

Teaching on both sides of the Pacific

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For the second half of 2007 and the first half of 2008 I was the Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University. It's an annual appointment, open across the range of disciplines that lend themselves to the study of Australia, and Jeff Borland of our department of economics will fill the chair next year.

Harvard is hardly a typical American university. On the contrary, it is the oldest, the richest, the most prestigious, the model to which many others aspire. It established the principle of a residential scholarly community, religious in its charter yet open to all, providing a liberal education in a colony conceived as in covenant with divine destiny, a city on a hill, and a nation that applied much of its prodigious energy and wealth to intellectual self-improvement.

Our own University of Melbourne is the second oldest Australian foundation, a civic university that along with Sydney blended British precedents with local circumstances, more utilitarian in ethos and curriculum, more dependent and less appreciated. It developed within a framework established by government, which in the second half of the twentieth century brought a Unified National System characterised by a remarkable conformity.

More recently Melbourne has sought to differentiate itself with the Melbourne Model, whereby most professional courses come after a preliminary, more

general, first degree. The Melbourne model draws on international developments, including the European Bologna model, but its principal point of reference is the United States and especially the arrangement whereby a college of Arts and Sciences is flanked by graduate schools, as at Harvard.

But the differences are fundamental. First, Harvard is a small university, the undergraduates numbering about 5000 and drawn from across the country.

Second, it is very wealthy. Other elite private universities and colleges, as well as the prestigious state universities, are wealthy but Harvard is richest of all: the SSR at Harvard is four students for every academic, the Australian norm twenty.

Third, all undergraduates there study the core disciplines of science, social science and the humanities. Their course of studies is rich, allowing a plenitude of choice, but it includes core subjects, typically in literature, history and philosophy.

The Melbourne Model began with this idea of a rich and challenging first degree in Arts and Science, but foundered on the exigencies of scale, economics and curriculum.

Scale. Melbourne has grown inexorably since the logic of our funding arrangements is that universities need to recruit increasing numbers of fee students to make up the shortfall of government support for those in HECS places. Thus it cannot emulate Harvard's system of advice, counselling and support. We have to teach large numbers with maximum economy, and we rely on detailed rules and elaborate systems of management.

Economics. Commerce was originally to be taught as a graduate degree, in keeping with its primary orientation to business studies, but the Faculty of Commerce asked – understandably – if Melbourne really intended to forsake abandon \$30m. dollars of international student fees each year for the B.Comm., and it turned out we didn't. Other first degrees were then created for other professions: medicine, engineering and architecture.

Curriculum. Once you did that, it was necessary to prop up the principle of a general first degree with requirements for cross-faculty studies and breadth subjects of uneven quality and mixed student acceptance. And as a further consequence we have reduced the freedom of our undergraduates to pursue their interests and explore subjects in depth.

Let me illustrate the differences in a less abstract, more personal fashion. Some months before I left for Harvard, the head of the history department asked me to prepare a course guide for my first semester of teaching. To help me, he sent a copy of one of his own recent course guides. It was quite adequate: the lecture program, reading list and assessment procedures were all set out. But to anyone teaching in an Australian university it looked decidedly scant, the sort of handout that might have passed muster twenty years ago before university learning and teaching committees began to insist that generic skills, key learning outcomes and much else be specified for all subjects.

The contrast between our practice and theirs became evident when I asked for the assessment guidelines. Here again Australian universities have elaborate rules that specify how, when and in what form the components of assessment will be conducted, along with explanation of grades, rules on second marking

and dire warnings against plagiarism. None of this appeared in the sample guide, and my inquiry about Harvard's policy met with a puzzled response before I was assured that I should specify whatever I judged appropriate.

Of all the differences between the American university and the Australian one, the difference in attitudes towards academic autonomy is the most striking. We have adopted methods of performance management, appraisal and accountability that sometimes remind me of my training as a tram conductor during the summer months when I was an undergraduate. A gnarled senior inspector took us through the rulebook, warning us of the dire consequences of a variety of petty criminal practices that not even a doctoral candidate in physics could have conceived; it was as if everyone of us had come from the Fagan labour-hire service.

Having worked as an academic administrator, I can appreciate the need to ensure that teaching and research is conducted appropriately. And having conducted audits for the Australian Universities Quality Agency, I understand the need for ensuring appropriate procedures. But there is something peculiarly demeaning and debilitating in the imposition of elaborate rules on intelligent professionals that require them to justify even the most mundane academic activity. Harvard operated on the assumption that the professor was competent and responsible, capable of determining the appropriate practice.

In the Fall semester I taught a survey course in Australian history, in the Spring semester a more advanced seminar to junior and senior students (we would call them third and fourth years). To make it more intelligible to them and more interesting to me, I gave it the lecture course a comparative dimension, using American history as a point of reference on every aspect from geography,

indigenous history, settlement, exploration, the gold rushes, immigration, urbanisation, international relations and religion.

