

## Making boundaries permeable: the university experience through the social sciences

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Cross-disciplinary boundaries, online technologies, active engagement, learning journeys

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**Abstract** In this paper we reflect on the challenges of developing and teaching two new first-year (intensively inter/cross-disciplinary and online learning focussed) and two third-year units (more traditional capstone and discipline-based seminar/workshops) in the Department of Social Sciences at Curtin University in a time of significant change to both structural and institutional frameworks. We interrogate our discursive understandings of student responses to units which subvert expectations and demand that students become border crossers (often of self-constructed barriers). In describing and analysing several of the strategies used in the spiral development of skills such as persuasive argument, image-word narratives and cultural accounts, and the ways in which online technologies can be deployed to make these strategies possible, we seek to understand the complexities of the demands felt by students (and staff) as we enter the foreign culture of the 21st century university.

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### The contexts

Seeking to broaden the intellectual and cultural horizons of its students, in 2010 the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin introduced a number of compulsory and elective (almost) Faculty-wide units (subjects) as components of a first-year foundation program for a new 'Super BA' program. Three of the Faculty's five Schools are participating in the new common core program: Design and Art; Media, Culture and Creative Arts; and Social Sciences and Asian Languages. Students are required to take at least eight first-year units spread over two semesters, a communications unit, Engaging in the Humanities (EITH) which comprises different streams for each School, one formally substantive unit from two offered by their own School, and one each from those offered by the other Schools. Students may also enrol in other Faculty-wide units (as they are known, despite the formal non-participation of two Schools). Anne-Marie Hilsdon was given carriage of the EITH unit for Social Sciences and Asian Languages (SSAL), and Joan Wardrop played the corresponding role for the new substantive unit for Social Sciences (another was separately developed for Asian Languages), in 2010 entitled

Culture, Place, Globality (CPG), and from 2011 renamed as Senses of Place (SoP). Philip Moore taught in both units.

Simultaneously, within Social Sciences, we embarked on our most extensive rethinking and reorienting of our program for more than three decades, in other words, longer than the School working life of almost any staff member. In reshaping the Social Sciences program, we were concerned to ensure the coherence of our majors (which newly emerged as Anthropology and Sociology, History, International Relations and Sustainable Development) and the integrity and challenges of each individual unit in the majors. Because all three of us in this eScholar project had been co-teaching second and third year units for some years we played significant roles in the re-conceptualisation and teaching of units at all undergraduate levels during the processes of reconstruction in both School and Faculty environments.

This paper then records and interprets some aspects of our responses to a period of very significant change in both structural and institutional frameworks.

### **The participants**

Our student cohorts in this project include those from two first-year units (nearly 900 students) and two third-year units (Understanding Social Research 311 and Doing Social Research 312) (approximately 65 students). As described above, one of the first-year units (CPG-SoP 100) has been a compulsory unit for students in the School of Social Sciences and Asian Languages, and an elective (of two units offered by SSAL) for students from the other Schools participating in the Faculty of Humanities first-year foundation program. The cohort for the other first-year unit (EITH) has been primarily SSAL students, with some small numbers from other Schools. The third-year units are capstone seminars for the Anthropology/Sociology and History majors within Social Sciences, including varying numbers (7-10) of students whose majors are in other disciplines and who take these units as part of a minor or as electives.

Students bring very varied backgrounds, interests, skill-sets and commitments to these units. For example, the third-year students have often developed considerable out-of-class experience in student guild activities and community work and several had travelled extensively, often on international student exchanges. First and third year students often have significant knowledge of web-based social media though it became clear to us very quickly that the web knowledge of the new students is often based on and limited to specific platforms or programs. Some new students adapt quickly to searching in media beyond Google or YouTube but others, when asked to research by using the University's Library catalogue or other sites such as Google Books, experience considerable difficulty and frustration. The development and transferability of search and research skills in order to produce information-literate students has therefore been an underlying task embedded in the first-year units.

The teaching staff directly involved in the eScholar project have backgrounds in Anthropology/Sociology (Hilsdon and Moore) and History/Anthropology (Wardrop). The first-year units in particular have involved more than a dozen experienced tutors drawn not only from the social sciences but also cultural studies and art.

