

Anna Clark: Teaching National Narratives and Values in Australian Schools¹

In 2004 Prime Minister John Howard and his then Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, launched the National Framework for Values Education. The prime minister had earlier criticised public schools for being ‘too politically correct and too values neutral’, and was keen to recast Australian values at the centre of this major new education policy. In their joint media release, he and Nelson announced that \$31 billion of federal education funding would be tied to the implementation of the framework. ‘This is a major investment in Australia’s future,’ they promised. ‘It will leave us better equipped to face the global future and help us build on our long traditions of innovation and technical excellence.’²

But this ‘investment in Australia’s future’ was dogged by persistent public and political debate. It wasn’t the sentiment of the framework itself that was controversial. Its nine values—care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility, and understanding, tolerance and inclusion—are I think genuine.³ The problem was the government’s insistence that ‘Australianness’ was somehow *beyond dispute*. While there is certainly powerful political and public pressure to define an uplifting national character for young people, I think there’s *even more* value in letting them analyse such ideas themselves. And perhaps unsurprisingly, many of them say just that.

Simpson and his values

When Brendan Nelson re-launched his government’s National Framework for Values Education following the London terrorist bombings in 2005, he again outlined the values he felt all Australian children should learn. And he did so by explicitly linking them to Australia’s Anzac legacy. Nelson designed a poster of the values ‘and over the top of it’, he said, ‘I’ve superimposed Simpson and his donkey as an example of what’s at the heart of our national sense of emerging identity’.⁴ The story of the unarmed digger and his donkey rescuing wounded soldiers at Gallipoli was the essence of our national character, insisted Nelson, ‘and he represents everything that’s at the heart of what it means to be an Australian’.⁵

Nelson drew an unbroken bond between teaching Australian values today and the iconic image of the Anzac, and it’s precisely this apparent continuum between this founding moment and our current identity that I want to examine in this paper. In particular, I’m interested in public debates about teaching national values to young people, and how students themselves think about these issues. Last year I conducted interviews with over 200 history teachers and students from around the country about their attitudes to Australian history and identity. They form the basis of this response to the government’s values framework.

Nelson’s invocation of Simpson and his Donkey certainly reflected the opinions of many students I have spoken for this project. When I interviewed a group of students at an independent girls’ school in Perth, they explicitly tied the importance of the Anzac story to themselves individually and to the nation:

Do you think it’s important to learn about Australians at war?

Amanda: Yeah I think it’s good to learn like how we get all our mateship.

¹ A revised version of this paper was published in *Agora*, no. 1 vol. 43, 2008: 4-9.

² John and Brendan Nelson Howard, ‘The Australian Government’s Agenda for Schools-Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity,’ (Brendan Nelson Media Centre, 2004).

³ Curriculum Corporation, ‘Values Education Study Final Report,’ (Carlton South, VIC: Curriculum Corporation, 2003); Science and Training Department of Education, ‘A Draft National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools’ (2004); Andrew Fraser, ‘Parents fly the way on poles,’ *Canberra Times*, 29 June 2004.

⁴ Samantha Hawley, ‘Brendan Nelson addresses Islamic schools on Australian values’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 24 August 2005 [cited 22 September 2005]); available from <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1445094.htm>.

⁵ Samantha Hawley, ‘Teach Australian values or “clear off”, says Nelson’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 24 August 2005 [cited 22 September 2005]); available from <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2005/s1445262.htm>; Ben Haywood, ‘Battlelines drawn on values,’ *Age*, 4 September 2005.

Mel: It's like a real Aussie tradition kind of thing.

