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'Surprise Me!':

The (im)possibilities of agency and creativity  
within the standards framework of history education

**Abstract**

In the current culture of regulation in higher education and, in turn, the history discipline, it is timely that we problematize discipline standards in relation to student agency and creativity. This paper argues that through the inclusion of a critical orientation and engaged pedagogy, historians have the opportunity to bring a more agentic dimension to the disciplinary conversation. Discipline standards privilege that arrogant historical moment in the higher education sector where certain skills development and knowledge creation becomes a hegemonic discourse. As a result there is less emphasis on creativity, agency, and individual opportunities for the demonstration of the historical imagination at work. We need to ensure that the work on teaching and learning practice is not lost in the rush to meet discipline standards through compliance. We are reminded of the student who asked his teacher: 'How can I get a High Distinction in my history essay?' The teacher replied 'Surprise me'. How do we include that agonizingly accurate and equally problematic response within a standards environment?

**Keywords:** discipline standards, regulation, historical thinking, creativity, agency

Contrary to popular belief, and although indisputably evidence-based, history is far from the mere recovery and ordering of facts. Rather, it is the imaginative and original interpretation of the past. The difference stems from the exercise of individual creativity to shape the historical narrative. In teaching history at the tertiary level in an era that privileges regulation and compliance and where the discipline of history has agreed to the application of discipline standards, what space remains to encourage, and ultimately reward, students who demonstrate genuine creative practice? We are reminded of the famous Australian historian who, when asked by a student, 'What must I do to achieve a High Distinction in my essay' replied 'Surprise me!'. In this paper we explore the increasing drive towards accountability and conformity and ask whether it is indeed possible to enable student creativity within such an environment.

What does it mean to be creative, imaginative and to have flair in the history discipline? Rüsen might argue it is the "complex mediation" when one connects the past, present and future and that allows one to develop capabilities and understanding beyond that required for practical daily historical consciousness (*Lebenspraxis*) (2005, 133). The shift towards higher order thinking is driven by an awareness of the self; historicized and located amid the theory and

philosophy of the discipline (Rusen, 2002, Nye et al, 2011). The student then possesses the agency and self efficacy to 'recast' questions of history (Seixas, 2005, 144). Paul argues for critical reflection of the 'competing models of scholarly selfhood' (2014, 371). In the context of this paper, we imagine the agentic student as one who can research, speak, and write with 'intent; flawed or otherwise' (Nye 2008). This is the emergent historian for whom managerialism, and the codification of knowledge has the potential to stymie. This is the student who crosses learning thresholds imaginatively, creatively and ultimately with the possibilities for originality and surprise.

### **Regulation in Higher Education**

Since the 1980s the higher education sector in Australia has undergone a managerial revolution intended to increase its ability to produce an educated workforce more clearly responsive to market demand (Green, 2011; Esland, Flude and Sieminski, 1999, pp. 2-3). At the same time, regulation by market forces can also encourage a greater degree of uniformity as 'organisations under pressure cannot afford to take entrepreneurial risks' (Sheehy, 2010, p?). As universities become more enamored of the managerial virtues of accountability and transparency, the iconic term 'ivory towers' may no longer be conceptually compatible with the modern approach to the delivery and pursuit of higher education. The shift was nowhere more obvious or discordant than in the 2008 comment by John Cassidy, then Chancellor of the University of New England, who likened the university to a business no different from selling 'fish and chips' (*The Australian*, 18 August, 2008).

In that same year Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley brought down her report into higher education in Australia that recommended a new regulatory system. The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) was enacted in 2011. Advocates for a stronger regulatory environment claim quality assurance and international reliability as the drivers. Australia is not unique in joining this clamour. In each case the modern pursuit of quantifiable quality has resulted in the demand for explicit and agreed standards.

