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# The transformative power of digital humanities in teaching family history online

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# The transformative power of digital humanities in teaching family history online

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the transformative power of digital humanities in teaching family history online to large cohorts of Australian domestic students. It takes as a case study a unit developed specifically for students to learn about how to research their convict ancestors' lives and how to situate their ancestors' lived experiences within relevant wider contexts. Its focus is twofold. The convergence of rapidly expanding digital repositories and databases of family history-related information and increasingly sophisticated online teaching platforms and how this has facilitated a shift from face-to-face to fully online learning and teaching is examined. The ways in which this transformative change was engineered through the unit design, delivery, and evaluative processes are then canvassed. The case study demonstrates how, with thoughtful, well-structured, and innovative approaches to design and by adopting a bespoke delivery model for online delivery, students can readily learn to access and engage critically with extensive online resources and can be equipped with the digital tools to use these optimally and to their satisfaction.

## **Keywords**

digital humanities, online teaching, unit design, family history, convict history

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author wishes to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful and helpful feedback.

## Introduction

Family history is big business. The advent of the internet coupled with the extensive digitisation of genealogical records since the 1990s has provided family historians with unprecedented volumes of records virtually at their fingertips. Ancestry, which claims to host “the world’s largest online collection of family history records”, provides some truly staggering statistics on its website. As at 1 March, 2018, the company stated that it “currently manages about 10 petabytes of structured and unstructured data”. It hosts 20 billion records from 80 countries of origin, including “records detailing births, marriages, deaths, military service, and immigration”, and “adds an average of two million records to its website each day”. Access to these records comes at a financial cost. Yet Ancestry subscribers worldwide have created 90 million family trees over the decade since the company introduced this functionality to its site (Ancestry 2018).

Public interest in genealogical research has exhibited strong growth since the mid-1990s as people increasingly engage in research designed to address questions around identity such as “who we are and where we came from” (Ball 2017, p.75). Cognisant of an emerging market for formal instruction in family history, and seeking to diversify its history offerings to students, in 2009 the School of Humanities at the University of Tasmania offered an intermediate/advanced unit in family history for the first time. Despite public interest in the subject area, the on-campus unit consistently attracted low levels of enrolments. The unit, Introduction to Family History, was taught as a face-to-face unit in intensive mode. On-campus lectures were complemented by excursions to a local archive and library where small groups of students gained practical experience as family-history researchers. Student cohorts enrolled in this unit ranged from n=17 in 2009 to n=14 in 2014, the final year in which the unit was delivered face-to-face.

Coinciding with a review of units with low levels of enrolments, by 2014 the University of Tasmania was committed to engaging with large student cohorts in the online space, most notably with its Understanding Dementia MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) (King et al. 2014a; King et al. 2014b). This impetus led to Introduction to Family History being redeveloped for fully online delivery in 2015. Strong student demand resulted in an online Diploma of Family History being conceptualised, designed and developed. This eight-unit course was rolled out during 2016 and the first quarter of 2017.

Successfully teaching family history in a fully online environment has become possible in the 21st century through advances in learning-management systems and because of developments in the digital humanities relating to genealogical and historical research. This paper explores the transformative power of the digital humanities in facilitating a shift from teaching small groups of students in a face-to-face environment on campus and at a local archive and library to being able to provide online tuition in family history to large groups of students who are provided with access to genealogical records from across the globe and the tools with which to use them. It focuses specifically on the development, incorporation and impact of digital resources within Convict Ancestors, a foundation-level unit coordinated by the author that forms part of the Diploma of Family History, of which the author is currently course coordinator.

The first section of the paper details the unit design process, commencing with a discussion of the range of students we envisaged would be enrolling in Convict Ancestors. This is followed by an explication of the “carpe diem” approach used in the unit design process in creating a unit to suit our intended students. As the unit has been designed to be delivered fully online, the final part of

this section provides some examples of approaches to e-learning incorporated into Convict Ancestors. The second section of the paper focuses on Convict Ancestors in the context of the digital humanities. This section opens with a brief elaboration of the key record series that are at the heart of the unit – the world-heritage listed convict records that have survived in Australia from colonial times – followed by an exploration of digital resources that complement our convict records. The section also examines how we have constructed digital toolkits to facilitate students using these records. The final section of the paper focuses on student and peer evaluations and feedback about Convict Ancestors, and is followed by concluding reflections.

## **Designing Convict Ancestors**

### **Intended audience**

The goal of the Convict Ancestors unit was to provide a foundation-level learning experience for a broad range of largely mature-age Australian domestic students (from those with no prior tertiary-learning experience through to those with degrees) that would engage their attention and increase their knowledge and skills in relation to identifying convicts and interpreting their experiences. Convict Ancestors needed to cater for those newly entering the Diploma of Family History as well as students who had already completed one or more units towards their Diploma.