Amanda: It's sort of where we got our identity.⁶

I've actually been surprised by just *how many* students assume this militarised national identity as intrinsically Australian. Ryan, a year 12 student at a public school on the NSW Central Coast, also identified strongly with Australia's military history. 'Gallipoli was a defining moment in our history', he said. 'I know it sounds clichéd, but we need to develop a sense of who we are. It's important to know what our heritage was.'⁷ At a boys' school in Adelaide Declan talks about his connection in similar terms: 'Most people say that you shape the country with the way you fight your battles and what comes from that. People are always talking about Australia's freedom is because we fought at Gallipoli and WWII.' He also wondered whether it was a topic that more boys than girls would connect with: 'I don't know, maybe it's just boys and guns, and we could kind of relate to it as 18 yr old guys going to war for the country'.⁸

But it isn't just boys who speak with such reverence. When I asked a group of year 10 students from a public school in Hobart whether they enjoyed learning about Australia's war history, it was the girls who spoke up first. Julia said she like the topic 'because they're fighting for *us*. If they weren't fighting Gallipoli, we wouldn't be where we are today.'⁹ At another Hobart school, the girls were just as positive. Ali said that 'I think our culture is really shaped by that [the wars]. Even though it seems a long time ago, you can relate certain aspects of the Anzac legend today'. Her classmate Deslie agreed: 'Like the whole "mateship" and everything, it's so Aussie'.¹⁰

Of course, there are many political and social readings that help explain what appears to be a growing pride and affection in Australia's military history. Commentators such as the sociologist Irving Saulwick suggest that Anzac Day provides an important ritual for young people to believe in and connect with in an increasingly secular age.¹¹ Meanwhile, historians such as Marilyn Lake and Clare Wright claim that our current political climate has enshrined a conservative commemoration of our past.¹²

I'm not sure to what extent this attraction with the Anzac Legend by young Australians is simply the result of conservative populism. Both federal and state Labor governments have certainly helped forge the Anzac hero's mythic status today (and I even remember as a high school student when Keating emotively kissed the ground at Kokoda track). It's clear that irrespective of party politics, Anzac Day is 'good' politics—it's a powerful public commemoration where national myth and Australian history have become inextricably entwined.

But when the values framework was re-launched by Nelson in 2005, Australia's identity was portrayed in very exclusive terms. Nelson reminded his constituents that if they didn't agree with national character espoused by Simpson (or his donkey), they should reconsider their place in Australian society. 'If you want to be in Australia, if you want to raise your children in Australia, we fully expect those children to be taught and to accept Australian values and beliefs,' Nelson insisted. 'We want them to understand our history and our culture, the extent to which we believe in mateship and giving another person a hand up and a fair go. Basically, if people don't want to be Australians and they don't want to live by Australian values and understand them, well, basically, they can clear off.'¹³

It was certainly an unfortunate use of 'we' and 'them' to describe the importance of values such as giving everyone a 'fair go' and showing 'understanding, tolerance and inclusion'. Unsurprisingly, given the timing and the tone of his remarks, Muslim schools furiously defended

⁶ Interview with students, independent girls school, Perth, 24 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

⁷ 'Ryan', public high school, NSW Central Coast, 22 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

⁸ 'Declan', Catholic boys school, Adelaide, 15 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

⁹ 'Julia', public high school, Hobart 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

¹⁰ Interview with students, independent co-educational school, Hobart, 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

¹¹ Cited in Graeme Davison, 'The Habit of Commemoration and the Revival of Anzac Day,' *Australian Cultural History*, no. 22 (2003): 80.

¹² Marilyn Lake, 'The Howard history of Australia,' *Age*, 20 August 2005; Clare Wright, 'Placing the answer before the question betrays a closed mind', *The Age*, 13 September 2006.

¹³ Matthew Pinkney, 'Values, by jingoism!', *Herald-Sun*, 29 August 2005.

their existing curriculum approaches, and insisted that they already taught Australian values to their students. Silma Ihram, the principal of the Noor Al Houda Islamic College in Sydney, said that ‘Every community has to prove their value to Australian society and our students are doing that.’¹⁴

Others wanted to know why Simpson had been chosen to represent contemporary Australian society. ‘Whose Australia and whose values are they talking about?’ asked the editorial in Melbourne’s *Age*. They felt that the 90-year-old tale of Simpson and his donkey was of ‘marginal relevance in 21st-century Australia, a society that reflects a range of social, political and religious values that inform the sum of its parts’.¹⁵ A number of commentators also reminded their readers that Simpson was actually a foreign national, a unionist and a queue jumper. Brendan Nicholson wrote in *The Age* that ‘If John Simpson Kirkpatrick, the Government’s icon of choice for mateship, had arrived in Australia this year instead of almost 100 years ago, he could have wound up in a detention centre for illegal immigrants’.¹⁶

Taking the critique into the classroom

The issue wasn’t with the values themselves, then, for their sentiments are undoubtedly worthy and genuine. The danger comes when any other interpretation is deemed unacceptable, or worse, ‘unAustralian’. There is a real pressure for governments and education departments to define Australia’s identity and its values to the next generation, but I hope there’s still some scope for them to be nipped out in class, rather than simply prescribed.