### **The rationale**

In this pilot project we have focussed on exploring strategies and technologies for teaching and learning in the new first year units within our Department, and on recording the reshaping of the first-year experience of university for students from a diverse range of disciplines across the Faculty of Humanities. In the third year capstone units our strategies and technologies have refocussed consolidation of knowledge from the previous two years, importantly strengthening interrelationships between the skills embedded in our social science degree and the professional workforce.

### **The initial challenges**

The Curtin Faculty of Humanities historically has prided itself on being the most diverse such Faculty in the country. It was inevitable then that the backgrounds of the students involved in the Faculty's common core units would be diverse and, as indicated above, that they would bring different interests, commitments, skills and cultural understandings to the experience.

First-year students at Curtin find themselves at a very large university whose primary constituency is a sprawling metropolitan area, but also drawing from regional areas in the geographically largest state in Australia, and from international sources such as South, Southeast and East Asia, the Middle East and Africa. In the First Year Humanities common core units like SoP international students tend to be concentrated in disciplines such as Design or Journalism. In the third year almost all students were from the Social Sciences yet (as indicated above) their out-of-class experience varied widely.

The differing cultures of the students manifest themselves through their disciplines (from the markedly vocational to the focussed generalist to the intellectually theoretical); cultural origins and educational backgrounds (local and international, urban and rural students); ages (mostly school-leavers, some with Gap Year experience, many mature-age students, some two or three years out from school, others 10 to 40 years away from formal education); and expectations of the purposes of a university education (vocational training, acquisition of portable research, analytical and communication skills, foundational for a range of possible careers).

Some students are from disciplines in which public exhibition and review of student work is integral to the discipline (e.g., art, design, creative writing), some from disciplines which historically have relied on less public exposure, through tutorial participation and presentation (often reluctant) and essays read only by the tutor. Students' expectations of the location of the boundaries between public and private, between modes and locations

of presentation, publication and performance, in units such as those we have developed therefore are widely divergent, leading to substantial tensions for groups and individuals at times.

We recognise too that many local students work part-time, some almost full-time, and some engage in extracurricular community work. University then is not necessarily perceived as their full-time occupation so that they often do not, as in a more traditional pattern, spend most days of the week on the campus, but rather visit only for classes and perhaps for quick side trips into the Library. The university and its campus are not necessarily the central location or activity in their lives outside the home.

We have observed difficulties for many students in making the transition from school or work to university: from being the big fish in the small, comfortable pond whose boundaries are precise and externally defined, they find themselves the small fish in the very big pond where both demands and boundaries are less clear and often frustratingly changeable. They bring with them difficulties in concentrating for long periods of time, practices and habits of greater reliance on the boundaries set by former teachers and tightly-defined syllabi than are demanded at university, difficulties in problem definition and consequent capacities to work independently, and uncertainties, at a time of transition (for many) from childhood to adulthood, about how to respond to the new and the different.

For mature-age students re-entering education after workplace and/or parental experience, accustomed to decision and boundary making and independent goal setting, often with strong views and opinions, the challenges are more often about accepting externally-imposed boundaries or requirements. This we also recognise as an issue about responses to the challenges of the new and the different.

For students in third year units, once the initial hurdles of earlier years have been overcome, we have perceived challenges for many around deepening and strengthening the core skills of reading and analysing text (whether written, visual, ethnographic) and problematising and representing the perceptions, understandings and arguments that result. In the third year, students are engaged in production of their own texts through advanced social inquiry and empirical research. Through this they are challenged to fully understand knowledge production and thereby to dismantle more comprehensively texts similar to those which they have analysed in the previous two years.

For us then, the primary challenge, perhaps particularly in the new first-year units but inevitably also in the third-year units, has been to construct learning modalities which enable students to cross what are often self-constructed boundaries and barriers. We have chosen to do that through an open-edged style of teaching which, wherever possible, *shows* rather than *tells*, and insists on *doing* rather than merely *listening*, which embraces the reality of cross-disciplinary teaching/learning and engages its disruptive and subversive qualities. In the third year units especially, such *showing* is accompanied by a

challenge to students to take over responsibility for their own learning in line with their eventual entry to the professional workforce. At both levels then we aim at active, engaged, deep learning by the students (Knight 2011, p. 68).

### **Research Question(s)**

Our small team asked how we could most effectively use a set of online technologies to assist students at these two undergraduate levels to:

- make the transition to the intellectual and vocational cultures demanded by the university world;
- understand and, where possible, utilise sources and modes of analysis from a range of disciplinary backgrounds; and
- understand, and where possible, utilise a range of representational possibilities.

