Archaeology out of the classroom: Some observations from the Fannie Bay Gaol field school, Darwin

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Abstract

This paper reviews the role of the Fannie Bay Gaol undergraduate field school in archaeology teaching and learning at Charles Darwin University. It details trends in the field school's history in attracting students to the archaeology programme and provides an account of the issues encountered in retaining student interest while simultaneously teaching the fundamentals of archaeological practice. A decline in student participation in the latter years of the field school is critically examined. Undergraduate students, most of who had no intention of becoming professional archaeologists, were eager to participate in fieldwork but only if they were engaged with the novelty of the adventure. The conclusion drawn is that a field school must be specifically oriented toward a target audience. Graduate and postgraduate field schools are vital to providing future practitioners with a strong grounding in method and technique. Undergraduate field schools are equally important, but not for teaching the finer details of methods. They must instead be designed as out of the classroom exercises that, if university archaeologists are to maintain the viability of their undergraduate programmes, need to be delivered as education and entertainment in equal measure.

Introduction

American archaeologist Jennifer Perry recently examined the value of field schools as a tool in teaching and learning archaeology, concluding (Perry 2004:256) that field schools serve two fundamental purposes by providing:

1. An experiential avenue for students to make choices as to whether to pursue a career in archaeology.
2. An opportunity for students to participate in ‘authentic’ research activity and to learn some of the tools of the trade, including the ethical responsibilities beholding of the practicing archaeologist.

These purposes undeniably play an important role in planning a university field school. All teaching staff initiate archaeology field schools in the expectation that some attendees will be attracted to archaeology as a potential profession, or at the very least will come away with an understanding of how archaeology is done. But the two fundamental purposes outlined by Perry gloss over the point that field schools also need to cater to students whose chosen career paths lie not with archaeology. These students – a cohort that in my experience of seven years of university teaching constitutes the majority of any undergraduate population – enrol in archaeology units because they wish to take interesting electives, often to fill out a general Arts or Science degree or relieve the tedium of a Law or Business degree. Archaeology is an attractively interesting topic to most, including those not intending to become practitioners (Balme and Wilson 2004; Colley 2005). But in these days of more vocationally-oriented tertiary education, where entering university to acquire a broad understanding of the world is seen in some circles as an (increasingly) unaffordable luxury, archaeology and other humanities subjects must be acknowledged as often a side dish to the vocationally-focused academic main fare (Colley 2003:91). Although these are not new observations – similar issues were being canvassed 25 years ago (McBryde 1980:74-75) – today’s career archaeologists in the academy and elsewhere might not find such comments palatable. Nevertheless, they stand as a cold fact in the context of the comparatively limited opportunities for full-time employment in archaeology and the increasing financial and social demands inherent in acquiring a university education in Australia (Lydon 2002).

The role of the field school

If most undergraduate students have no plans to become career archaeologists, where then does the field school stand in archaeology teaching and learning? It must be stated from the outset that pressure exists from within the archaeological community, particularly from those employed in the heritage management industry, for field schools to provide a far more comprehensive coverage of field and laboratory techniques than they generally do at the moment (refer Lydon 2002 for a discussion). This was highlighted for me during my participation in the 2003 National Archaeology Teaching and Learning Workshop. More than a few commentators at this gathering bemoaned the lack of practical experience exhibited by many graduates coming out of Australian archaeology departments. As Sarah Colley noted in her analysis of the outcomes of this workshop (Colley 2004), a number of non-university archaeologists saw academics as utterly failing in their perceived duty to teach about professional practice.