The University's intention for Convict Ancestors to be delivered fully online presented both opportunities and challenges in a learning and teaching environment where the norm was "blended learning". As this paper discusses, the dramatic upsurge in the availability of digitised material pertinent to family-history researchers has transformed the capacity to teach family history in the online environment. At the same time, challenges can arise in relation to creating shared understanding as to what constitutes online learning as opposed to simply putting content online.

In 2015 in the then-Faculty of Arts, units were typically delivered on campus in face-to-face mode generally comprising traditional 50-minute lectures followed by tutorials. These units were often replicated online, usually comprising 50-minute lecture recordings and discussion boards, the latter of which were substituted for synchronous class discussions.

As Conrad and Donaldson cautioned,

...new media offer a wealth of opportunities for interaction, yet many times are employed in a non-interactive mode that tends to focus on creating an online lecture. Lecture is effective for knowledge transmission, but if the primary strategy used in the online environment, the course becomes a digital correspondence course with potential problems of learner isolation and a high drop out rate (2004, p.6).

This phenomenon was borne out in early fully online deliveries of Introduction to Family History, a unit that incorporated long video lectures and in which staff mandated compulsory participation in online discussions. Across several iterations, the most successful delivery in terms of student completions saw only 54% of those who initially enrolled successfully finish the unit. A significant challenge, then, was to significantly increase the numbers of students completing the Diploma of Family History units in which they enrolled. Tied to this was an opportunity to design Convict Ancestors incorporating a new approach to online learning in the Diploma of Family History. Once proven successful in terms of student engagement and completions, the unit's

design could provide a template on which further units in the Diploma of Family History would be modelled.

One of the keys to designing an engaging online unit was to engender a shift from seeing students as “passive knowledge-absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed information to them” to focusing instead on the “imperative” that students “be active knowledge-generators who assume responsibility for constructing and managing their own learning experience” (Conrad & Donaldson 2004, p.7). Beetham (2007, p.29) has also stipulated a need for learners to be provided with “opportunities to make a newly acquired concept or skill their own”, an exhortation that neatly encapsulates the intention that underpinned our design work in creating *Convict Ancestors* in 2016.

Another key design imperative was to engineer a learning environment within which students could rapidly learn to feel comfortable, if not confident, and in which they would be provided with ample opportunities to engage meaningfully with a wide range of digital learning materials. The design approach adopted in creating *Convict Ancestors* used Salmon’s “carpe diem” model, as discussed in the next section.

#### “Carpe diem” approach to unit design

Following a workshop held at my institution by Salmon in 2014, I participated in her CDMOOC, in which students learned about using her “carpe diem” (“seize the day”) approach to unit design. Inspired by Salmon’s promise of being able to “bask in the glory of happy, engaged and achieving online students” through following her approaches to unit design, and with the confidence that came from successfully completing her MOOC, I adopted this approach to designing the online unit *Convict Ancestors* (2013, p.5).

The design process began with the elaboration of three intended learning outcomes, or “identifiable change[s]...anticipated in the learner” on the successful completion of *Convict Ancestors* (Beetham 2007, p.30). Devising the unit’s intended learning outcomes provided the basis for ensuring that our curriculum and assessment methods were constructively aligned. The three intended learning outcomes devised for *Convict Ancestors* stipulated that on successfully completing the unit, students would:

1. Be familiar with the wide range of historic records available to locate individual convicts transported to the Australian penal colonies and to trace their life-course experiences.
2. Be able to read, transcribe and understand key material presented within convict, court and prison records.
3. Be able to situate the experiences of individual convicts within a relevant wider context and convey this information clearly and succinctly.

These three intended learning outcomes underpinned the unit-design process. As Salmon (2016, p.5) has set out, the carpe diem process involves a unit development team working together through six steps. The process begins with the team agreeing on what it hopes to achieve. The next step involves creating a storyboard that, in effect, tells the story of the unit. This visual and visceral process involves populating a giant poster with colour-coded sticky notes stipulating content, e-tivities (interactive online activities) and assessment tasks. It facilitates sequencing

learning activities and scaffolding students' learning. The beauty of the notes is that they can easily be moved around until the unit developers are satisfied that there is a sense of flow and alignment between the unit's learning components. Development then moves from paper to the online environment, with the unit prototype being built, reality-checked, reviewed and adjusted. The final phase involves agreeing on the next steps as the team builds an action plan together.

