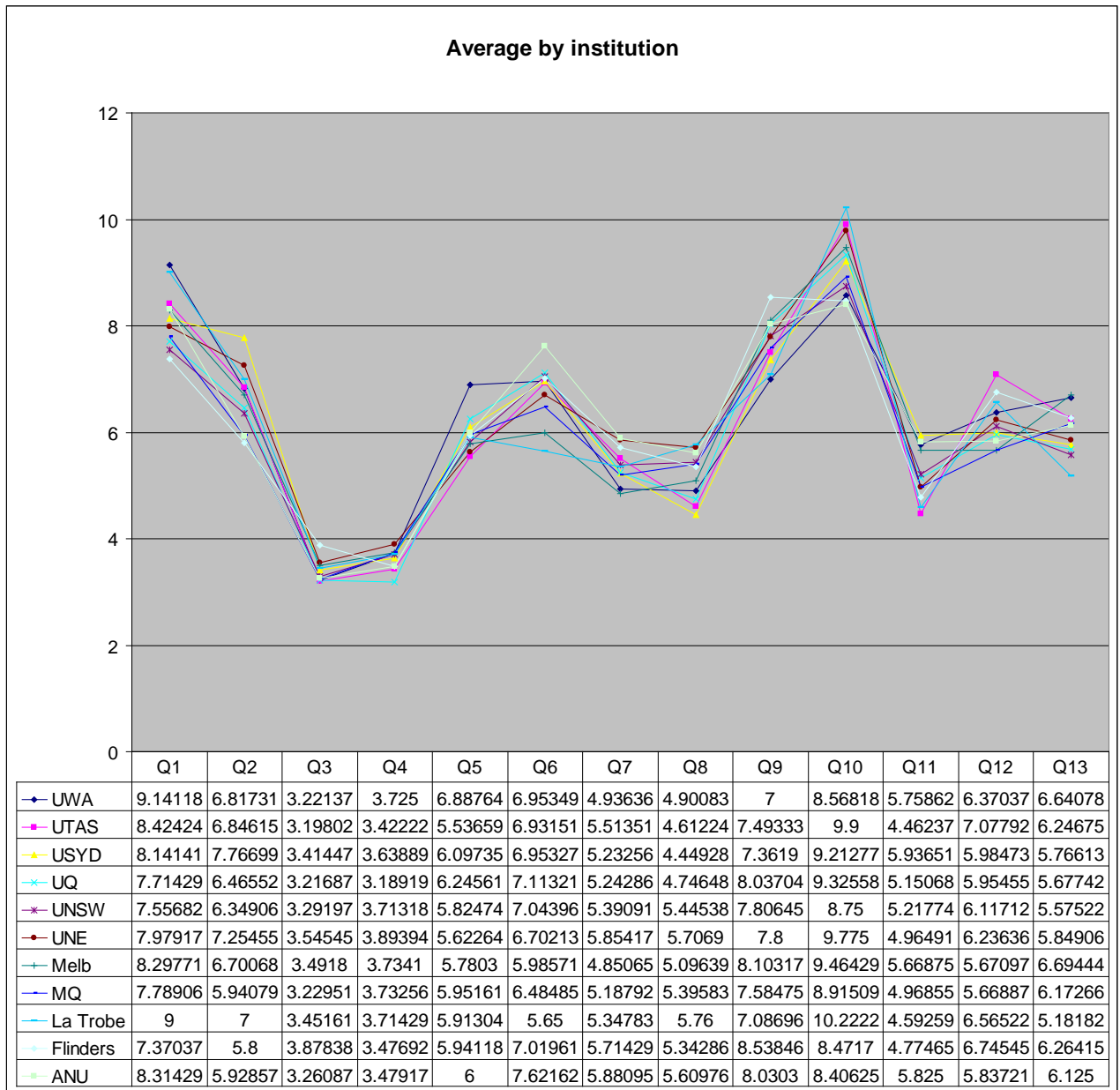
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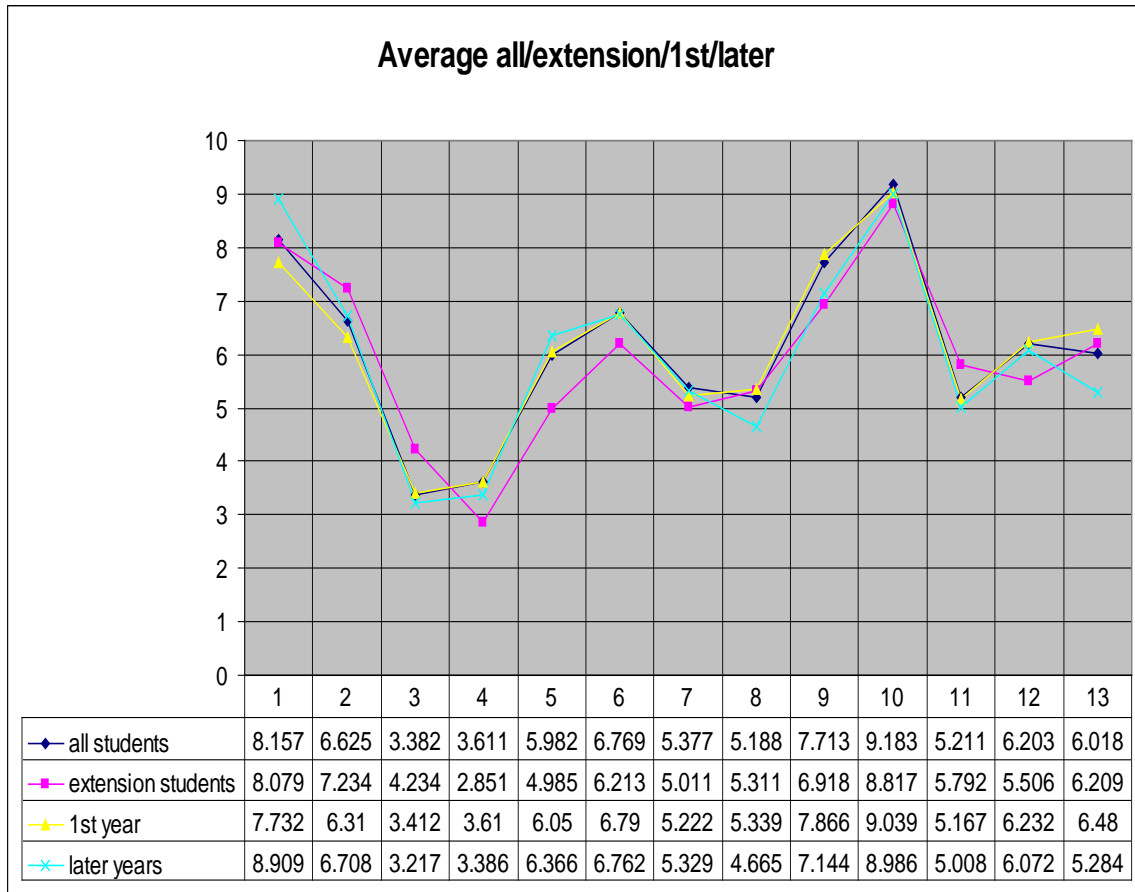