Academic archaeologists need to heed such criticism. However, such concerns are often outweighed by the practicalities of university teaching in today’s Australia (Colley 2003:95). Archaeology, unlike social work or psychology, has no nationally accredited body with the power to monitor course content and ensure that professionally prescribed teaching objectives are met. In the absence of any legislatively binding requirements for certain archaeology topics to be taught at university, no formal framework exists for structuring an archaeology course. This is not necessarily a bad thing as it has allowed distinctive and successful ‘schools’ of archaeology to organically develop in Australia (e.g. the maritime programme at Flinders University and the Pacific/Asian programme at the Australian National University). However, it has also placed archaeology teaching at the...
mercy of a system in which student numbers and retention rates are increasingly becoming the bottom line for measuring the efficacy of a university course. The pressure is on academic archaeologists to make their courses sufficiently attractive to both lure students into enrolling and ensure that they do not abandon the course (at least not until after the student enrolment census cut-off date). In this climate the undergraduate field school – with its romantic connotations of the adventure of the ‘dig’ and of discovering something new and exciting – plays an important role as a drawcard for archaeology. This is not to say that field schools should be geared to the level of a playtime adventure. Obviously, an archaeological field school, as with all units and courses accredited for tertiary delivery, must have measurable learning outcomes. The issue here is how academics might balance the demand of the majority of students for a novel and engaging learning experience against a requirement by the minority and the profession for a thorough grounding in methodology. An over-emphasis on the complexities of field and laboratory techniques runs the risk of turning the majority of students off, while a ‘dumbed down’ field school will be an exercise in professional futility. This paper illustrates one attempt to manage this balancing act in a series of field schools I facilitated between 1998 and 2003 as part of a unit on archaeological method and theory at Charles Darwin University.

Teaching archaeology in ANY 242
Anthropology 242 (ANY 242) was inherited in 1997 when I began teaching archaeology at Charles Darwin (then Northern Territory) University. My predecessor in archaeology had established the unit to introduce second year students to the fundamentals of archaeological practice, with an emphasis on laboratory techniques and lithic technology. There was no formal fieldwork component. ANY 242 was the first unit I taught upon taking up my appointment at the University. Based partly on readings set by my predecessor and additional readings I thought relevant, I endeavoured to teach archaeology out of the textbook. Looking back on my lecture notes today, I see an attempt to cover almost everything, from palaeoedits to processual theory, from site surveying to site catchment analysis. Needless to say students, many of whom had knowledge limited to a general world prehistory unit taught in the previous semester, were variously baffled, bewildered and bemused. At the end of the course the consensus from the student group was that archaeology should be fun and exciting, and that the unit had not met those expectations. I wished to enhance the visitor experience of the gaol. The archaeological recovery of portable items, food remains, and other detritus would, Dewar and I thought, help fill gaps in the surviving archival record by documenting the more mundane aspects of gaol life, providing visitors with an interesting story of day-to-day existence inside the facility. The gaol appeared to serve as an ideal field school site that held the promise of adding significant information on early Darwin history (Dewar and Fredericksen 2003). Consequently, Dewar and I cooperated in setting up the first Charles Darwin (Northern Territory) University field school as a research exercise to determine the potential for archaeology to reveal hitherto unknown vistas on nineteenth and early twentieth century gaol life.

The first field school was held over two weeks in the dry season of 1998. Despite my expectations enrolment in ANY 242 in that year was less than one-third of the previous year (Fig. 1). The excavation, which focused on the discovery of...
subterranean structures associated with the storage and management of the gaol’s drinking water (Fig. 2) (Fredericksen 1999), had failed to provide a drawcard for students. The reason for this became obvious. I had responded to student requests for an opportunity to participate in fieldwork but made the error of offering this as a voluntary adjunct to ANY 242. The 1998 Fannie Bay Gaol field school was not an assessable component of unit coursework. Clearly, students were not only unenthusiastic about learning from a textbook but were equally unattracted to taking part in a field school merely for the experience of doing archaeology. Students wished to gain university credit for their efforts. Learning from this I repeated the field school in 1999, but this time structured it into the frame of a defined learning exercise worth 40% of the assessment for ANY 242. In deference to student comments that a two

Figure 1 Student enrolment in ANY 242 between 1997 and 2003. The unit was not taught in 2000.

Figure 2 Excavating a nineteenth century water storage feature, 1998 field school (Photograph: Clayton Fredericksen).
week field school was too long in the face of employment and other university coursework commitments, the 1999 season was reduced to one week. These changes attracted more student participants and enrolment in ANY 242 increased more than three-fold over 1998 (Fig. 1).