From the outset, we envisaged creating in *Convict Ancestors* a visually stimulating, coherent multi-media experience for students that would be delivered within a streamlined structure incorporating the appropriate sequencing of content and scaffolding of assessment tasks. The *carpe diem* process provided us with both structure and flexibility in designing *Convict Ancestors*. The creativity involved in shaping the unit using Salmon's recommended approach emulated the creative yet structured approaches that we wanted to adopt in translating the unit from the drawing board to the online environment.

Creating a storyboard for *Convict Ancestors* informed the decision to structure the unit's content so that it narrated convict life courses. Six modules guide students through a process of orientation and introduction to the unit, followed by an exploration of convict arrests, trials and transportation; the sea voyage to the Australian penal colonies; experiences specific to convict women and their children; convict life in the colonies, including reformation and punishment, escapes and indulgences; and finally outcomes such as marriage and family formation, reoffending, pauperism, illness and death. Embedded into this overarching narrative are instructions on how to find and use pertinent record sets, how to develop the skills required to read archival records and how to better understand and situate convicts' experiences within relevant wider contexts.

Students are introduced to investigative and qualitative approaches that enable them to identify those amongst their ancestors who arrived in Australia as convicts, and to situate those ancestors' experiences within relevant broader contexts. Our students work towards acquiring skills in locating and transcribing a wide range of records, as well as interpreting the experiences of their (or other people's) convict ancestors. The latter involves challenging received wisdom to newly conceptualise convict experiences. Students' learning experiences in *Convict Ancestors* therefore include engaging with content and assessment tasks designed to facilitate their skills acquisition and grasp key concepts in ways that provide a sense of accomplishment and ownership of new knowledge.

Because *Convict Ancestors* is delivered entirely online, translating the unit from a design mapped out on paper into a high-impact online learning environment required a different approach from designing units for face-to-face delivery or for blended delivery to student cohorts in which some students engaged in on-campus learning experiences and others learned online. Our key approaches to e-learning are elaborated below.

### Approaches to e-learning

As Biggs and Tang (2011, p.78) have pointed out, "e-learning...offers possibilities of engaging learners that are not possible in the classroom". Delivering learning experiences to a fully online cohort "opens up a whole new domain for student activity" (Biggs & Tang 2011, p.70) that extends well beyond watching lengthy lecture recordings, reading associated course materials such as journal articles or book chapters and taking part in mandated discussion groups.

Students are introduced to Convict Ancestors with a welcome video and are guided via a hyperlink to their first week's learning content. Instructions and prompts are provided so that those who are new to the University's learning-management system can readily learn to navigate within it. This supports students in acquiring the digital skills necessary to engage fully in online learning while allowing their learning confidence to build incrementally.

Within Convict Ancestors, sequences of learning activities are grouped into "chapters" within "modules", with each module designed to be completed within a week. A multi-media approach sees students watching short video lectures, often filmed onsite at locations closely associated with convict experiences. Transcripts are provided so that students can download and retain their lecture notes. Students listen to or read material associated with each chapter topic, and participate in optional moderated discussions pertaining to key issues with their peers.

A modified version of Salmon's e-tivities (online activities designed to engage students in "enjoyable and productive online learning") is used throughout Convict Ancestors as part of the formative assessment regime (2013, p.5). Students attempt a range of sorting, grouping and other online activities designed to help them to develop basic and more advanced skills and to self-test their progress. The summative assessment regime requires students to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired. It comprises an online transcription exercise, a series of content-knowledge quizzes and a requirement to complete a biography of a convict, fully referenced and incorporating relevant and appropriately captioned illustrative materials.

Fundamental to the unit's delivery is the staged introduction of a wide range of relevant digital sources, which are foundational to identifying convict ancestors and learning about aspects of their lives. Source materials range from convicts' trial records through to, for example, their marriages and family formation, including potential acquisition of land grants, possible admittance into pauper institutions and ultimately their deaths. The wealth of digital resources now available that have facilitated the transformation of family-history teaching from small face-to-face units into large, fully online units is discussed in relation to Convict Ancestors below.

## **Convict Ancestors and the digital humanities**

### **Digitised convict records: United Nations Memory of the World Register**

Between 1788 and 1868, more than 165,000 people were transported to and within the Australian penal colonies. The extensive record sets generated by the convict bureaucracy provide unparalleled access to details of these largely working-class 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century prisoners' lives, including descriptions of their physical appearances, families and places of origin, literacy levels, trade skills, offences, punishments, rewards and details about family formation. The many thousands of pages of convict records that have survived in Australian archives are considered highly significant for two key reasons. They document processes considered to represent "the beginning of the modern age of globalisation by government agency" while also providing "forensic detail" about individual convicts' lives. Such details have "enabled historians to build a picture of the human capital which shaped the economy, demography and culture of early colonial Australia" (United Nations 2007). The significance of these surviving records has seen them inscribed into the United Nations' Memory of the World Register. These archival records, in which convict lives are richly described, are at the heart of the Convict Ancestors unit. Their

digitisation has made these records accessible to researchers with an internet connection anywhere in the world.

