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PROBING THE PAST
IDEAS FOR A WEB-BASED LEARNING RESOURCE
ABOUT THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY

Klaus Neumann

Only public servants involved in formulating and administering current government policy, and historians, used to access government archives. Until recently, such archives had primarily a curatorial role: that of safeguarding written records related to the formulation and administration of government policy. This focus is still reflected in the legislation governing Australia’s federal archives. According to the *Archives Act 1983*, nine of the twelve functions of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) are concerned with the collection, preservation and disposal of government records. But today, the NAA is directing many of its resources towards a function that only in the last twenty-five years or so has been added to the catalogue of key tasks government archives are expected to perform, namely the encouragement, facilitation, publicising and sponsoring of the use of archival material (see Section 5(2)(h), *Archives Act 1983*).

The NAA’s emphasis on the public’s use of its holdings is of very recent origin: it was only in 1993 that the NAA created its Public Programs division, and a year later that the NAA’s *Strategic Directions* paper committed the organisation to making public programmes one of its core activities (see Golder n.d., pp. 1–4). Since then, the NAA has tried to establish itself as one of Australia’s foremost national cultural institutions—on a par with the National Gallery, the National Library and the National Museum.

The NAA is acutely aware that its aspiration to be a leading cultural institution rests on its ability to significantly increase the number of users attracted to its reading rooms and/or to its website. In 1998 the Law Reform Commission’s review of the *Archives Act 1983* referred to the ‘wealth of information contained within Commonwealth records’ but noted that ‘only a small proportion of the population makes use of archival records in Australia’ (Australian Law Reform Commission 1998, para 19.2). In response to this dilemma, the NAA has identified several groups of existing and potential users, ranging from genealogists to students.
Secondary school students now constitute a key target audience for many government archives. Increasingly, archives resort to the Internet to reach this and other groups of potential users. Library and Archives Canada’s Learning Centre website, for example, was developed specifically to service the needs of secondary students and their teachers (http://www.collectionscanada.ca/education). Britain’s Public Records Office provides substantial electronic resources for students on its Learning Curve (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/online/learningcurve.htm). The United States government archives has developed a Digital Classroom (http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/index.html). Most of these educational websites are directed at students and teachers of national history. The NAA is currently in the early stages of developing a suite of web-based resources akin to those hosted by the national archives in the United States, Canada and Britain.

In late 2002, the NAA and Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research (ISR) embarked on an ambitious joint project, Retrieving the Record, that is aimed at developing a conceptual model and a strategy for using the NAA’s resources in secondary school education.¹ An interactive website directed at secondary school students and their teachers is one of the project’s proposed key outcomes.

The project partners made two important decisions at the very beginning of their collaboration. They decided that they needed to focus on a broadly-defined chapter of Australian history in order to develop their model, and then chose the White Australia policy and its administration between 1945 and 1973 as their historical case study. They also agreed on a division of labour: the ISR team was responsible for researching, and writing about, the case study; for identifying issues suitable for a learning resource; for selecting relevant archival sources; and for developing and proposing strategies for the use of archival resources in secondary school education. The NAA team was responsible for implementing and evaluating these strategies.

I was employed to identify and research suitable aspects of the White Australia policy, to identify relevant archival sources, to collaborate with NAA staff in the development of resources that would draw on the results of my historical research, and to write a monograph that could serve as a
companion to the website and other learning resources developed by the project partners. In the remainder of this paper, I sketch some of my ideas for a web-based learning resource. I begin by outlining a series of ten assumptions that guided me when suggesting a conceptual design to the NAA and when writing the text for a pilot website, then briefly describe that proposed website, and finally draw attention to problems that proposals such as this may encounter.

Assumptions

My first assumption concerned the principal purpose of the learning resource:

1. The learning resource is to enable students to do history.

Traditionally, teachers have used archival documents for three purposes: to teach students how to interpret written primary sources, to illustrate historical narratives, and to draw attention to key historical moments. These three purposes may overlap: an archival document used to acquaint students with the difference between primary and secondary sources could also illustrate a historical narrative; a primary source used as illustration could be a seminal document marking a momentous moment in history.