### **Standards in history and the 'audacious' counter-attack**

As a result of the Bradley Review's advocacy of a move away from a 'fitness for purpose' approach, that is, acknowledging institutional difference, to a regulatory system based on 'excellence and standards', that is, acknowledging and promoting commonalities (Bradley et al, 2008, p. 128) the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), now known as the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT), funded the Learning and Teaching Academic Standards (LTAS) project. This 2010 project began the process of promoting discipline discussion around what students ought to know and do at the time of graduating with a discipline major. History was chosen as a demonstration discipline and the panel produced a set of eight discipline standards, or Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLO) (Hay, 2010). The significance of the LTAS project for history is three-fold. First, it meant that as a discipline, history was at the forefront of developing and endorsing TLOs and operating under them. Secondly, historians across the country assumed that the development of TLOs was urgent and important, fearing that if the discipline did not engage with the 'accountability movement', then decisions in this space would be taken at a higher level and subsequently be outside disciplinary control and influence (Huber and Brawley, 2013, p. 3). Thirdly, and most importantly, history demonstrated that those who were most concerned about disciplinary learning should be those leading this conversation and practising its outcomes rather than setting themselves apart from it (Skinner, 2014: 361). Huber and Brawley call this an 'audacious move' (Huber and Brawley, 2013: 5).

It is one thing to bring down a set of standards, it is quite another to implement them. In the *After Standards* project, an OLT funded investigation of how to implement and audit compliance with history discipline standards, the investigators determined that regulation at the disciplinary level was exceedingly problematic in practical terms but also in the intellectual space of what it meant to be an historian (Brawley et al., 2015).

### **Managerialism v. professionalism**

In a sector bent on regulation, managed practice and transparent quality assurance, historians in Australia have carved out an interesting intellectual space for their discipline. By engaging with the managerial push for accountability and quality, the discipline has positioned itself well not only to respond to the new environment but also to take a leading role in it. In this way, the history discipline has tried to overlay managerialism with professionalism. This approach endorses the argument posited by Jane Green in 2011. Green criticizes the managerialism of higher education and advocates instead 'an alternative model, one that complements, rather than undermines, professional judgement' (Green, 2011, p. 2). Perhaps selling education is not the same as selling 'fish and chips'. She argues that the push for accountability and transparency can overlook the nuances of professional practice - 'hitting the target has become an end in itself' (Green, 2011, p. 5). Green (2011, p. 38) identifies the emphasis managerialism places on 'explicitness' as the problem suggesting that professional judgement must be monitored. As a consequence professional discretion is reduced (Green, 2011, pp. 43-4; Esland, Flude & Sieminski, 1999, p. 1).

Managerialism requires the codification of knowledge. Making knowledge explicit, especially the knowledge of historical practice and historical thinking, is problematic. Here we return to the issue of discipline standards and its intersection with professional practice. Even if historical practice can be codified to a certain extent, what happens to those professional values, such as creativity and agency that are impossible to quantify? In this context creativity is understood as original and valuable, purposeful and the result of agency. Creativity requires understanding, judgment and intention (Gaut, 2010, p. 1040). Agency is the capacity and freedom to act while taking responsibility and accepting ownership (Bandura, 2001, pp. 6-8; Nye et al, 2011, p. 764). Crucially, critical thinking is the handmaiden to creativity and agency. The concern here is that if a practice cannot be measured or made explicit then it will not be valued (Blacker, 2003, p. 2-3; Green 2011, p. 149-150). How can the imaginative recreation of the past be prescribed in a standard? How does one standardize

creative flair? How does one make provision within a regulated intellectual environment to be surprised?

### ***Critical Thinking***

Jones has argued that one of the strengths of the history discipline is its ability to turn a critical gaze on itself (Jones, 2009). This was evident in the fifty interviews on the Australian historical thinking study (Nye et al, 2011). Academics repeatedly talked about fostering a confidence and self-efficacy in students so that they would immerse themselves in critical historical debate and, crucial to authentic participation in such debates, was an understanding of history theory and philosophy (Nye et al 2011, p. 775). Student agency and the willingness to engage in critical self-reflection was regarded as essential. Booth found similar evidence in his international study:

lecturers believe that at its best, history teaching helps students not primarily to acquire a body of facts but to learn to think historically. This is an active conception of learning grounded in critical inquiry and personal agency through the attributes and capabilities that the best teaching fosters extend still further (2014, p. 81)

Phillip Roberts' research, while focusing on schools rather than higher education, also affirmed the view that this critical perspective is an embedded characteristic of that signature pedagogy of history (2011, p. 6). As students soon discover, history is inherently problematic and always under contest – be it how it is written and by whom, where and how it is read, how it is interpreted and then how it is re-dispersed and by whom. Whether memory and history create nation states, change global perceptions, provide a sense of belonging and identity, bring justice or merely 'keeps the wolf of insignificance from the door' (Bellow, 1977, p. 190), it and those participating in it must always be under question.