In the latter decades of the 20th century, increasing levels of interest in family history and, in Australia, tracing convict ancestry was putting pressure on increasingly fragile convict registers. Initial endeavours to preserve these significant record sets involved photographing them and making many of the records available for interested family-history and academic researchers to access on microfilm in archival and library reading rooms. In the first decade of the 21st century, a large research project to digitise many of these records was established (Bradley et al. 2010). People searching for details about their convict ancestors who served sentences in Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), for example, can read their relatives' indent and convict-conduct record online. These records reveal their place of origin, their family network, the place and date of their sentencing, the term of the sentence, the vessel on which they were transported to Van Diemen's Land and their behaviour on board the ship, a full physical description, their religion and trade and the locations to which they were sent while under sentence. Details of any offences detected and punishments meted out are recorded even down to which magistrate the person was brought before. Records of indulgences such as tickets of leave and pardons, and in some cases deaths, are also recorded.

Associated records illuminate the wider societal networks of which a convict individual was a part. Some reveal details about the master, mistress or government agency to which a convict ancestor was assigned as a labourer. Other records detail convicts' requests for permission to marry, providing valuable details about family formation in the colonies. Further record sets are in the process of being digitised. Records are being linked to individuals so that ultimately all of the records available in relation to an individual will be able to be read from one digital repository, thus revealing all that the archive can reveal about that individual's life course. Similarly rich repositories of convict records have survived for Western Australia, where character books recorded details akin to those noted in conduct records in Tasmania. These can be accessed digitally via the Ancestry Library database, with the same online repository also providing digital access to surviving records pertaining to convicts transported to New South Wales and Norfolk Island.

The wealth of information available online about convicts has transformed our approach to teaching and learning in relation to these ancestors' lives. This plethora of digitised material is complemented by a range of other pertinent repositories to which students are introduced in Convict Ancestors, and which assist students in learning the skills and knowledge necessary to building biographies and engaging in life-course analysis. These complementary digital resources are discussed in the following section of this paper to indicate the breadth and depth of contextual information pertinent to "the convict experience" on which lecturers, tutors, and students can draw to understand the experiences of convict ancestors better and to contextualise them appropriately.

### Complementary digital resources

Students who enrol in Diploma of Family History units, including Convict Ancestors, gain complimentary access to the Ancestry Library database. Ancestry Library provides digital access to vast numbers of birth, death and marriage records as well as to a wealth of archival records pertinent to the convict experience. Some examples of searchable Australian record sets include government gazettes, police gazettes, criminal court records, convict records from relevant



jurisdictions across the 18th and 19th centuries, hospital and asylum records, lunatic estates and registers, convict-ship muster rolls and registers of coroners' inquests. Added to this are record series from sites of convict origins, including England and Ireland, including but not limited to police charge books, police gazettes, gaol registers and prison records (ancestrylibrary.com.au). Unfettered access to this wealth of material, which is literally at their fingertips, facilitates students' charting their convict ancestors' life courses with an ease and within timeframes that simply would not have been available prior to the 21st century.

Criminal trials often contain intriguing details about the circumstances under which people ended up serving sentences to transportation. In the digital age, it has become possible to access these details through a variety of online repositories. The Old Bailey Online website, for example, details the proceedings of trials held at London's central criminal court between 1674 and 1913. The 197,745 trials available form "a fully searchable edition of the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published" (oldbaileyonline 2018). In addition to providing access to qualitative information in the form of trial transcripts, the Old Bailey Online also allows people to access data. This facilitates their being able to quantify their ancestor's or research subject's experiences within a wider milieu. It is possible to determine, for example, that between January 1788 and December 1868 (the period over which people were being transported to the Australian penal colonies) 26,672 defendants at the Old Bailey were sentenced to transportation (oldbaileyonline 2018).

The Digital Panopticon is an associated extensive digital repository to which the Old Bailey Online now provides a link. Its focus is on tracing London convicts in both Britain and Australia during the date range 1780-1925. As the website explains, it "allows you to search millions of records from around fifty datasets, relating to the lives of 90,000 convicts" (Digital Panopticon 2018). As well as facilitating access to qualitative data about individual lives, the Digital Panopticon enables users to "explore and visualise data", providing graphic insights into the wider experience of convict transportation (Digital Panopticon 2018). Accessing records available through this website allows people to explore the lives of Old Bailey defendants both before and after they were tried and sentenced to transportation. The Digital Panopticon also assists people to learn more about the relevant processes that affected their ancestors' lives, and to view those lives within broader contexts.