### **Approaches and technologies**

In developing the new first-year units, our brief was to be as inclusive as possible, to explore the core themes and topics researched and taught in Social Sciences (and, for EITH, also in Asian Languages) and to engage as many staff as possible in the units, introducing both the individuals and the topics to the students. This was achieved by the developers working on the whole 12-week programs as totalities, conceptualising and defining the topics, approaches and focus skills for each week of the programs. Once those detailed maps for the total programs had been developed, the developers negotiated with colleagues from the disciplines to take responsibility for the development and initial transmission (through a live or online lecture and, then for CPG/SoP, through an online interview) of individual weekly topics.

The third-year units, on the other hand, were initially developed in 2007-2008 to replace a range of units, grown organically over a long period of time in the two disciplines of Anthropology and Sociology, with new interdisciplinary seminar/workshops which deliberately focused and interrogated the core concepts and practices of understanding and doing social research. Drawing intensively on student responses to these early iterations, by 2010 we had developed a structure within which active engaged learning was central to our own practices, each of us individually leading specific seminar/workshops (in a classroom where the others were also actively involved), using both small-group and group-of-the-whole structures to encourage differing modes of discussion, and analytical and presentation skill development through substantial content each week. In these units, online learning systems have played a background role, as support structures, while online research techniques have been foregrounded.

The initial parameters from the Faculty envisaged EITH as a compulsory unit in communication skills, primarily involving detailed weekly exercises which introduce specific skills and technologies. In Social Sciences we give primacy to teaching these

skills through substantive content. This unit then was developed to explore the core social sciences themes of human rights and development through the ongoing skills sessions. For SoP, the parameters were determined by the School (SSAL) and Department (SocSci). In curriculum development, the initial theme of the relationships between culture, globality and place was quickly refined to a focus on these issues as articulated through the core idea of senses of place, and further refined to use each of the discipline areas of the Department as the lens for investigation of particular topics.

In both EITH and CPG/SoP units our core online technology was Blackboard, on which each unit had its own site. The internal applications offered by Blackboard enabled us to develop programs around shifting combinations of intensive online and face-to-face interactions between staff and students. Given the large student numbers, particularly in CPG/SoP, we early identified a requirement to explore online technologies that would enable lecturers, tutors and students to be connected in constructive knowledge loops which would facilitate (and, if possible, demand) deep learning rather than superficial glossing of the complex ideas and concepts that underpin both units: we were actively seeking to replicate the intensity of engagement experienced in live classes. During the second half of 2009 a number of possibilities outside Blackboard were identified for us (for example, Elluminate *Live*, and various types of blogging and online content sharing software). When we tested these, none proved to add significantly to our capacity to achieve our objectives, either being unsuitable for our very large numbers, or demanding temporal synchronicity of a type which was unsuitable for our diverse student cohort, or not sufficiently superior to the Blackboard equivalent to warrant the addition to the suite of technologies we would deploy.

We did however choose to use a combination of Curtin's iLecture system (to record live lectures for immediate dissemination through the Blackboard site) and Echo 360 recordings of framing interviews which were the solution we developed in place of live lectures when confronted with more than 700 students in our second semester of teaching CPG/SoP. No lecture theatre at Curtin was available for this number of students, but even if there had been we would have chosen to use an online format. This is because we recognised that a semi-structured interview (conducted and filmed by one of the unit developers, Michelle Barrett) with a lecturer in their study, surrounded by books, papers and artefacts, would provide a more direct and engaging experience for students.

In choosing to work online to a large extent, we explicitly sought to subvert the understandings of the social sciences carried to university by new students and/or from disciplines which have not conceptualised themselves as research-based but rather essentially as vocationally-based, as preparing students for a particular career through the teaching of a narrow skill-set from within that vocation. Our approach was to offer students understandings of the social sciences as inclusive of a very wide range of

techniques and strategies of social research, analysis and representation, which could be transferred across discipline boundaries.

With the assistance of more experienced Blackboard users, and with clear briefs developed both from intensive discussions and from an earlier online learning project (Wardrop, 2001) we focussed on shaping the capacities of Blackboard to achieve our objectives. In particular, we developed a core concept of a weekly online dossier, designed both to engage the students as actively as possible, and to encapsulate and define the topics and skills to be worked through during each week. The dossier essentially is several objects although it has core similarities in both units.