The 1999 field school was directed to uncovering the remains of the unmarried guards’ quarters, a building constructed in the late nineteenth century and demolished only in the 1960s (Fig. 3). Excavation of this part of Fannie Bay Gaol proved particularly fruitful from the perspectives of both maintaining student interest and contributing information on the social history of the prison. Field school excavations of this area were repeated in 2000 and 2001 and proved very successful in revealing new information on gaol life and activities between the late 1800s and mid-1900s (Fredericksen 2005). Student numbers however declined from the highpoint of 1999 (Fig. 1). The year 2000, the only year in which ANY 242 was not taught, witnessed voluntary field school participation by only seven students and volunteers, approximately 50% down from the preceding year’s numbers. (The field school was run in 2000 to maintain momentum in what by then was an important research programme for both the University and the Museum). The fourth field school, held in 2001 and characterised by a particularly enthusiastic student group (Fig. 4), was associated with reasonably healthy double digit enrolment in ANY 242, although numbers were still lower than 1999 (Fig. 1).

In 2002 a fifth and final field school was held at Fannie Bay Gaol. Excavation that year targeted a new locality, an infilled 1880s underground water storage facility. This change was undertaken to meet a research agenda to investigate promising but unexplored underground features in the northern sector of the gaol. The excavation was held over a long-weekend of four days. Despite a shorter field programme and a potentially interesting new investigation, enrolments in ANY 242 were considerably down on the previous year (Fig. 1). Additionally, only approximately half the students from the cohort participated in the excavation, the remainder electing to choose the alternative option of cataloguing finds from the excavations of former years. I found this downturn puzzling and asked students for their reasons for non-participation, given that in previous years undergraduates had specifically asked for an opportunity to carry out practical archaeology. Responses fell into two groups. Some students responded that they simply had other commitments that prevented their attendance. Other students bluntly stated that they had little interest in excavating a site from the recent past, brushing aside the historical fact that the gaol was built little more than a decade after the founding of Darwin. The impression I obtained was that the gaol field school – which in all the years that it ran had been covered by the *NT News* newspaper, *ABC Radio* and other media outlets – had become rather commonplace and lost some of its novelty.

Student numbers were declining and by 2002 were too small to justify continuation of the school, especially in the face of threats by the University to axe units with average enrolments of fewer than 10 students. This, in combination with a shift to a new government position by Dewar, whose support as a Museum representative was essential, meant the Fannie Bay Gaol field school had become difficult to sustain. I consequently took the reluctant decision to wind it up after the 2002 season.

![Excavating the site of the guards’ quarters, 1999 field school (Photograph: Clayton Fredericksen).](image-url)
Analysis

The gaol field school was a success on a number of fronts. Student requests for practical experience in archaeology were met, the teaching of basic archaeological principles was achieved, and new research information was uncovered. A fourth outcome was the unanticipated one of learning how to formally assess student output in a situation where students did not submit formal, easily quantifiable components of coursework. In each of the Fannie Bay Gaol field schools (the 2000 season excepted) student participants were required to maintain a daily log of activity to be submitted for grading at the end of the excavation. Other assessable tasks included drawing up a cross-section and an excavation plan, on which the position of strata, artefacts and major features was plotted. As these were kept as a truthful record of the excavation, drafting was closely supervised (inevitably some errors were made). Students were also taught such basics as how to lay out an excavation grid so that squares were indeed square; how to formulate and use a three dimensional grid coordinate system; methods for surveying in excavation areas and features using an EDM and level; and the importance of maintaining an artefact inventory and photographic record.

Assessing student competency in particular field school activities posed challenges, similar to those encountered in the University of Sydney programme (Colley 2003). In my situation the assessable component of the field schools did not vary greatly from year to year, but the manner of their assessment had to be tailored to particular student cohorts. In particular I had to learn that many students – especially those without a science background – needed to be directed away from the traditional mode of essay writing to clear and concise but abbreviated recording of data. I learnt this the hard way in the first two seasons when presented with field notebooks that were wonderfully written and illustrated but which bore little resemblance to what was actually uncovered. I also found that students, schooled in the correct/incorrect dichotomy often found in teaching and learning, had to be taught to be unafraid of recording their own thoughts on what they were uncovering. Perhaps one of the most satisfying aspects of the field school programme was observing the increasing confidence and competence exhibited by some students, a number of who returned to participate in consecutive years as volunteers. (Two of the most enthusiastic field school participants are presently engaged in postgraduate research at Charles Darwin University on historical and contact sites, research that has involved directing their own excavations).