Regardless of the purpose for which archival documents were traditionally used in the classroom, they were related to a narrative provided by the teacher (or the history textbook). Thus a certificate of exemption would be used to illustrate the White Australia policy, and a memorandum from the notorious Western Australian Chief Protector A.O. Neville would accompany a narrative about the removal of children from their Aboriginal mothers. These documents would not serve to explain the government’s restricted immigration or Aboriginal policies, nor would they necessarily prompt students to construct a narrative about these policies.

History textbooks written for secondary school students often reproduce archival documents. CD-ROMs and websites were initially little more than expanded conventional textbooks (see Bellamy 1999, pp. 4–6). They tended to differ from textbooks only in that they avoided what a reviewer of the Learning Curve termed the ‘canapé approach’: the presentation of primary historical sources in the form of edited extracts (Turtle 2000). But on CD-ROMs and websites, too, archival documents were initially support material. The National Archives’ Documenting a Democracy project is an
example of one such website (http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au). It makes available 100 seminal documents which function as markers of a pre-existing historical narrative.

The learning resource that I envisaged was to be radically different in that it was to allow students to fashion histories. Thus its users would be encouraged to do the work of historians who draw on primary sources to construct historical narratives.

The following five assumptions make claims about the process of doing history:

2. *Anybody can write history.*
3. *Historical research is laborious and time-consuming.*
4. *Curiosity is one of the, if not the, most productive driving force(s) of historical research.*
5. *Ideally, the process of historical research is open-ended.*
6. *There can be no unmediated access to the past.*

The proposition that only professional historians can write history has been made by historians asserting their professional authority and trying to corner a market (even if it were only one of ideas, rather than of more tangible commodities). Notwithstanding the fact that the quality of histories may differ enormously depending on the training and experience of their authors, the writing of history does not require skills that are beyond the reach of secondary school students. This assumption gives rise to the confidence that a project in which students are the producers, rather than the consumers, of histories is feasible. A learning resource aiming at the production of histories by students needs to provide them with opportunities to acquire the skills that would facilitate their task. At the same time it needs to help build their confidence by refuting the idea that only specialists have what it takes to write history.

But while no specialised knowledge is needed to identify historical evidence, and then to turn it into history, the process of doing history is nevertheless complex and laborious. Regardless of whether one’s historical evidence is found by interrogating archival sources or by interviewing eyewitnesses, the gathering and interpreting of evidence is time-consuming. Even when historical documents are only a mouse-click away, they still need to be read and interpreted, and linked to
other pieces of evidence. The digitisation of archival sources facilitates access to them, but it does not otherwise speed up the process of doing history. Neither does it provide a magic wand for making students historically literate. The electronic format of the learning resource has no bearing on what Robert Hassan calls the ‘temporal dimension’ of the cognitive process (2003, p. 114). A learning resource encouraging students to be historians needs to stress that point. If the learning resource is to be used in the context of the classroom, then teachers need to be strongly encouraged to budget what may seem to them to be an undue amount of time for its use.

Most historical research is conducted in response to external stimuli: be it a commission, the invitation to contribute an article, a looming anniversary or a funding opportunity. Yet even commissioned research hardly ever proceeds exactly according to a preconceived plan, and is instead more likely to be driven by the curiosity of the researcher. A student’s curiosity triggered by her own sense of surprise is more productive than her dutiful response to a teacher’s questions—particularly, when these questions aim to elicit ‘correct’ answers. The authors of a learning resource aimed at facilitating the production of histories need to allow for the outcomes to be determined by the user’s curiosity rather than by their own.

Not all historical research is driven by curiosity. Historians who do research merely to illustrate (rather than prove) a point are only looking for evidence in support of their arguments. They know of the outcome of their research projects well in advance. Their approach is akin to that of authors whose secondary school textbooks employ historical evidence only to illustrate historical narratives (while sometimes pretending that students interpreting the evidence would arrive at results that are independent of the narratives framing the evidence). Students pursuing open-ended research projects need to have access to a sufficient amount and variety of material: the smaller the available data, the more likely it is that the direction and results of the historical research process are predetermined. They also need to be empowered to ask their own questions (and to seek their own answers).