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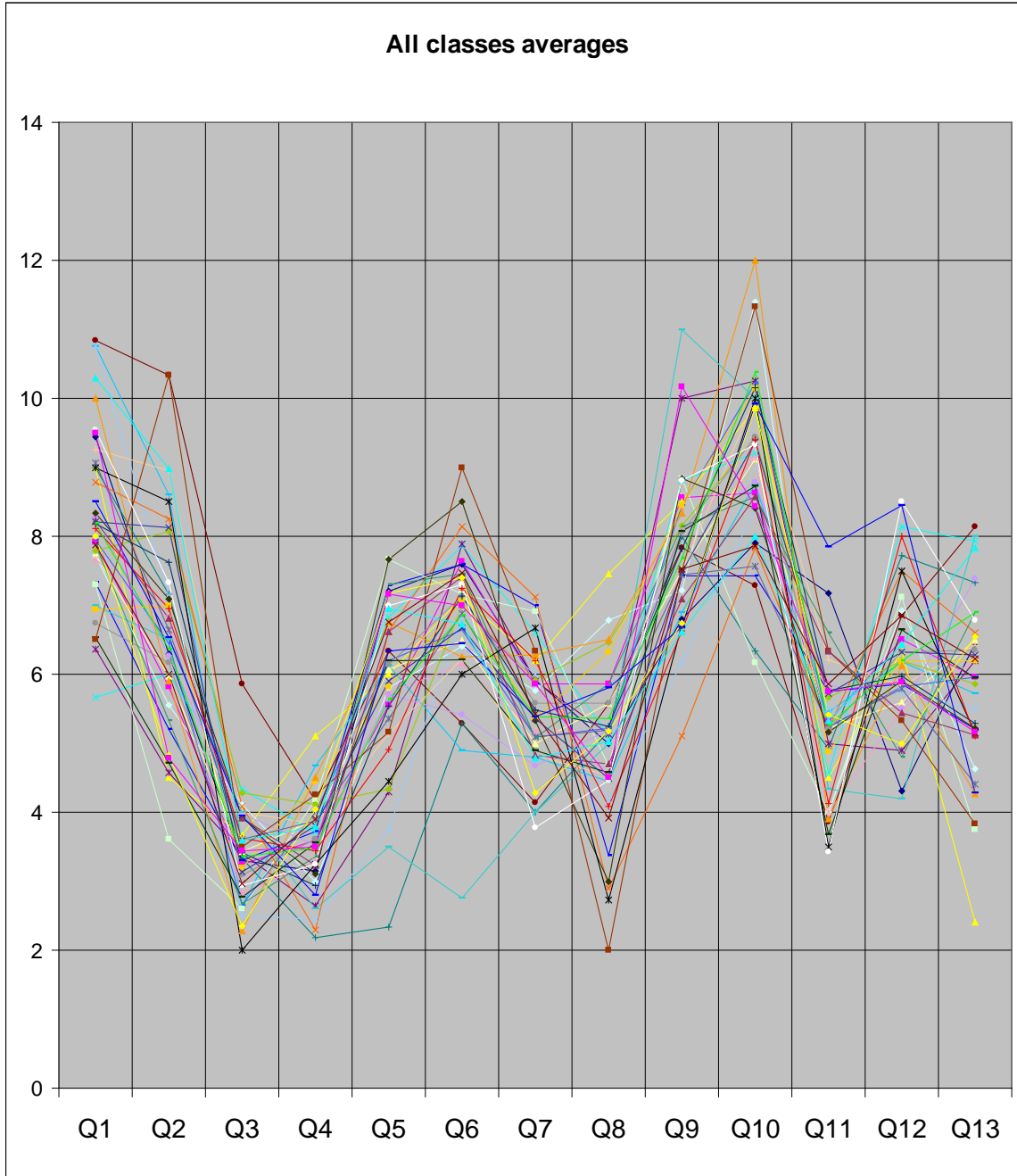
### 3. Q2 Results by Institution