While the majority of convicts transported to the Australian penal colonies were from Britain, not all were tried in London. Details of alleged criminal activity and the associated criminal trials and sentencing were often reported in local newspapers. These details have become available for Australian students to access through the online database *British Newspapers 1600-1900*, compiled by Gale Primary Sources. Promising "an integrated research experience", it draws together primary sources from across the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Burney Collection*, *Archives Unbound*, *British Library Newspapers*, *The Making of Modern Law: Legal Treatises, 1800-1926* and *The Times Digital Archive* (Gale Primary Sources 2018). As well as covering London, the collections extend to English provincial newspapers as well as Scottish and Irish publications. Providing online access to this extensive collection of primary source material to our students ensures that almost all of them will be able to locate details of their convict ancestor's criminal activities, trial and sentencing.

Australia's extensive convict records are complemented by an extraordinary wealth of contextual information available through the National Library of Australia's *Trove*, an online tool that provides digital access to record sets including colonial newspapers, diaries, letters, pictures, photographs, objects, music and sound archives, maps, books, journals and government gazettes. Details about people's lives within and beyond the convict system can be gleaned from amongst the millions of pages of records held about Australia's past. Their lived experiences in and beyond the convict system can also be explored through accessing online databases created by groups associated with orphan schools, female factories, pauper institutions and the like. Scholarly explorations of aspects of convict life and life in Britain and across its former empire can be located and read using tools such as electronic journals, Google Books, and the Google Scholar search engine.

As can be seen from the digitally available materials described above, there is a wealth of material to further contextualise convicts' – and indeed other ancestors' – lived experiences, and to facilitate a deeper appreciation of the times in which they lived. It is, however, one thing to provide students with online access to a range of pertinent databases, search engines and other digital resources, and another to ensure that the students are confident and comfortable in acquiring the skills necessary to access, assess and use relevant material from this abundance of online information. The following section discusses our approaches to providing students with the tools to navigate and use the plethora of digital resources at their disposal as family historians and historians of the convict past.

### Digital toolkit

As discussed above, the Convict Ancestors unit is designed to emulate the life course of convicts: students navigate their way through a series of week-long modules commencing with trials and sentencing through to the convict's departure from the convict system on completion of their sentence or death. Pertinent record sets are introduced and contextualised within each module. The initial learning focus is on students acquiring skills through expert knowledge transmission. This takes place through students watching short video lectures, reading digitally provided materials, accessing pertinent websites and learning about relevant resources. Students are encouraged to share their evolving knowledge and perspectives through participating in optional discussion groups.

Opportunities for students to test their knowledge and skills acquisition are provided throughout Convict Ancestors. This is achieved through the provision of carefully sequenced materials that help students to build a toolkit of digital research skills and that incorporate online activities, referred to as e-tivities. These e-tivities form part of the formative assessment regime. Two examples drawn from the second of the six content modules in Convict Ancestors, "Captured, Tried, and Transported", demonstrate this sequenced and fully integrated approach to knowledge introduction, exploration and self-testing.

In the first chapter, "Getting Knicked", the Old Bailey and its associated database *The Old Bailey Online* are introduced in a brief paragraph illustrated with a relevant drawing. A frame used throughout Convict Ancestors to signify web resources (essentially a colour-coded turquoise text box that contains an icon offset to the left of its textual content) then follows, introducing and providing hyperlinks to the *Old Bailey Online*'s "getting started" guide and "guide to searching".

In the context of using Old Bailey records, students are introduced to the concept of language use having changed over time. They are provided with information about this as well as direct access, again via a hyperlink, to *The Old Bailey Online* glossary of unfamiliar judicial and historical terms. Further hyperlinks guide students to some of the more detailed information available from the database, including pages from which statistical data can be gleaned.

Through the introduction of an e-tivity, which they can attempt as many times as they like and for which results are not recorded, students can assess their own capacity to use *The Old Bailey Online* advanced search functions. Students are asked to do a date-constrained search to discover how many defendants were sentenced to transportation at the Old Bailey over a given period. Three potential answers are presented on which students can click; their choice reveals which is correct. For those requiring further assistance, I provide a drop-down box on which students can click to reveal step-by-step instructions on how to arrive at the correct result. As well as allowing students to test their advanced searching skills, *The Old Bailey Online* advanced search function e-tivity introduces students to one of the ways they can source relevant contextual data within which to understand and situate their convict ancestor's experiences.