In EITH each online dossier comprises a preview of the social inquiry to be undertaken for that week. Through an integration of substantive content with specific communication skills, the dossier introduces the topic and its associated key concepts, lists key academic readings and relevant skills websites. Dossiers also incorporate a variety of visual materials: images, photographs, Youtube clips, cartoons, book reviews, interviews, lectures, documentaries, and NGO and government websites and reports. Questions were posed in the dossier to stimulate social inquiry around the topic.

In this way the dossier both invites and requires active student engagement. Students have the opportunity to add their own material to the dossier, resources which encapsulate various aspects of the weekly topic from their own point of view. The dossier links students to their online tutorial group in which they can create and build discussion and critique of ideas and dossier resources. Because the dossiers are posted in advance of the weekly sessions, active engagement with dossiers also serves as preparation for the weekly sessions. The dossier invites and requires contributions such as the following:

1. Sharing ideas and resources on a weekly basis;
2. Writing paragraphs and summaries;
3. Student group presentations on each weekly topic (presented face to face and online). These presentations involve use of a variety of visual, nonverbal, oral and written communication modes including role plays and debates; and
4. Online and in-class student reflections on these presentations.

Most assessments, which also include an essay and an academic referencing test, are submitted and assessed online. The group presentations assessed in class provide the catalyst for student online reflections. While dossiers are intended to stimulate and guide investigation, online submission using different types of audio-visual and written resources facilitate greater possibilities for expression, explanation and argument.

In CPG/SoP, the dossier first offers the students the materials for the investigation of the week's topic. It includes background, discussion, keywords and focus questions and

begins with a brief overview of the topic. Rather than a simple or even an annotated reading list, this is followed by a discursive exploration of ideas linked with sources for the student to follow up. We wanted students to understand that in our own research as social scientists we draw on a very wide range of sources and materials so, while every week the sources included some academic reading (papers or chapters which would be accessible to first-semester first-year students), at least one of which would be designated as essential reading, much of each dossier was made up of visual materials (Youtube clips, newspaper cartoons, maps, paintings, music, graphs, photographs, documentaries accessible through the Library, etc.), and of suggestions as to where to find statistics, transcripts of oral history interviews, NGO reports, etc.).

Secondly, the dossier demands active engagement by each student: in pursuit of the aim of having the student engage with the ideas as fully as possible. The dossier requires weekly contributions of several types by each student to their online group (about 20 students in each):

- a) a write-up of their research/reading/viewing/listening from the dossier materials, about 400-500 words, and including drawings, photographs, maps, audio and video clips, and further questions for class discussion. This section of the dossier is used as the basis for weekly in-class (online or live) presentations by individual students as well as providing further materials for class discussion; and
- b) a reflective online blog/journal in a private space, accessible only to the individual student, the tutor(s) and any other student granted specific permission by the writer. This also includes the full range of visual, aural and written materials and is designed to assist in the development of individual reflective practice.

All assessment for these first-year units is submitted and assessed online, with the exception of assessment for formal in-class group or individual presentations and for class discussions. Online submission opens up the possibility for all students, whether from a specifically visual background or not, to use and analyse images and sound files, and to explore multimedia possibilities.

In EITH the dossiers and parallel in-class sessions focus on a type of sequential development of communication skills embedded in various knowledge contexts. In each week priority is given to a particular skill contextualised in a substantive content from the social sciences and Asian languages designed to support student completion of specific assessment tasks. Hence, critical thinking about gender and sport identities ('Becoming an academic detective') precedes the session about the construction of an argument ('Making persuasive arguments: Reporting the world'). However, the teaching and learning of these and other skills reappear throughout the semester indicating their unavoidable association but also their spiral development. This approach is also reflected in the management of assessment: the essay, for example is initially submitted as a small skeleton piece, returned with feedback, then redeveloped and resubmitted.