At a time when the concept of reality television has been extended to allow viewers to become part of the lives of families in war-time Britain or in nineteenth-century Australia, it is important to stress that we can never fully know the past because we cannot relive it. Information technology facilitates access to historical documents but it does not improve our chances of gaining
unmediated access to the past. A learning resource that allows students to access a large body of historical evidence also needs to guard against the illusion that primary sources in themselves constitute history, or that history is the more authentic, the more the historian makes use of verbatim quotes from primary sources.

The following two assumptions concern the nature of history’s subject matter:

7. The past is different from the present.
8. Historical processes are inherently complex.

Students are often motivated to learn about the past for either of two reasons: because they are fascinated by the strangeness of the past, or because they are attracted by the purported compatibility of past and present. Teachers routinely try to draw on present concerns to make history palatable, using the standards of today to pass judgment on yesterday’s actions. Textbooks and teaching resources abound with questions beginning with ‘What would you have done if...’ and with invitations to condemn our forebears as cruel or racist, without either identifying the contemporary contours of cruelty or racism, or drawing attention to the fact that our criticism of past generations functions to make us feel virtuous. I prefer to avoid misleading anachronisms to make the past palatable and instead focus on the extra-ordinariness of historical phenomena. My own experience as a teacher suggests that the engagement with a past that startles the students on account of its strangeness is more productive in the long term than the familiarising of the past (whether by making it appear to be contemporary, or by explaining away phenomena that could surprise or disturb the students). Only that which cannot easily be assimilated prompts a closer and pensive look (Rumpf 2002, p. 4).

A learning resource that allowed students to understand the past as different from the present would introduce them to history’s immanent complexity. But shouldn’t sixteen-year-olds be spared the confrontation with such complexity and instead be treated to a simplified version of history? To me, the abundance of such simplified versions in public debate suggests otherwise. In his memoirs, the literary critic and philosopher George Steiner reflected on his own education, and on the excitement of being challenged by something he did not initially comprehend:
But the vortex was spinning, the irradicable intimation of a world new to me in depth. I vowed to try again. This is the point. To direct a student’s attention towards that which, at first, exceeds his grasp, but whose compelling stature and fascination will draw him after it. Simplification, levelling, watering down, as they now prevail in all but the most privileged education, are criminal. They condescend fatally to the capacities unbeknown within ourselves. Attacks on so-called elitism mask a vulgar condescension: towards all those judged a priori to be incapable of better things (Steiner 1997, p. 45).

The last two assumptions concern the relationship between the authors of a web-based learning resource, and its users:

9. *The learning resource provides skills training, rather than information about the past.*

10. *Ideally, the relationship between those authoring the learning resource and those using it is dialogic.*

It may be difficult to justify the time that would have to be devoted to using a learning resource aimed at facilitating the production of histories in terms of the resource’s content—the more so since it is useful to focus on relatively obscure topics in order to give students the sense that they are able to discover the past. But in my view, the content of the resource is merely a vehicle that allows the student to become historically literate, that is, to learn about how to do research and how to write history. Given this emphasis on the acquisition of generic skills, however, it is important that a problematisation of historical methodology is an integral part of the learning resource (and not merely introduced by stealth, as if the resource were solely about a particular aspect of the past).

As a means of promoting historical literacy, the learning resource needs to engage its users in a conversation about the nature and writing of history. It is conceivable that that conversation takes place in a chat room or on a webpage where users can post comments. Irrespective of such attempts to make the learning resource interactive, I envisage an—admittedly imaginary—dialogue between the historian writing the site, and the user. Part of that dialogue would need to be anticipated at the writing and design stage. Ironically, the reflexivity required to facilitate this dialogue would lead to the historian as author being more rather than less present. But it would also
make that presence visible, and something the student can directly engage with. Graeme Davison has drawn attention to the danger that electronic databases could ‘be more coercive than the explicitly didactic text of the book’ (1997, p. 4). I am confident the narrative formats that hypertext allows make possible a degree of reflexivity which more than matches what is possible in a book, and that these formats provide space for a dialogue which encourages students to develop their own questions and search for their own answers.

The Probe! Website

The proposed website consisted of nine interrelated modules. Each of them was to focus on a case study of aspects of Australia’s restricted immigration policies between 1945 and 1973. They included, among others, the indentured labour system in the pearling industry, trafficking and Chinese illegal immigration, the deportation of the non-European spouses of Australians under Arthur Calwell, and Australia’s response to the expulsion of Uganda’s South Asians in 1972.