The second example has been drawn from the third chapter in the same module, "Clues for Convict Detectives". This chapter opens with a short video lecture on tracing convict ancestors before moving on to provide information about, and a drop-down checklist relating to, disambiguation (how to distinguish between two or more historic personages who share the same names). A short written introduction is provided to help students cement their knowledge about how to begin their online searching. Of particular interest here is the way this information is followed once again by a "web resources" frame, providing students with a visual prompt to recognise the type of resources they can access. In this frame, they are introduced, and provided with hyperlinks, to relevant searchable state archives through which digitised convict records can be accessed or copies of paper archives ordered.

One of these key search tools is the Tasmanian Names Index. Students are instructed about how to search for specific individuals using the Tasmanian Names Index, and how to confine their search to convict records. They are then provided with an opportunity to self-test in relation to their Tasmanian Names Index search skills. As part of an automated sorting e-tivity, students are provided with a list of names. They are then invited to look these names up using the Tasmanian Names Index to ascertain whether the named individual was a convict. Each name, once investigated online, can be dragged and dropped into either of two boxes: "I'm a convict" and "I'm not a convict. If the name is dropped into the correct box, it turns green and is marked with a tick, providing visual confirmation that the answer is correct. If not, the name turns red and is marked with a cross. The wrongly placed name can simply be returned to the original list and dragged to the correct answer box. Like all of our e-tivities, this exercise can be attempted as many times as students choose.

Ultimately, the new skills and knowledge gained throughout Convict Ancestors is codified by students in their production of a fully referenced, online convict biography. This digital document includes both text and images, and is designed to convey not only data about a particular convict but also to demonstrate the information-gathering skills and capacity to assess and contextualise relevant data that they have acquired. The convict biography forms a substantial component in the summative assessment regime, contributing 50% to the student's overall grade in this unit.

The following section of this paper discusses student and peer responses to Convict Ancestors to provide an informed indication as to the extent to which the unit's design has helped students achieve the intended learning outcomes and has enhanced their learning experiences, and the unit design's value in terms of its transferability to other online teaching contexts.

## Unit evaluation

### Student evaluation

There is extensive scholarly debate about the usage, reliability and validity of student evaluation of teaching (SET), which recently has turned to questions about "reliability issues engendered by the process itself" (Clayson 2018, p.666). As Clayson (2018, pp.671-672) has pointed out, SET ratings within the same classes can be shown to be internally inconsistent due to a range of variables that might, for example, include students' motivations for taking a particular course through to teacher manifestation of political or social views that may resonate with some students but that others find repugnant. Furthermore, Uttl, White and Wong Gonzalez (2017, pp.22-42) have asserted that while universities use SET ratings to evaluate lecturers' teaching effectiveness, higher SET ratings are not necessarily correlated with better student learning outcomes. Earlier studies asserting such a connection were, the authors contend, based on small sample sizes and subject to publication bias (Uttl, White & Wong Gonzales 2017, pp.24-30, 38-40). Despite these critiques of the process, outcomes and use to which SET surveys are put, universities continue to use them.

The University of Tasmania uses eVALUate to gather qualitative and quantitative data from students about their experiences of units. These anonymous, online SET surveys are made available to students near the end, or following the conclusion, of a unit. A set of statements requires students to indicate their response according to a Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Students use free-text fields to offer their views on what worked particularly well and to identify areas for improvement. To date, two eVALUate unit reports are available in relation to Convict Ancestors (2016 respondents n=507 and 2017 respondents n=279). For the purpose of this paper, students' qualitative feedback (particularly comments relating to the unit's design and about the extensive use of digital resources and sequencing of materials) is pertinent.

Qualitative student responses are elicited to standard questions including "what are the most helpful aspects of this unit?" Feedback from students in this textual field across both the 2016 and 2017 cohorts was extensive. Five students' responses to this question from 2016 and five from 2017 have been selected for discussion below based on their particular relevance to the topics in this paper:

*The historical progression of the learning journey, linked to the resources for finding out more.*

*Excellent teaching materials, clear instructions and appropriate use of technology.*

*The videos and interactive activities are engaging and introduce different aspects of the course in a very accessible way.*

*Learning how to research, and interpret documents that record our ancestors' lives. Exploring a wide range of documents, sources, websites, repositories, etc., to build a comprehensive picture of our ancestors' lives. Collaboration with fellow students to find new sources of information, or new insights on information we find.*

*The most helpful aspects would be the wide range of resources made available, including access to Ancestry. The rich, diverse experience of the teaching team and the varied styles of teaching are most helpful/stimulating. The Unit is presented in an exciting, accessible format. The content is brilliant and engaging, encouraging exploration of the topics presented. The technical support for this unit has been excellent and most helpful.*