Students' opportunities for engaging, analysing and experiencing various forms of communication are expanded and deepened over the duration of the unit by using different technologies to investigate current relevant social, cultural, environmental political and international issues. In one weekly session students investigate a plethora of different non-verbal (e.g., emotional and other bodily) responses to photographs and other images of bodies ('Working without words'). More conventional communication skills such as developing an argument are presented in innovative ways. Students address climate change issues by evaluating the persuasiveness of three arguments: the lecturer's in their presentation, a comprehensive online climate change report and a website. An online website about 'writing a persuasive essay' provides coaching for students in their tasks. As the unit unfolds it is clear that the learning process is strongly supported by peer learning as students participate in the weekly sharing both on and offline of ideas and resources.

The organisation of EITH as a core unit involving a variety of academic staff from social science disciplines and Asian languages has resulted in students being exposed to lecturers, learning styles and substantive content heretofore exclusively available in specific first year subjects. By exploring common themes of difference, identity and human rights students are engaging with foundational knowledges shared by the social sciences and Asian languages. In explorations of cross cultural difference for example in a session entitled 'Writing Culture', students are asked to locate a photo or picture that best represents the 'Australian face', 'by browsing through magazines, website, photo albums of your friends. It could be an image you have seen in television drama, films or advertisements. You could also draw by using your own imagination.' Students are asked to write a paragraph explaining the rationale of their choice and to take it along with the photo/picture/drawing to their weekly workshop. Through the integration of knowledge production and communication skills development in EITH we aim for a greater understanding of both. Such learning we suggest is enhanced by a blend of technologies.

Paralleling the skills development in the EITH unit, in CPG/SoP students were introduced to further skills such as socio-cultural observation and analysis and its presentation through a range of technologies to audiences of varying sizes. The first of these exercises takes place in the first week of the semester when students are asked to write (and visually illustrate where possible) a 200-word cultural account of a meal in which they participate during the week. We give the students a number of models (initially written by staff members, and now also student examples) and make clear that a meal might be a solitary cup of coffee or a family barbecue, or pizza at 3am after a night out, or a bowl of muesli after a long morning run. At this early stage we ask for these to be posted online within the individual groups but accessible to everyone engaged in the unit, tutors giving advice about resizing image (and sound) files, building on skills which some but not all students already possess.

What concerned us in assessing these is the depth and care with which (self) observation is pursued, and the communication of its analytical representation through evocative words and images. In the models the students read of ways in which a meal is a component of cultural networks of understanding, of relationships between people, family, friends, of political relationships, of the tensions between local and globalised production and consumption, of memory, nostalgia and emotional connection. From the beginning of the unit we ask that students immerse themselves in the meanings of what seem to be simple actions and objects and to develop understandings of how these can be analysed, represented and communicated. We convey, in as many different ways as possible, that we are not interested in what Knight calls “strategic” or “procedural surface learning” (Knight, 2011, p. 68; Case & Marshall, 2004, pp. 609-610) in which students blind themselves to understanding what lies behind a particular task and focus solely on the procedural strategies that will enable a superficial achievement of the task. Rather, we explore what full engagement in learning can mean in this social sciences context.

We now engage this type of cultural-account making several times during the semester, looping the observation, analysis, communication and technological skills, so that by mid-semester students are taking for granted skills that they were initially reluctant to engage. In another form of cultural analysis (for which we have specifically used Powerpoint or its Open Source equivalents such as Open Office Impress) we reverse the relationship between words and images, privileging the images (usually no more than five) and limiting the word count. Calling this the Image-Word Narrative exercise, we ask the students to explore one of the unit's central themes, such as the very broad concept of sense of place, through their own experience, and to produce a narrative which can be viewed by everyone else in the unit.

Here we again confront the hesitations, embarrassment and fears (a word often used in discussion of this by the students themselves) that many have about making their work available to others, particularly their peers, to view, read, critique and potentially criticise. Interestingly, we found this also to be true of the students in the EITH unit as they post and share their ideas and their work. Using the technologies available to us, we (as developers and tutors) engage this as a specific barrier self-imposed by students themselves in a number of the disciplines and fields in our Faculty. Surprisingly to us, the technology itself and the skills required to use it effectively, are perceived by many students as a significant barrier, despite their age-status as digital natives (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). That, linked with the fear of being criticised or laughed at, has demanded intensive work both online and in class by the tutors, developing generalised understandings of the distinctions between critique and criticism, often working individually with students to locate points of difficulty and to allay fears. That said, once the initial hesitations have been confronted almost all students have found themselves able to embrace the demands, both technological and intellectual, of the units (Hoskins & Van Hooff, 2005).