There is, of course an asymmetry here, as there is in other aspects of the Australian-American relationship. No Australian can help but have a familiarity with many aspects of American life, whereas American undergraduates have at most a fragmentary awareness of Australia.

When I asked my students to name an Australian, I thought Rupert Murdoch might find favour, or perhaps Nicole Kidman or even Robert Hughes; but Steve Irwin won hands down.

In teaching the students, I had to make a point of observing local usage (labor unions, not trade unions; graduate students, not postgraduates) and I was sometimes surprised at the misunderstandings. I remarked in my first lecture that Oscar Wilde had described England and America as two countries separated by a common language, and then made the mistake of asking them if they knew of Oscar Wilde. No, not even when I added that on landing in New York on his first visit to the United States he said he had nothing to declare but his genius.

This was not my only failure when using the Socratic method. I prepared a lecture comparing the Californian and Victorian gold rushes, drawing heavily on David Goodman's fine study *Gold Seeking*, but made the mistake of asking the class if they could tell me the American term for alluvial gold. No response. You do know about the Californian gold rush, I inquired. Sort of, they said, but we are Easterners. But Australian school students all know 'My Darling Clementine', I insisted and sang them a verse. They didn't.

There were other surprises. The students took a keen interest in Aboriginal history — many had seen *Rabbit-Proof Fence* — but found it difficult to draw comparisons with native Americans. They were astounded to hear of the recent claim that very few Indigenous Australians were killed in frontier violence, but remarkably unsure when I asked them about the much larger number of fatalities during the settlement of New England.

My students were intrigued by the convict foundations of Australia, and it took some time to dissuade them of their assumption that the early settlers worked in chains. Perhaps I was too successful in this endeavour as they took to the meliorist arguments of recent historical interpretation like ducks to water. Here, however, they seemed to know their New England history too well, so that they drew a sharp contrast between penal transportation and a godly errand into the wilderness. I had to remind them that three-quarters of the early settlers of Virginia were indentured servants.

The Anzac Legend holds a fascination for some of them almost as strong as it does for their Australian counterparts. The idea that a country would commemorate an ignominious military defeat struck them with particular force. Quite a few have seen Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*, and its depiction of innocent heroism sacrificed to British military incompetence struck a chord, but this only intensified the puzzle of a colony that never felt the need of a declaration of independence.

Harvard being Harvard, the class sizes (with the exception of core courses) are small. I had about thirty in my lecture course, ten in the advanced seminar.

Thirty was relatively large; any subject with an enrolment of more than twenty attracts a teaching assistant (tutor). But I wanted to find out how the students were faring, so I took a number of the sections (tutorials). This was an unusual practice. When the head of department wrote to congratulate me on the student feedback, I had the feeling that I obtained an unfair advantage.

Try as I might, I could not persuade my students to use my first name; all but the one Australian and another Englishman invariably addressed me – in class and in email, even at the Australia Day party my wife and I put on with pavlovas, lamingtons and sausage rolls – as Professor.

The opportunity to get to know the students did make me appreciate that our Australian ways are not without merit. Harvard professors are eminent and busy with research. The students do not feel neglected; through the residential system of Houses (we would call them colleges) they are supported with advisors and tutors. The facilities are superb.

What were these students like? They were selected with high SAT results, and chosen to mirror the demographic composition of the population (so that 11 per cent are African American, ten per cent Asian, and so on) on a largely means-free basis that a university an endowment of \$30b. could afford. They were confident, ambitious: about a third of mine were due to go to Wall Street before the crash.

They were perhaps less aware of the world than their Australian equivalents but then citizens of the wealthiest and most powerful country have less reason to look outward than we do.

They were hard working: they all did the reading. They were bright, but seemed to me to be no brighter than the honours student I teach here. They were

articulate but their written expression had the usual range of neologisms and solecisms.

It seemed to me that they spanned the range of Melbourne undergraduates, from clear first to an adequate pass, an impression I tested this year when I taught a fourth-year class to 20 odd Melbourne students in history honours. My two best students here were no less knowledgeable, articulate, intellectually independent and acute than the best Harvard ones.

What conclusions might be drawn from my comparison? We can hardly expect to emulate Harvard's plenitude and we might hesitate before following some of its practices. But as the University is currently reviewing its Melbourne Model, it is salutary to acknowledge the American understanding of a liberal education. It does not reduce choice, it insists emphatically on a rich curriculum.

Equally, we might note the strengths of best Australian practice, the engagement of senior academics in teaching, the maintenance of the teaching-research nexus, the enrichment of this university by the students it attracts and the close engagement it allows.