While teachers and academics share an understanding of the contested nature of history, this professional appreciation is sometimes not reflected in broader society. There is a common perception that history is a static concept and that

one can embrace the 'facts' of the past or adhere to Von Ranke's notion of 'as things actually occurred' (Von Ranke, cited in Hughes Warrington, 2008, p. 298 ). Students first enrolling in history units at university sometimes think there is a formulaic approach they can adopt to get through their studies based on the pursuit of an ordered collection of facts (Calder, 2006, p. 1363; Nye et al 2011, p. 768).

Historical study is in many ways a subversive act that asks students to question and challenge what they observe and read. It is a discourse that takes up critical theory, seeks out the transgressions, acts of oppression or privileging, and questions the construction of 'facts' and the intent of those who purport to know them. History pedagogy is shaped by encouraging students to think about discursive deconstruction and disrupting taken-for-granted ways of thinking and other meta-narratives.

Accompanying, or perhaps complementing, the critical theory and postmodernist standpoints in history pedagogy is a consistent moral and political dimension. This discourse is evident in the creation of terms such as 'honest history' (2013), 'history wars' (McIntyre & Clark, 2003), 'Three Cheers view' and the 'Black Armband view' of history, (Blainey, 1993, p. 11) 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg, 2004) and textbook battles (Shin & Sneider, 2011). In regard to the student and their scholarship, the moral dimensions of history and the capacity for the student to undertake moral reasoning as a result of historical study is extensively acknowledged in current research (Seixas 2006, p. 2 and Rüsen, 2004, p.71, Barten and Levstik, 2005, VanSledright, 2002).

**Social Justice and History** Historical thinking is a disciplinary skill that has a far reaching impact on the individual student. It contributes to the broader generic graduate attributes in universities and in the primary and high school sectors (Nye et al., 2009). At a more specific disciplinary skills level, it is possible to track development of critical thinking, self-reflection and the ability to appreciate temporality: to understand how historicism is inherently personal and contextualised. Research has indicated that students of all ages develop an

understanding of active citizenship (Cooper et al., 2009, Demircioglu., 2009, Lacovetta et al., 2008) decision making, (Nye et al., 2011) and of lifelong learning (Kreber, 2009, Pitman and Bromhall, 2009). Becoming an historian involves developing an understanding that the historian is at all times located, contextualized and burdened with moral and very personal dimensions. As the student progresses through this process they will also come to understand the degree of agency embedded in professional historical practice and that they, in turn can become 'informed decision makers' and 'agents of change' in wider life experiences (Nye et al., 2011 ). Both students and academics articulated this ongoing role of the historian as a critical thinker who will contribute to society in a just manner.

As Jones suggests, the epistemology of any discipline is 'fluid, dynamic and multifarious' (2009, p. 86) and history depends on these characteristics for its vitality. The acts of the student historian: historical thinking and historicism are dependent on student agency and willingness. For a student of history to engage authentically in the discipline, it is broadly agreed they must locate themselves in the process and, in turn, understand that the process itself is temporal (Rusen, 2005, Nye et al, 2011, Retz, 2013). Or as Gadamer stated 'real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity' (2004, p. 299, cited in Retz, 2013, p. 10). This is a process that requires guidance from academic teachers and a commitment to authentic practice (Kreber, 2007) and as Barnett suggests, developing dispositions of willingness and preparedness to engage in higher order thinking(2009, p. 433).

