

Grappling with AIM734, 'Understanding significance'

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Heritage under one umbrella: a call for convergence and reform



Deakin's Heritage & Museum Studies program adopts a converged concept of cultural heritage encompassing 3 domains: objects, places, traditions (intangibles).

It requires a doubled (or tripled) language: 'heritage places/objects'; 'historic objects/sites'; cultural places/objects/intangibles...' Inclusiveness comes at the cost of /slashes/

Places

There is a logic to convergence (strengthened by the rise of heritage studies) – but both disciplinary roots and professional practice discourage working out of their silos, onto the same platform. And besides, potential students still don't know what 'heritage' means...

Objects

Intangibles

Crossovers between domains

- Museums adopted significance assessment, adding significant thinking.
- Sites picked up exhibition communication via visitor centres.
- Heritage interpretation: a crossover field with immediate political ramifications [which/whose heritage?], carrying evangelical natural environment baggage.
- There is much in common, theoretically and methodologically, but at some risk to disciplinary identities...

Hence, some resistance:

- Some site people are disdainful about museums...
- Some museum people are very ignorant about place heritage...
- Australia never developed either an academic* or governmental approach to folklore/folklife, leaving the rise of 'intangible heritage' without a body of educated torch-bearers.

* With the valiant exceptions of Graham Seal at Curtin University, Gwenda Davey here and there; and the National Library of Australia's music and oral history collecting programs.

Paying attention to people

- Museum visitor research since c.1990 reveals insights into the meanings of heritage to the public, esp. the spectrum of individual tastes in visitor experience, and the disconnection between intended discourse and visitor reception.
- Social significance methodology in the place-heritage sphere since the early 1990s establishes routes by which communities are able to identify and articulate non-official heritage values into the public sphere.
- Such developments highlight the limits of professional expertise in heritage practice.
- Students need to learn perspectives and techniques that sensitise them to the makers/consumers of heritage, generating community-responsive heritage management in the social environment as well as museums and sites.



What do the AQF, students, industry and academics want?

- The Australian Qualifications Framework requires 2 year FTE Master courses.
- PVCs demand fewer units on offer.
- Students hanker for named degrees.
- Industry wants literate people capable of critical research.
- Academics want more time for the non-converging paths of teaching and research required by universities...



Terracotta warriors, X'ian: D. Young

Deakin's revised course: M.Cult.Her.

Core units	
AIM734	Understanding significance
AIM736	Heritage, museums and identity
AIM708	World heritage & international heritage practice
AIM709	Intangible heritage
AIM723	Heritage interpretation
AIM735	Leadership in museums & heritage organisations
Electives	
AIM703	Introduction to heritage planning
AIM704	Tourism and sustainable cultural development
AIM705	Conservation management planning
AIM714	Cultural landscapes
AIM715	Virtual heritage
AIM722	Collections and movable cultural heritage
AIM727	Exhibitions

Plus a mixture of:

- Heritage in the field (internship)
- Applied heritage project
- Research design
- Dissertation A
- Dissertation B
- Research paper A
- Research paper B

AIM734: Understanding significance

It took a while for the Deakin group to come to the view that significance is the apt vehicle to:

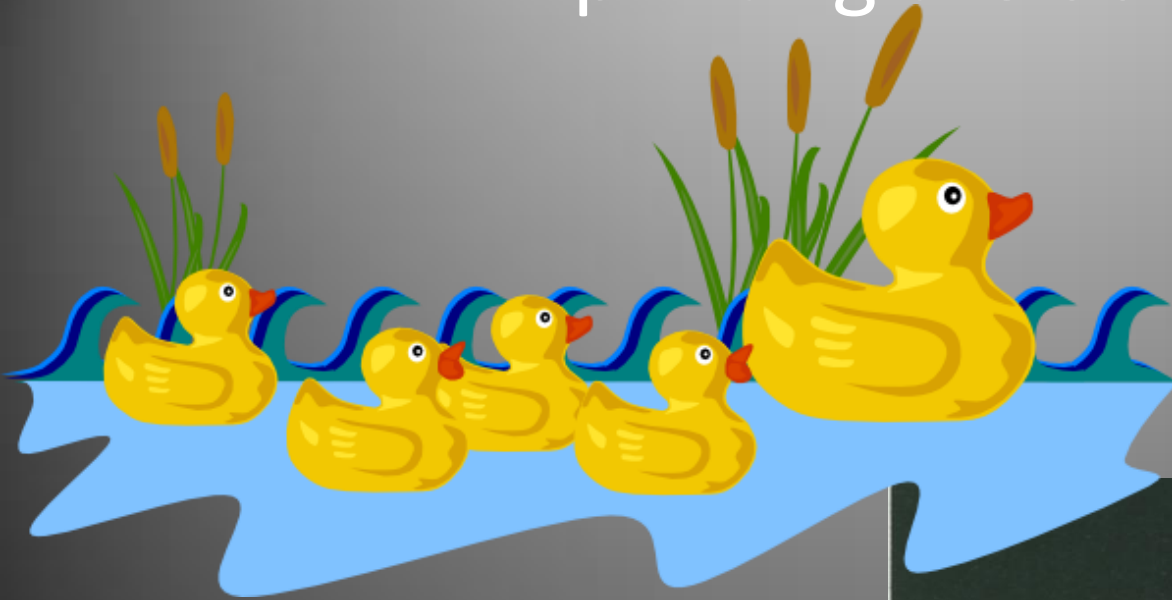
- Introduce the place/object cross-over concept.
- Frame the concept of values-based heritage management.
- Connect with a more advanced unit on Heritage Management Planning.
- Situate the cosmopolitan ethics demanded by practice today.

The first iteration of the new unit shows good grasp of principle, conditioned by inexperience with historical context and comparative cases. Everyone has to start somewhere!



Class site visit, 2011; T. Horman

Imprinting the ducklings



Come graduation they turn
into swans and paddle off
towards their fortune with
a large vision of heritage