We are aware of the presence of these issues across first year units, as new students struggle with the transition to the university culture and its demands and requirements. However, we also recognise that we are constructing these units not only on the self-directed learning model but in accordance with what has become best practice across the social sciences. Rather than models of delivery and passive reception (punctuated by essay writing and tests or examinations), our models demand engagement by students, both intellectually and through self-awareness. In developing their intellectual self-awareness, we are asking students to use their own experience of the world as a tool with which to begin the complex task of wider socio-cultural analysis, whether contemporary, historical, political or geographic.

To reach this level of engagement is demanding of students. Student responses have helped us unpack where (and for some, where not) it has been successful. For a substantial majority, the opportunity afforded by the online spaces to work creatively between the scholarly and the personal, and to do so through the understanding of words, images and sounds as equally authentic forms of text, has proved engaging and seductive. Perhaps surprisingly, the blogs (essentially private journals) have not been the only or even the principal outlet for this production of creative and scholarly interrogation and construction of text. Students have chosen to interpret and extend the virtual potentials of the online dossiers (visible to all students) and the various assignments (such as the cultural accounts and the image/word narratives) in unexpected ways that have provoked unanticipated and productive connections and discussions.

## Findings

EITH students in the SSAL stream presented reactions and responses similar to those of other streams in the Faculty. Unlike SoP, which is administered at the School level, EITH is administered at the Faculty level (as a unit of approx. 1300 students), the structure of which has had important implications for student teaching and learning. As indicated above, each of the participating Faculty Schools (SSAL, Design and Art [SODA], and Media Culture and Creative Arts) developed their own specific unit known as a stream. In the overarching EITH structure the SSAL stream (semester 1, approx. 130 students, semester 2, approx. 30 students) was relatively small reflecting the pattern of Social Sciences and Asian Languages enrolments. The teaching mode changed accordingly to accommodate the reduced numbers in semester 2, from a live lecture and two hour workshop to online lectures and two, two hour workshops.

The initial structure of the faculty level EITH unit was perceived by students, tutors and stream coordinators in the Schools as 'two-tiered' bringing confusion. When EITH started in semester 1, there were two student outlines, a generic EITH one generated by the Faculty and a stream one generated by the School (the organisation and design of the SSAL unit has been discussed above). Tutors and students became confused about what seemed to be uncoordinated joint advice from stream coordinators and the faculty unit coordinator. Each lecture comprised two-parts, where the Faculty coordinator presented

generic communication skills development to all students thereby reducing the emphasis the stream lecturer could give to the weekly substantive topic, and thus militating against the desired constructive interplay in tutorials between communication skills and stream content. These arrangements were unpopular with both students and stream lecturers. In addition, tutors reported students were overwhelmed by the variety of technologies and strategies they were expected to learn. Apart from using Blackboard as explained above for this eScholar project, students were expected to use i-portfolio and encouraged to use other technologies such as diigo.

Once initial technological, social and personal barriers were overcome through the work done in tutorials, as indicated above, students enthusiastically participated in most activities for which the dossier was a vehicle. However, as generic faculty assessments agreed upon in 2009 did not include all activities in the eScholar project students tended to give primacy to assessment related activities. In addition, initial confusion at the two-tier system with competing demands may have reduced also the level of engagement.

Increased outcomes for students in learning engagement for SSAL students in EITH could be achieved by implementation of recommendations in the Stream Coordinators Report to Heads of Schools (Hilsdon, 2010, p.1) all of which related to redefining the faculty-school structure of the unit. Firstly a reinstatement of the primary place of Stream interpretations of EITH is necessary to support its organic approach as followed in this eScholar project communication. The report also locates any faculty unit development primarily in terms of cross-stream synergies in a continuing 'bottom up' process. This suggests a redefinition of Faculty Unit coordination as one of support to the various school streams as the cardinal points of design and delivery. These changes would facilitate the development of the inquiry based interactive deep learning and other integral aspects of the eScholar project as explained above.