Given the focus on critical thinking and self-reflection in history pedagogy it is easy to see why academics foreground deconstruction and disruption of power, privilege and homogeneity through their citing of influential theorists and philosophers such as Marx, Foucault, Butler and E.P. Thompson. In a recent survey, historians were asked which theorists and philosophers shaped their thinking and their teaching (Hughes-Warrington, et al., 2009). They were free to name as many or as few influences as they wanted. The broad and multiple responses was remarkable, they named more than one hundred individuals

deriving from history, philosophy and sociology and from diverse locations around the globe (Nye, 2011). There were however some interconnections, 40% of the 35 respondents cited Foucault, while 20% cited Marx, E.P. Thomson, and E.H. Carr and 10% named Judith Butler, Joan Scott and Greg Denning (Nye, 2011). What was especially evident from the data was the strong transdisciplinary influence and the impact of postmodernism. This did not result in the academics taking up strong ideological positions, rather, the effect seemed more about permission-giving to be exploratory, agentic and open rather than fixated on a single way of teaching history or doing research. The historical thinking project found that history academics are empowered by this multiplicity and, in turn, have more agency and autonomy in their practice (Nye, 2010). Similarly the broad influence of postmodern thinking was always evident and knowing why it has been important to acknowledge the impact of people like Jenkins despite the tag assigned to him: the 'historiographical bluebottle' (Hughes Warrington, 2008, p. 196).

When Penny Russell explored the ethics of historical imagination, she began by differentiating academic disciplines that dealt with the 'real' such as medicine and engineering from those that dealt with 'the creative' such as literature and art, by saying 'And then there is history' (2004, pp. 106-109). By putting history in a category of its own she immediately recognized the way in which it straddled two conceptual and ontological worlds. She clearly pronounced history as 'a creative art' to be constructed with 'narrative flair', but at the same time cautioned that 'historians make stories, but they do not make them up' (Russell, 2004, pp. 107, 109). This duality of practice means that, on the one hand historians follow clear rules of engagement, but on the other rely on intuitive perception, empathy and emotion in order to put meaning on the past. This liminal space of interpretation is personal, unrepeatable, individual, immeasurable, and indeed, often impossible even to understand. 'In the grip of creative energy,' explains Penny Russell, 'it is not always possible to discern the precise origin of my interpretations: they feel at once informed and intuitive. Intuition, psychologists will tell us, is not a mystical force but the collation of a thousand hints collected and interpreted subliminally, barely consciously'

(Russell, 2004, pp. 113-114). If we, like Russell and Tom Griffiths (in Russell, 2004, p. 111), who sees the work of the historian as a clay sculptor, working to release something meaningful, then we must also acknowledge the powerful, if not unfathomable, and yet also essential contribution of human creativity to the act of doing history. It is very difficult to account for intuition in a discipline standard.

### **Interrogating the History TLOs**

When historians tried to snatch control of disciplinary governance from below by engaging with the standards-setting process they also began to reflect on and articulate what it was that historians actually did. As a result the TLOs are both expressions of quantifiable skills and unquantifiable implicit professional knowledge, perhaps even innate cognition (Wineburg, 2001). They attempt to bridge the difficult divide between tacit knowledge, professional know-how, cognitive positioning and the demands of management to make such knowledge explicit and codifiable. They tried to capture the messiness of historical practice and the unfathomable nature of a cerebral discipline dependent for its variability and creativity on the locatedness and positionality of the historian in a discourse of managerialism and regulation. The outcome is a series of statements of purpose and direction but how effective and thorough are they to capture what it means to do history, to nurture creative and agentic student experience - 'critical gaze' - and at the same time be accountable. Is this even possible? Ludmilla Jordanova describes the nature of historical skills as different from any others:

'they are developed over a lifetime, to become an integral part of the person. They are enhanced by the ability to write well and to grasp the complexity of situations. Naturally there is much that can be taught, but there is a great deal that relates to more subtle human qualities, which are not so amenable to direct instruction (Jordanova, 2006, p.150).

### **The (im)possibilities in the TLOs**

TLO 1 – Demonstrate an understanding of at least one period or culture of the past - is the easiest of all for staff to teach and for students to meet. It simply requires the gathering and informed presentation of some information about a given topic. It does not ask for any critique, or deconstruction or bringing into the picture any sense of the self. Neither does it demand any particular level of understanding. TLO 1 best satisfies traditional demands to know what happened. If we are to look for creativity and agency in the history standards, there is little scope to find it here other than in the choice of subject to be understood. Where on the surface it may seem impossible, an intuitive teacher can encourage students to look for the previously undiscussed, the purposely hidden, the silent voice, and the uncomfortable or raw stories of a people's past. There are many 'periods or cultures' that can be revealed by judicious selection and transgressive accession.