The pilot module agreed to by the project partners was to feature the immigration of Mauritians between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. It was particularly suitable for several reasons. First, the issues involved are complex and seem to run counter to many popular understandings of the White Australia policy. Most Mauritians who migrated to Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s were gens de couleur, that is of European, and African and/or Indian ancestry. Therefore the module focused on so-called mixed-descent immigration, that is, the migration of people who were neither unambiguously European nor non-European. The mixed-descent policy was difficult to administer: in each individual case, the immigration department had to decide whether or not the applicant was ‘predominantly European’. The selection of Mauritian immigrants before March 1968, when Mauritius became independent, was further complicated by the fact that Australia did not have a permanent representative in the British colony, and that the British colonial administration refused to assist the Australian immigration authorities in determining the ‘racial admixture’ of applicants.

Second, I wanted a case study that the students could not read about in their textbooks, one that did not allow them to relate the primary sources to an already existing authoritative narrative. The topic of Mauritian immigration is therefore deliberately peripheral to the issues that routinely feature in
school curricula in studies of society and the environment (SOSE), Australian history or political studies.

So-called mixed-descent immigration in general, and Mauritian immigration in particular, are rarely if ever mentioned in secondary school history textbooks or in monographs about Australian immigration or postwar Australian history. In 2003 the migration of Mauritians of mixed descent to Australia was discussed in detail only in two texts, both of them in French and not accessible in Australia (Dinan 1985; Adone Resch 2001). Thus the students using the Probe! website would potentially produce original scholarship on a topic neglected by scholars writing about postwar Australian history and politics.

Third, I was looking for a case study that could be introduced in several disciplines. Mauritian emigration and immigration was relevant to existing senior high school curricula for Australian history, political studies, geography, international studies and contemporary Australian society. It was particularly suitable for interdisciplinary project-oriented work. The pilot module could even be adapted for use by students of French.

Fourth, Victoria’s education department had been the first to offer to amend the syllabus for senior level history to accommodate learning resources produced by the Retrieving the Records initiative (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004, pp. 90–1). Because of the comparatively large concentration of Mauritian Australians in Melbourne, a case study focusing on Mauritians seemed particularly apposite.

Fifth, because of the comparative scarcity of published material on Mauritians in Australia and the strong interest expressed by Mauritian community organisations in our project, a focus on Mauritian immigration seemed to guarantee that the website would also attract an audience beyond that of secondary school students and their teachers.

Finally, a case study that focused on the administration of immigration policies, and thus could draw on the immigration experiences of individuals, appeared to be particularly attractive to students. It would allow them to relate to the past, empathise with historical actors, and perhaps
even make ‘personal connections with the world outside school’ (Taylor 2003, p. 186) by learning about the experiences of Mauritians living in the local community. The NAA holds hundreds of immigration case files from the 1960s and early 1970s of Mauritians applying to migrate to Australia. Not only do these files comprise a particularly rich resource, they could also serve to showcase an important part of the NAA’s collection.

If the students were to do history, then the website needed to provide them with the necessary tools and resources. The pilot module’s resources included a large number and great variety of historical sources: archival documents and files, excerpts from documents, newspaper clippings, Hansard extracts, photos, statistics, extracts from audio tapes, and extracts from books and articles. They included more than 100 individual documents, plus another 25 files, each containing about 50 documents on average, from the NAA’s own collection, as well as manuscript and oral history sources from the NLA. All of these were digitised to be loaded onto the website. In addition the website was to contain transcripts of numerous short newspaper articles, extracts from books, and other sources, all of which would be searchable as text documents. The students’ most important tool was to be a database they could use to search for documents, files, newspaper clippings, photos etc. All sources therefore needed to be coded with keywords. The students were also to have access to secondary resources: a who’s who with biographical data about key historical actors; a timeline with key dates to do with Mauritian migration to Australia; a list of abbreviations and acronyms used in government records; a list of synonyms to make it easier for students to do keyword searches on the database; and a historical dictionary that was to include key terms related to the content of the learning resource as well as to historical methodology.