For CPG/SoP, the unit which has dealt with the greatest diversity and largest numbers of students from across the Faculty, each of the two semesters in 2010 produced a similar curve of student reactions, responses and engagements. Because of the requirement that students enrol in core units in their own Schools as well as in others, student numbers differed substantially in the two semesters (approx.110 in sem. 1/2010, approx. 650 in sem. 2/2010) reflecting a pattern of primarily Social Sciences enrolments in first semester and a very diverse range of backgrounds in second semester. Because of the large enrolment in second semester (and the difficulties both of continuing interactive lectures with these numbers and even of finding appropriate lecture spaces), we made the decision to move from the first semester pattern of a weekly one-hour live workshop and two-hour live lecture (as interactive as possible) to a weekly two-hour live workshop and the online interview introducing the week's topic.

Almost universally, the online interviews have had positive responses from the students, although a small minority have been vocal in requesting a return to live lectures. Student

responses tell us that they appreciate being able to time-shift, watching the interviews at a time of their choosing, and they like the interview format, which, in introducing an element of relationality, is viewed as being more personal than simply viewing a talking head. They also like its concision, most interviews not extending beyond 30 minutes, yet very concentrated. This is a comfortable technology for many of the students.

Specific activities such as the early constructing of a cultural account of a meal (discussed above) and the image-word narrative overall produced vigorous and enthusiastic participation and engagement, as did the weekly dossier and reflective blogging. Many students, perhaps even a majority, initially found difficulties in conceptualising and separating the tasks required, particularly those of writing up the dossier and writing a short reflective piece. Weekly practice and feedback from tutors and, in the instance of the dossiers, other students, overcame these difficulties for most. In setting up reflective blogging, in which the audience was both the self (as a number of students specifically recognised) and the tutor, but not fellow students, we recognised that reflexivity is not well understood by most new students, and that it can too easily become self-indulgent and/or banal, lacking intellectual intent and purpose (Prinsloo, Slade, & Galpin, 2011, p. 32). The work of the tutors in open class discussion and in assisting individuals to move beyond this produced remarkable results. Students used the privacy of their blog pages to interrogate the central theme of the unit – a sense of place – as a theoretical construct, as an issue of personal location and being in the world, as cultural narrative of self, family, suburb, club, school (Espasa & Meneses, 2009). The blog also became a place in which questions could be asked of self and tutor, and a place of connection for the student through the tutor not only to the unit but to the university.

The shock of the new, not least of an intellectually open-edged unit in which there was no single set text, was significant for many students, both those entering university immediately from school and those who had been in the workplace. In our estimation this shock was greater than usually experienced by students new to university. The demand on the part of some students for the types of tight, clear boundaries and structures they had been used to in the school environment, and to be told exactly and precisely what to do at every step, needed to be worked through over a period of weeks by tutors demonstrating less mechanical and linear ways of thinking and doing. On the other hand, from the beginning, many students articulated satisfaction and pleasure at being able to think for themselves and to use their creativity in working with the problems and issues we were raising with them.

Overall, though, most problematic for students has been learning to use the online teaching/learning program Blackboard, and Curtin's associated Campus Pack of add-on technologies. From the reports of students themselves, we identify these difficulties in the following ways:

1. initial confusions about which tool to use for which task, in part an issue of some of the technologies not being suitable for the task (e.g., issues of small group

construction and boundaries, with relatively undifferentiated permissions to read and post; our large numbers overwhelming some technologies);

2. student self-perceptions as digital natives challenged by operating in a new environment (university) and with tools which are not as intuitive as those of the social-networking or gaming sites with which they are more experienced and which internalise as normative; and
3. that unaccustomed sense of discomfort and disruption of pre-existing understandings of their individual capabilities and skills for a few leading to a profound frustration externalised by some as blame for a unit which was taking them away from their real purpose in being at university (particularly a problem for student designers), yet for many others productive of a creative tension which gradually manifested itself (by about halfway through the semester) in their understanding and acting on the permission to explore the intellectual, textual, visual and technological possibilities of the topic that we had been giving from the beginning.

In looking back at our original research questions, we recognise that although we did not succeed completely with every student, and there were some that we lost, we provided significant support in making the transition to the very different cultures of the university. By the midway point in each semester the great majority of students had begun to understand and value the range of sources, modes of analysis and of communication and representation to which we were opening doors for them and were producing work that was engaged, imaginative, analytical and creative, and consonant with the principles of engaged, deep and active learning on which we based our project. In particular, beyond the success of the occasional exercises such as the taxing image-word narrative which demanded concision in both images and words, by the time of the final reflective essay in CPG/SoP, a significant number of students were able to recognise and articulate for themselves the extent to which they had come to be able to identify categories and characteristics, to work between words and images, to develop a working understanding of that elusive word *culture* for which so many had unsuccessfully demanded a precise dictionary definition in the first weeks of the unit, and an equally valuable complementary understanding that in situating themselves in their work and their work in themselves, in becoming *reflexive*, they had been able to reposition their understandings both of the work of being at university and of the links and connections between the local and the global, and the personal and the public.