TLO 2 – Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of conceptual approaches to interpreting the past – suggests a teacher may follow a text and teach students to identify a history typology. The student may learn about conceptual approaches in the way one would identify rock types in geology by recognition and by applying a standardized decision-making matrix. But, used effectively, this TLO allows a teacher to introduce students to the complexity of historical thinking. Not all historians are the same, nor are the methods that they use to reach their conclusions. Different approaches applied to the same subject matter can reveal starkly different results. Hidden in this TLO is the seed of historical argument and dispute. Going further, new approaches are always possible. The digital revolution has exposed opportunities for historical analysis not previously possible even in the lifetime of current historians. Students can be encouraged to think about how to locate themselves most comfortably within the tradition of a conceptual approach or, taken further, to push out in a totally new direction. If we are looking for the possibilities of creativity and agency we must be prepared to push the boundaries of the TLOs beyond the limitations of simply making the implicit explicit. The TLOs must be interpreted in an open-ended way.

TLO 4 – Identify and interpret a wide variety of secondary and primary materials - reads as a listing and cataloguing exercise. The practising historian is often faced with the theoretical problem of a source falling into both categories, a deeper level of complexity certainly, but the teacher must look beyond the ‘tricky cases’. What constitutes a source material? As a discipline history is either blessed or cursed with sitting comfortably or uncomfortably close to other disciplines – sociology, literature, archaeology etc and the cross-disciplinary studies of cultural studies, death studies, whiteness etc. The materials that can be used as sources are far from the traditional written text and can include every conceivable item of the natural and manufactured world (De Groot, 2009, Jordanova, 2006, 2009).

TLO 5 – Examine historical issues by undertaking research according to the methodological and ethical conventions of the discipline – is a statement of doing. It restricts students to an already conceived practice, regulated and reformed. This is one area where students must have agency to practise conformity.

TLO 6 – Analyse historical evidence, scholarship and changing representations of the past – on the surface looks like a lesson in historiography. This is a simple statement but holds within it a vast accumulation of assumptions about the nature of historical thinking and practice over generations and across subject areas. This one TLO can explode into innumerable pieces of intellectual shrapnel. First, creativity and agency around evidence is determined by the questions one asks of the source material at hand. Ask a clever question and you have the key to a career. Without the right question the source remains useless and inanimate. As Wineburg (2001, p. 77) has argued: ‘For students, the locus of authority was in the text; for historians, it was in the questions they formulated about the text’. Two historians approaching the same source with different questions produce different histories. Secondly, students can see themselves as being autonomous participants in a community of scholarship where historians over the years have built up a body of accumulated knowledge and perspectives. The individual becomes part of a community on entering the scholarship of the discipline.

Thirdly, changing representations of the past, the meta-narratives of history, have purpose and a history of their own. Students need to negotiate that story and position their own interpretation within that body of work. Once they understand the changing narrative of their subject's history, they know what they themselves can say, and how they fit in the grand design of historical interpretation. The creative and agentic student can add to the body of knowledge by extending the pinnacle of historiography, by tweaking the interpretation of the past in yet a new inflected direction.

TLO 7 - Construct an evidence-based argument or narrative in audio, digital, oral, visual or written forms - is once again about doing history. Here the student presents their work. The panel establishing the TLOs was most anxious to offer new alternatives to the written essay. Here the creative student can exhibit their knowledge in a range of aesthetic forms. In the use of an evidence-based argument, there is also the possibility for the student to problematize what evidence actually is and how it can be selected in conjunction with the mode of presentation.

In discussions about the implementation of National Standards at the 2012 *After Standards* workshop, historians suggested that TLOs three and eight were the most difficult to implement.

TLO 3: Show how history and historians shape the present and the future

TLO 8: Identify and reflect critically on the knowledge and skills developed in the study of history.

One might argue that this is because they reflect the most complex processes of historical practice; that is, teaching students to reflect critically and problematize the evidence, historians and themselves. These standards are possibly the most important for the development of the history student because they do not represent easily quantifiable skills and tasks one can learn by rote or imitation. Rather, they ask students to take risks by accepting and engaging in the

uncertainties of knowledge making. These are transformative or threshold moments in the ontogeny of historical thinking and as such, there is 'no going back' once students understand their significance (Meyer and Land, 2008, p.5). As Savin-Baden suggests this type of shift in learning is challenging but generative (2008, p. 76).