The pilot module’s resources also included contextualising texts and 79 sample research tasks, such as: ‘Write a report about Mauritius based on sources available in 1966. Imagine that you were working for the Department of External Affairs’, or ‘Relate the criteria used by Australian officials assessing Mauritian applicants after 1968 to instructions issued by the Department of Immigration to guide officers of the Departments of Immigration and External Affairs in their assessment of applicants of mixed descent’.
The Probe! modules were designed for two distinct uses: either teacher or student could initiate the research process. A teacher could identify a particular research task (from among the list of 79 tasks), and then ask students to tackle that task by drawing on the database and other tools, and on the contextualising text accompanying the task. The tasks themselves were coded according to five levels of complexity and five disciplinary categories, and according to whether the task required the student to answer a research question, perform a close reading, or do a comparative analysis. Thus the first of the two research tasks cited in the above paragraph was rated 4 (‘complex task; considerable amount of research required’), identified as suitable for both Australian history and political studies, and classified as a research question. Teachers would have been able to access a catalogue of questions for each module, and search for questions suitable for their requirements (for example, for a ‘moderately easy’ ‘comparative analysis’ in the field of ‘Australian history’).

Alternatively, students could explore the site by following pathways. They would start with one particular document (and questions and contextualising text linked to that document), and then, depending on their own interest, make choices about which particular issue they wanted to explore. Alternative options, research tasks and contextualising texts functioned as guides that informed students about where their selections might lead them. A student exploring the module’s pathways would be encouraged to formulate his or her own research task; the catalogue of assignments formulated by the module’s author would assist in that process in that it gave the student an indication about the size and nature of the database and thus about the kinds of tasks that could be tackled successfully with the resources available through the site.

The lengths of the pathways depended on the student’s interest. Depending on a student’s skills and on the amount of time available, the teacher could suggest particular entry points to the pathways, and set a limit as to how many stages a student could traverse. The pathways focused on four subject areas. Four key documents served as the launching pads for questions related to these areas: the formulation of immigration policy; the administration of immigration policy; immigration policy and public opinion; and Mauritian–Australian relations. The key documents signifying these areas included a 1964 Cabinet minute recording the government’s decision to revise the so-called mixed-descent policy; the assessment of a prospective migrant by an Australian immigration official visiting Mauritius as a member of an Australian visa mission in 1968; comments the
former Leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, made in 1972 about Mauritian immigrants and
the spectre of a chocolate-coloured Australia; and the report an Australian government minister,
Annabelle Rankin, wrote about Mauritius after visiting the country to attend its independence
celebrations in 1968.

The routes taken by students depended on their individual curiosity: for example, a student initially
curious about and beginning her investigation with the document showing an Australian visa
team’s assessment of a prospective Mauritian immigrant could, depending on her interest, learn
about the terms used by Australian immigration officers to distinguish between ‘predominantly
European’ and ‘predominantly non-European’ applicants from Mauritius, or find out about
comparable assessments in South Asia, or learn about the legislation underpinning this distinction.
In pursuit of the latter option, she could then, for example, learn about the politician responsible for
introducing changes to the so-called mixed-descent rule, Hubert Opperman, and his term as
Minister for Immigration. In pursuit of her exploration of Opperman’s biography she might stumble
upon extracts from an interview in which he reflected on the politicisation of the public service
(Opperman 1983–1984, tape 10a), and decide to focus in her research on Opperman’s views on the
autonomy of the Department of Immigration (comparing it, perhaps, with the role the Department
played more recently in the so-called children overboard affair).

Problems

Several of the ideas sketched above do not sit easily with current trends in history education and
website design. They run counter to how the Internet is now often used by secondary school
students. Internet-based teaching resources often promise faster and more immediate access to
information. Probe!’s pace is deliberately sedate; the material that could be accessed by students
through Probe! could not easily be slotted into existing narratives, nor used to fill blanks in
students’ knowledge.

The concept summarised above pays comparatively little attention to how students would use a
resource such as Probe!. Would they be encouraged by the format of the learning resource to
produce assignments that shun conventional historical narrative and offer multiple explanations
instead of a linear argument (see Snyder 1996, pp. 112–14)? How compatible would such
assignments be with what students are required to produce in their all-important end-of-school exams?