A further factor shaping our experience with the large first-year units was the size of the enrolment in CPG/SoP and our need for a large number of tutors, several of whom took on very substantial tutorial workloads. This added complexity and, while it worked well, demanded constant interaction between the coordinators and the tutors in order to ensure that everyone was on the same page week-by-week throughout a very challenging semester. It is a labour-intensive activity.

## Conclusion

### *What worked well?*

We specifically recognise that no matter how sophisticated or responsive the online systems are, without the valuable contributions of colleagues providing content and engagement through their lectures, and, most particularly, the commitment of the more than a dozen experienced tutors working at the coalface week-by-week, dealing with large numbers of students at the most vulnerable point of their university experience, these units would have been impossible. Very early in their first iterations, we realised that if such cross-disciplinary social science units, with all their nuances and complexities and deliberate lack of neatness of ideas and categories, were to be taught substantially or wholly online to first-year students, a cohort of tutors experienced in first-year teaching and with a strong sense of personal engagement with both whole classes and individual students was essential, and that without which we could not teach the units. While we have provided training workshops and as much support as we could for the tutors before and during each semester, it has been their capacity to engage and support students and to work creatively and constructively in live class and online that have made this project a success.

The processes developed in the third-year units, particularly of a close focus on very specific skills (research, reading, critical, analytic and presentation), clearly articulated, demonstrated and practiced, through weekly three-hour workshop sessions informed by the differing positions of the three staff members, produced lively, informed discussions and very high standards of work. What we found was that there was learner centredness and deep learning through active participation. The third-year units have been excellent examples of how we could hand over responsibility for learning through the creation of independent learners. What we now recognise is that although we were not consciously planning out their engagement in any formal sense with blended technologies (as described, for example, on the Curtin site [ctl.curtin.edu.au/learning\\_technologies/](http://ctl.curtin.edu.au/learning_technologies/), the knowledges we were bringing from the experiences of conceptualising, developing and teaching the new first-year units were profoundly influencing our choices of teaching/learning strategies for the third year students.

### *What could have been done differently?*

We learnt much from the first year of teaching these units, not least about the logistical and intellectual issues of managing and teaching very large numbers of students from very diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Critically, we learnt that students having committed themselves to particular learning technologies required by the unit, are not only reluctant but justifiably vocal, for example, in their rejection of systems that fail to live up to the promises that are made for them, and are resentful of the wasted time when, after some weeks of the semester, they are asked to shift to another technology.

That was of course also a problem for the teaching staff, and built much resentment which had to be identified and overcome.

We also realised that the development of such first year units is an organic process deriving initially from the knowledge/skills contexts identified by the School offering the unit, and developing in response to the interests and needs articulated by a diverse body of students. Centralised Faculty control of such units, itself an innovative process in our Faculty but requiring a certain homogenisation can be detrimental to the provision of learning processes aimed at here.

### ***Implications for future implementation***

We have learnt then that we should only marry teaching/learning requirements to specific online technologies if those technologies are already accessible not only to unit developers but also to large student numbers at the time of development so that they can be stress tested. Secondly, the input of students from early in the development of such units is crucial. Informed and interesting student feedback throughout the process, including in SoP an informal and anonymous survey at mid-semester, has enabled development to be responsive and ongoing.

### ***Implications for future research***

In the particular, the EITH and SoP students of 2010 will be the third-year students of 2012. The skills acquisition, information literacy and technological flexibilities that we focused on in the first year units has been designed to influence their progress through the remainder of their university careers: detailed follow up of these students in their final undergraduate year will therefore provide further input to the ongoing development of the first year units. In the general, we continue to fine tune these units, recognising that there is much yet to understand about the crafting of being a university student in the humanities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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[eScholar 2010 – Joan Wardrop, Phillip Moore & Anne-Marie Hilsdon – Case Study Video](http://youtu.be/KQooJki9xhY)  
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