More difficult to measure is the success of the Fannie Bay Gaol field school as a drawcard to attract students to the archaeology programme at Charles Darwin University. My impression is that initially it did attract more students but that after five years it had outlived its usefulness, as reflected by enrolments that were not stable and by 2002 were too low to sustain the school. By informally canvassing archaeology undergraduate students after the 2002 field school I found that most maintained a high interest in experiential archaeology. They were, however, not particularly attracted to excavating a site, particularly one from the early years of European settlement of Darwin. Rather, their interest lay with being introduced to a range of different sites and especially sites associated with the Aboriginal past. Many of Darwin’s younger generation of European or Asian descent have little appreciation of...
Indigenous culture beyond the urban precincts of the city. These students seemingly took little account of the fact that Fannie Bay Gaol was a place of Aboriginal incarceration and today continues to hold an important position in the memory of Darwin’s Aboriginal community. The latter was vividly brought home to me on a number of occasions, particularly during the 2002 field school when an Indigenous student excused herself after a few days’ participation because of the discomfort she felt from the spiritual presence of past Aboriginal prisoners. (Indigenous Australians – from both within and outside the Northern Territory – made up a small but significant proportion of each year’s enrolment in ANY 242). In a nutshell, the undergraduate field school had proven to be a drawcard for archaeology but its continuing viability in this respect was contingent on offering students a new, alternative suite of experiences.

This conclusion is illustrated by student enrolment in ANY 242 between 1997 and 2003 (Fig. 1). From 1999 to 2002, the years of operation of the Fannie Bay Gaol field school as an assessable component of ANY 242, a yearly decrease in enrolments in the unit is evident. The implication here is that the novelty of the field school was waning with each year. Significantly, a record high enrolment in ANY 242 took place in 2003, the year after the cessation of the Fannie Bay Gaol project. In that year I organised a practical component based on a four day field trip to Kakadu National Park. With the invaluable assistance of two Park Rangers and an Indigenous guide (the daughter of a senior traditional owner), students were introduced to a variety of historical and archaeological sites within the Park – rock art localities, rockshelters, a lithic reduction site, and the remains of a buffalo hunting and pastoral station (Fig. 5). The trip was assessable, each student having to prepare a mock proposal to undertake research on one of the visited sites. Putting aside pedagogical outcomes, the success of the field trip is inferred by an all-time high for enrolments in ANY 242 (Fig. 1). However, if the Fannie Bay Gaol field school is a guide, we might expect to see a gradual decline in student interest with repeated excursions to Kakadu Park. This proposition is unlikely to be tested, at least in the foreseeable future, as I have since departed Charles Darwin University and at the time of writing the archaeology teaching position there remains unfilled.

Summary and conclusions

When we speak of an archaeological field school we need to distinguish between field schools with a strong focus on method and technique and those geared to providing an entrée to archaeology in the field. Some may see the former, reserved for those who are dedicated to pursuing further studies or even a career in archaeology, as the only experience with sound teaching and learning outcomes, as these schools provide the vehicle to enable students to make career choices and to learn some of the tools of the trade (Perry 2004). Nevertheless the value of the introductory undergraduate field school as a mechanism for maintaining critical student interest (and enrolments) seems self-evident.

The case of the Fannie Bay Gaol field school is one example of an exploration into what a heterogenous and often fickle undergraduate population seeks from experiential archaeology. Perhaps the main point to come out of this exercise is that although undergraduate
participants valued measurable learning outcomes, they also demanded to be entertained and stimulated. Accommodating these demands for a student population that has no necessary vested interest in archaeology is one of the great challenges facing archaeologists in university teaching environments. But it is a challenge that needs to be met if university archaeologists are to be successful in maintaining their undergraduate programmes in today’s unforgiving academic climate. And it may very well be that meeting those challenges will involve introducing learning experiences that have no direct relevance to the practical requirements demanded by the archaeological profession at large.

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References

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