The development of a web-based learning resource is comparatively expensive. For the NAA, secondary school students are only one of several key target groups. Therefore the development of a resource that focused on one very specific issue in Australian politics and history and was aimed principally at students (as self-directed learners) rather than at teachers, that was complex and time consuming and therefore difficult to integrate into an existing syllabus, and that required teachers to allow their students to pursue tasks almost entirely for the sake of acquiring generic research and writing skills, could be seen as an excessive use of scarce resources.

Because of the expense involved in developing a fully functional website, the NAA has understandably been anxious to seek feedback from potential users as early as possible. Users asked to comment on a concept that seemed to run counter to established practice but unable to test an application of that concept are understandably sceptical about it, and likely to recommend that it incorporate elements of established practice (that is, the use of archival sources as illustrations of historical narratives taught by the teacher).

While teachers may be less adept at using web-based resources than their students, the latter are usually not expected to make informed comments about the pedagogical implications of such resources; thus the users invited to review the resource before it has reached a level of functionality that would have allowed it to be tested are more likely to be teachers than students. Teachers are understandably reluctant to embrace a resource that puts students in charge of producing histories, particularly in subject areas with which the teachers themselves are not very familiar. Teachers may also be hesitant to rely heavily on a web-based learning resource because they are often far less skilled in navigating websites and using software packages than their students.

Recent controversies about the content of the permanent exhibition in the National Museum of Australia have drawn attention to the Howard government’s expectations of the role of national cultural institutions (see, for example, Macintyre & Clark 2004, pp. 191–215). These institutions are increasingly expected to assist the process of national identity formation by promoting patriotic historical narratives. An ambitious website development focusing on restricted immigration
policies could be seen to promote a ‘black armband’ view of history by drawing undue attention to a purportedly shameful chapter of Australia’s past, which could not fit easily into a patriotic history.

Keith Windschuttle, one of the principal combatants in the so-called history wars, has already attacked Henry Reynolds and other historians for implying that the White Australia policy was ‘some morally repugnant product of the Australian past from which we should cringe or [for which we should] apologise’ (2004, p. 9). Critics sharing sentiments most famously articulated by Prime Minister John Howard and New South Wales Premier Bob Carr (see Clark 2003, pp. 191–2) might also accuse a project such as Probe! of neglecting to provide students with essential facts about Australia’s past by preferring to use obscure themes and historical instances to promote historical literacy.

Governments tend to be sensitive about histories that could be read—even remotely—as implicit criticisms of their policies. Given that many critics of the Howard government’s refugee and asylum seeker policies have tried to link mandatory detention and the Pacific solution to the White Australia policy, the proposed learning resource could have been seen to be providing ammunition for those seeking to establish a link between widely discredited policies of the 1950s and 1960s and those developed and administered by the current Department of Immigration.

Successful internet-based learning resources relate macrohistorical developments to the experiences of individuals. Students are likely to find the immigration case files of individual Mauritian migrants more interesting than policy files. But should government files about individuals be made accessible through an internet-based learning resource? Over the past 35 years, the NAA has developed a comparatively liberal access policy for records older than 30 years (see Stokes 1994). More than 95 per cent of all immigration case files I viewed at the National Archives are accessible in their entirety. These files contain not only personal details about prospective immigrants, but also references from employers, medical records, the results of departmental investigations to ascertain the bona fides of sponsors in Australia, and comments by immigration and external affairs officers about applicants’ physical appearance and character. At present, under the NAA’s digitisation on demand service, anybody can request that a file in open access be digitised and
placed on the NAA’s RecordSearch database. But the use of such files for a learning resource presents ethical problems and raises privacy issues which at present cannot be solved by recourse to NAA policies and guidelines.

Government agencies such as the National Archives identify as corporate bodies operating in a market environment. Citizens who avail themselves of government services are nowadays often thought of as customers, and the services themselves as commodities. In order to attract new audiences, cultural institutions run campaigns that are similar to those of companies trying to extend their customer base. If an institution such as the NAA conceived of secondary school students and teachers as potential customers, and of a learning resource as a product that needs to be sold to them, it would run the risk of striving for marketability. Pedagogical considerations that cannot be translated into selling points may then matter less than features that appeal to the target audience and make history less boring, leading to an emphasis on speed, spectacle and fun.13

Outlook

The NAA decided not to pursue a website development along the lines of the Probe! model. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify the precise combination of factors that have militated against Probe!’s realisation. All of the problems mentioned above may have had some bearing on the NAA’s decision to create the Vrroom site (see Cath Styles’s contribution in this volume) and thus proceed with a concept different from the one advanced in this paper. It should be noted, however, that, while pragmatic considerations loomed large in controversial discussions about the Probe! model, the NAA has never questioned the assumptions made in the first part of this paper.