*Content and sequencing were excellent.*

*I've thoroughly enjoyed this Convict Ancestors unit. I've learnt many new sites to find resources. As I live in Perth and my ancestors came to NSW, online resources are helpful. The resources of this unit were well set out for people with hearing difficulties, such as myself. The transcripts were easy to locate.*

*There was a strong emphasis on researching for various documents throughout this unit. It was well structured and achievable. The scaffolding of the learning units was a great help.*

*Not only the information given directly in the content but suggestions and leads to discover more ourselves into the future was great. Knowing little really about the whole subject it has opened my eyes to see this era in our country's past in a new light and understanding. Appreciated the lecturers and tutors input and feedback through the discussion boards.*

*The way the unit's learning resources are put together with different styles of material - some short, some quizzes, some longer academic papers. This keeps it varied and interesting. The online student forums are also very useful – sharing our learning with each other.*

Students appreciated the multi-media approach to the unit's design and delivery. The sequencing of materials and scaffolding of tasks not only held students' interest but facilitated their understanding of the unit's content and interaction with the online materials to which they were being introduced. Even those who considered themselves to be seasoned family-history researchers learned about digital resources of which they had previously been unaware. Through completing Convict Ancestors, students became equipped with a tool kit to enable them to engage meaningfully with the wealth of digital data available to them.

The high level of student satisfaction represented qualitatively above is supported by the quantitative data gathered by the university in relation to the Convict Ancestors unit. The following chart tabulates student agreement (responses in the ranges "strongly agree" and "agree") with the 11 statements to which they were invited to respond:

eVALUate Question	Student Agreement	
	2016	2017
The learning outcomes in this unit are clearly identified.	99.2%	99.3%
The learning experiences in this unit help me to achieve the learning outcomes.	98.0%	98.9%
The learning resources in this unit help me to achieve the learning outcomes.	98.0%	97.8%
The assessment tasks in this unit evaluate my achievement of the learning outcomes.	95.1%	98.9%
Feedback on my work in this unit helps me to achieve the learning outcomes.	89.0%	92.4%
The workload in this unit is appropriate to the achievement of the learning outcomes.	93.9%	97.1%
The quality of teaching in this unit helps me to achieve the learning outcomes.	97.3%	98.9%
I am motivated to achieve the learning outcomes in this unit.	97.0%	97.8%
I make the best of the learning experiences in this unit.	97.8%	97.8%
I think about how I can learn more effectively in this unit.	94.5%	98.2%
Overall, I am satisfied with this unit.	96.1%	98.2%

Students also provided qualitative feedback on the areas in which they would like to see improvements. Feedback from 2016, for example, resulted in my changing how students' final assignments (their convict biographies) were to be formatted and presented for assessment in the 2017 iteration of *Convict Ancestors*. Heightened student satisfaction in relation to this is reflected in the data above, where agreement with the statement "The assessment tasks in this unit evaluate my achievement of the learning outcomes" increased from 95.1% in 2016 to 98.9% the following year.

The qualitative and quantitative data presented above demonstrate that the unit's design ensured that students were well supported in achieving the unit's intended learning outcomes.

#### Peer evaluation

Unbeknownst to the unit coordinator and teaching team at the time during which *Convict Ancestors* was delivered in 2017, at least one of the students who participated in the unit was a colleague from another school (Education) at the same university. This led to an opportunity for our colleague to provide a peer review of her experiences as a student in the unit from her standpoint as a fellow educator using the same online teaching tools within the same institution. As Boud (2001 p.2) pointed out, "there is considerable benefit in taking what we know of the value of informal peer learning, making it explicit and using it more directly in the design and conduct of higher education courses". In this case, Thomas (25 February 2018) provided a written report detailing her experiences of *Convict Ancestors*:

Dr Harman has outstanding expertise not only in her field, but in the use of technology and pedagogical strategies to cater for distance students. I was

impressed from the moment I entered the online environment. The unit is structured in innovative and inspiring ways to take maximum advantage of the online platform, using a combination of short video lectures, written and visual texts, links to resources, practice quizzes and discussion forums to engage students. Special consideration was given to students with a range of learning needs, as full transcripts and slides and images of the video lectures were provided. As a University lecturer who uses this same platform, I learned a great deal about best practice from the way Dr Harman had prepared and organised the content for this unit.