#### 4. Q2 Results by Year



### 5. Graph: Q2 Results by Subject Area





## 6. An explanation of Jorn Rüsen's Ontogenetic Categories of Historical Consciousness<sup>33</sup>

Category	Explanation
Traditional	A belief that history can be understood as a fixed and stable tradition and adheres to pre-given narratives <sup>34</sup> .
Exemplary	Refers to the idea that the past can provide lessons for the present, including moral ones. It is based on "timeless rules" <sup>35</sup> and a view that the past is a source of "cultural universals". <sup>36</sup>
Critical	A means for confronting and challenging positions that have been regarded as the norm. It un-entangles dominant hegemonies. <sup>37</sup>
Genetic	A site of maturity and application of historical theorizing. It is marked by a sense of self, change and temporality

<sup>33</sup> Nye, "Perspectives of Women as Historians: An Exploration of Women's Learning and Historical Practice." .pp.72-75

<sup>34</sup> Lee, "'Walking Backwards into Tomorrow' Historical Consciousness and Understanding History." p.4

<sup>35</sup> Jorn Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function and Ontogenetic Development.," in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).p.73

<sup>36</sup> Peter Seixas, "Historiographies and Historical Consciousness," in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).p.22

<sup>37</sup> Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function and Ontogenetic Development.." p.75

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