Whatever the history student writes or the professional historian produces should therefore be thought of as constructed (Jenkins, 2003, p. 40), proposed (Ankersmit, 1994) and imagined (White, 1973). Knowing and locating this within the discourse of the history discipline is what distinguishes the most accomplished students. History theorists and educationalists have long been intrigued by transformative moments or phases in historical thinking not least because this is also the point from which the students are likely to begin producing the most original and creative work of their studies. Rösen for example sees this process as degrees of narrative competence and increased sophistication in understanding (2005, 28-35). This process of orientation of the self is crucial for the emergent student historian, imagining differently and creatively requires self-efficacy and student agency. Students need to believe there is the opportunity for authentic engagement and intellectual risk, which includes the rejection of the 'correct' interpretation of an historical problem. As Ankersmit (1994, p. 187) says: 'To put it provocatively, the more high-quality interpretations we have, the more the ideal of the "correct" interpretation becomes compromised.' High quality interpretations emerge from creative, imaginative or agentic thinking. As Hayden White (1973, p. 82) explains: history is 'a narrative discourse the content of which is as much imagined as found'.

### **The importance of intention**

There is no immediate relief from the current regulatory fashion. Managerialism is yet to wain. Although Bradley may have been well-intentioned in her search for accountability and transparency through regulation, and although the LTAS project produced useful statements of discipline practice and knowledge, still the issue remains, in a sector bent on proof of quality, how does history comply? Quality history and effective historians must go beyond what can be produced

within the clipped statements of Threshold Learning Outcomes. Sherry Turkle (2004) argues that technological forms can determine cognitive approaches. Her point was that the new reliance on power point presentations meant that we now think more readily in terms of dot points rather than carefully prepared narratives. She claims that 'The tools we use to think change the way in which we think' (Turkle, 2004, p. B26) and that 'presentation software has fetishized the outline at the expense of the content' (Turkle, 2004, p. B. 27). The dramatic compartmentalization of the complexity of history into eight dot points was always going to be problematic and at risk of being homogenised. Should we think of this through Turkle's lens of the power point presentation, that is, embodying 'its own way of thinking' within 'its own aesthetic' (Turkle, 2004, p. B 27).

In this paper we have highlighted the dichotomy and tension between the apparent prescription of the TLOs, pared down to the most easily formulated, or managerialized concepts, and the hidden depths of complexity such statements belie. The issue is one of language and control. In establishing specific standards, the history profession has distilled its life-blood into an essence, made apparently absent its subversive and transgressive nature and not been able to articulate the liminal spaces of intuition. Playing within managerial systems can mean that the complications, nuances and potentialities of a discipline may be obscured or indeed, impeded. And yet, we ask students of history to trust that taking individual risk by engaging in the moral, political and personal dimensions of historical thinking and practice, is the only way they can have authentic engagement in the community of scholars.

At the same time, by interrogating the eight TLOs, we have suggested that the teacher may find the space to encourage creativity and agency. Alan Booth has argued that the role of the history teacher is crucial in providing successful learning experiences for students (Booth, in Booth and Hyland, 2000, p. 35; Booth, 2014). The onus will rest on the intention of the historian/teacher to expose the depth of the modern history profession. In the recent review of the National School Curriculum, Donnelly and Wiltshire criticized the implied agency

given to primary school History students. They argued that instead the 'emphasis should be on imparting historical knowledge and understanding central to the discipline, instead of expecting children to be historiographers' (Donnelly and Wiltshire 2014, p.181. See alternatively Parkes and Donnelly, 2014). On the contrary, discipline knowledge and understanding cannot be separated from historiography. Creativity and agency belongs as much in the primary school as it does in the university. It must be nurtured and supported rather than stifled and limited. In that way, the true meaning of the TLOs can be released and the control that historians feared can be countered. While the 'cage of words' (Schutz, 2005, p.17) hovers menacingly from regulatory discourse historians need to be ever more keen to seek out creative and agentic avenues for their students and, as always, reward surprise.

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