Thomas's evaluation of Convict Ancestors was reaffirming. The correlation between her views as a tertiary educator and the sentiments expressed by numerous other student participants in Convict Ancestors led me to conclude that the unit was indeed fit for purpose, as the eVALUate data gathered from our student cohorts in 2016 and 2017 had indicated. This was further borne out by the fact that unit completion rates rose from an earlier high of 54% to a dramatically improved 94% when the delivery model developed for Convict Ancestors was rolled out across the rest of the units that comprise the Diploma of Family History.

As well as being used as a model for other units across the Diploma of Family History, Convict Ancestors was made available to other interested academic staff at the University of Tasmania engaged in developing or redeveloping units designed to be delivered fully online. Within the College of Arts, Law and Education, the approaches to online learning and teaching developed in Convict Ancestors have influenced the redesign of units coordinated by Dwyer in Police Studies. Dwyer (20 June 2018) reflected how auditing Convict Ancestors

...really helped me to set up all of my own units following your accessible and informative (and quite frankly, beautiful!) approach. The structure and organisation of your content on this site really helped me to conceptualise how I was going to approach my own units, and after about 18 months, I have nearly set up all my units to follow your exemplary model.

Similarly, when the College of Science and Engineering was introducing new fully online units based in Plant Sciences about the Science of Gardening, the unit coordinator Wiltshire was provided with access to Convict Ancestors to use as a model. Wiltshire (12 June 2018) has since reported:

Your example in HAA007 Convict Ancestors was inspirational, and I hope that I maintained the high quality in our outreach to the community in Science of Gardening and SoG2. Having a structure in place that we could follow was instrumental in taking our first steps in online delivery; the process would have been very difficult indeed without that model to follow.

The peer feedback detailed above demonstrates how the design approaches integrated into Convict Ancestors have been very positively received by colleagues from disciplines as disparate as Education, Police Studies and Plant Science. The principles followed in designing Convict Ancestors and the practices integrated into the unit have translated well into other disciplines within which peers were redesigning or developing fully online units.

## **Concluding reflections**

The digital revolution that has taken place in the online availability of family-history related resources and, particularly in the 21st century, in the platforms and tools available to enable online instruction has transformed the ways units such as *Convict Ancestors* and, by extension, its companion units within the Diploma of Family History, can be delivered. Innovative unit design involving carefully sequenced delivery of unit content and a scaffolded approach to assessment tasks has been of paramount importance in facilitating successful student learning outcomes. The ever-expanding plethora of online materials available to family history researchers necessitates not only directing students' attention to key resources but also ensuring that they are equipped with an appropriate digital tool kit to use when accessing these resources. This enables students not only to assume responsibility for their learning experiences within the unit, but to become better equipped as life-long learners and family-history researchers in an increasingly digital world.

Developing a visually attractive, multi-media online learning environment replete with repetitive visual cues for our student cohort was critical in enabling participants to gain skills and confidence in working in a digital environment with which they were initially unfamiliar. Almost without realising it, students learned rapidly to navigate their way through the learning experiences provided, ranging from interactions with external websites through to content-knowledge quizzes and opportunities to engage in discussions with their student peers and with the teaching team.

Using Salmon's *carpe diem* approach to unit design facilitated the development of an overarching narrative for *Convict Ancestors* in that content was structured logically to follow convicts' life courses. Situating students' learning experiences within this narrative structure emulated students' investigation of a myriad of digital resources within a suitably contextualised framework. Ultimately, students crafted their own narrative relating key aspects of their convict ancestor's (or chosen convict's) life as a short biography in a way that made sense of otherwise disparate digital data. Taking a similar approach to unit design and delivery across the Diploma of Family History is ensuring that our student cohort can navigate their learning experiences with ease, engage skilfully with a multitude of online resources and create meaningful outputs that hold the potential to become family legacies.

Because of the rapidly changing nature of the digital space, it has proven essential to check carefully the currency and ongoing relevance of digital resources, tool kits and e-tivities incorporated into *Convict Ancestors* and its companion units. Mundane elements such as website links need to be carefully checked prior to each iteration of the unit to ensure that they are still live, while newly available resources need to be evaluated and added to each unit where appropriate. The pace of change necessitates separating the provision of website resources from video lectures and the accompanying lecture transcripts. Providing such information separately within the online learning environment facilitates it being updated when required without necessitating the re-recording of otherwise current lecture materials.

In a tertiary environment that tends towards privileging on-campus tuition or a "blended learning" model that combines elements of face-to-face and online delivery, the amount of labour required to develop and deliver fully online units (particularly in subsequent iterations) can be underestimated, and therefore undervalued. Part of the role of those teaching online is therefore to continue to educate peers within their institutions as to the challenges, opportunities and sheer



scale of time and effort involved in designing and delivering optimal online learning experiences for tertiary students in a rapidly changing digital world.

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