A key difference between the Probe! model and the Vrroom site that is currently being developed by the NAA is marked by the change of title: while the imperative ‘Probe!’ could be associated with the careful yet insistent search for and interpretation of historical evidence characteristic of the work of historians and archaeologists, the acronym ‘Vrroom’ connotes drag races and video games. It is the thrill of being in command of a powerful engine (and thus dependent on a vehicle and its horsepower), rather than the excitement of discovery. ‘Probe!’ connotes a careful reading, whereas ‘Vrroom’ appears to advocate a scanning at breakneck speed.14
Irrespective of the Probe! model’s feasibility, it is worth exploring further whether or not history teachers (and the authors of websites for secondary school history students) need to do more to counter the idea that the past, too, is now instantly accessible through the web, and that the production of history can be sped up with the help of internet-based resources.

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National Archives of Australia


Cabinet Minute, decision no. 481, 15 September 1964, NAA: A446, 1970/95021.


Additional websites

http://www.collectionscanada.ca/education
http://www.foundingdocs.gov.au
Notes

1 The three-year project has been funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant, by Swinburne University of Technology and by the National Archives of Australia. The project’s team includes, among others, Denise Meredith and Julian Thomas (as chief investigators) and myself from Swinburne University’s ISR, and Margaret Kenna (as partner investigator), Beatrice Barnett, Cath Styles and Tikka Wilson from the NAA.

2 Given the scope of this paper, I am not able to carefully argue how I arrived at these assumptions. They betray the influence my teacher Horst Rumpf has had on my thinking about learning and teaching (see, for example, Rumpf 1981, 1986, 2004), and, more generally, reflect my training and practice as an educator. They also reflect my practice as an ethnographic historian: when doing research in Papua New Guinea, I became distrustful of the authority historians take for granted when mediating a community’s understanding of its past (see Neumann 1996).

3 I believe that a specialist training is not an essential prerequisite for anybody wishing to successfully research and write history (see Kingston 2004, p. 83). But if it were, then, in Australia at least, a higher degree in history would not necessarily be sufficient proof of having undergone such training, as the overwhelming majority of undergraduate and postgraduate history subjects focus on content rather than on historical theory and methodology; also, many Australian students are able to major in history without having undergone intensive training in the search for and reading of written primary sources, the conducting and interpreting of oral history interviews, and the writing of historical non-fiction.

4 Some of the literature on hypertext is reminiscent of—if not paying homage to (see Taylor & Saarinen 1994)—the futurist manifestos of the early twentieth century; speed is both reified and identified as a key outcome of the cybertechnological revolution.

5 Cameron Paterson has pointed out that history teachers ask too many, and their students too few questions (Paterson 1999, p. 4).

6 Here, ‘interactivity’ refers also to interactions among users, and between users and the creators of the website, and not just to interactions between users and machines. For a critique of the reductive understanding of inter-activity, see Porombka (2001, p. 139).

7 The Probe! website was never realised. Key components and much of the text I wrote for it, however, found their way into the pilot research module of the Vrroom website developed by the NAA and Link Web Services (http://vrroom.naa.gov.au). See Cath Styles’s paper in this volume. Probe! was the name chosen by the NAA team for the website development referred to in this paper; the renaming of the project signalled both a departure from elements of Probe!’s conceptual design and the end of the ISR’s involvement in the website development.

8 I wrote the text for the first module, and was committed to writing research papers about all case studies, which would then assist the NAA in writing the texts for other modules (see Neumann 2004, 2005).


13 The results of a national survey conducted by the University of Technology (Sydney) show that many Australians experience history in schools as boring (Ashton & Hamilton 2003). On fun as a new pedagogical goal, see Rumpf (2004, pp. 34–6).

14 Vrroom’s creators may not have intended to make students think of historical research as something akin to a drag race. But the acronym Vrroom does not easily lend itself to other associations. Incidentally, the NAA’s own promotional material draws on the association between the acronym and fast cars (Anon. 2005).