This isn’t rocket science. Teachers and students around the country already do precisely that (it’s just that their voices so rarely permeate this very public and political contest over the past). Ophelia, who goes to school in Adelaide, explained in her interview how she had *enjoyed* being able to critique and discuss the significance of Australia’s Anzac heroes. ‘I think for me what was interesting was we got onto Australian identity’, she said. ‘And, because everyone’s like, “Oh yeah, the digger, that is a true Australian”, we sort of went through and decided if we agreed with the principals that everyone thinks what an Australian is.’¹⁷

Jiang, a year 11 student from Brisbane, enjoyed studying Australians at war because ‘there are a lot of different perspectives from which you can actually look at it’. Like Ophelia, she appreciated the different points of view her teacher brought to the topic. In ‘primary school they tell you “this is what happened, this is what our men were like, and this is just the basic idea”. Whereas now it’s like, “did this really happen?” and just the whole critical thinking thing that’s been incorporated.’ Lauren agreed: ‘I think that in primary school we did the same thing, but this year we’ve sort of branched out a lot, and looked at it in a lot more detail’. In particular, she liked looking at ‘Australia’s kind of position on the global scale with all the alliances and all that’.¹⁸

In other words, lots of kids don’t want a parochial Anzac story. And indeed many of them enjoy studying Australians at war precisely because it’s ‘branched out a lot’, to use Lauren’s phrase. In Canberra, Felicity explained that she didn’t like learning history in years 9 and 10 so much because it was ‘only really the Australian side’. It was ‘just such a one-sided thing’, she said. ‘Whereas in year 11 and 12 you’re looking at every perspective.’¹⁹ At a Catholic boys’ school in Brisbane two year 12 students also discussed how Australian history shouldn’t be told as a simplistic narrative: ‘It’s very sort of propaganda-ish, isn’t it?’, asked Brendan. Andrew paused for dramatic effect, then joked, ‘They’re toying with our minds!’²⁰

One particular interview springs to mind here: when I visited an independent girls’ school in Canberra, I was taken by a conversation between two girls about the need to learn Australia’s war history. Morgan was insistent on its importance. ‘I think war defines us’, she said. ‘It’s just part of our history and we need to know it.’ Annie wasn’t so sure:

¹⁴ Lillian Saleh, ‘We are good Aussies—Muslim schools defend the values they teach,’ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 August 2005.

¹⁵ Editorial, ‘Chasing the donkey vote on values,’ *The Age*, 26 August 2005.

¹⁶ Brendan Nicholson, ‘Spinning the tale on Simpson’s story,’ *The Age*, 26 August 2005.

¹⁷ ‘Ophelia’, co-educational independent school, Adelaide, 14 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

¹⁸ Interview with students, independent girls’ school, Brisbane, 24 July 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

¹⁹ ‘Felicity’, independent girls’ school, Canberra, 17 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²⁰ Interview with students, Catholic boys’ school, Brisbane, 25 July 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

I kind of think though, not to be completely unpatriotic or whatever, but we have a very American outlook on it. Like when they teach Australian history they're like, 'Oh Australians finally got into the war and we got at chance at the world and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah'. But the actual emphasis of the war was that it started in Europe, so the action was in Europe, and it's involving all the European countries.²¹

I was quite struck by the way these girls discussed the influence of war on Australia's national character *themselves*. As they continued their discussion it became clear that they wouldn't come to a defining image of Australia's identity—nor should they be forced to. At times, they were so insistent about presenting their point of view that they seemed to forget I was there altogether.

It's critical that this space the Canberra girls had for discussion is preserved, that any effort to promote Australian values doesn't *preclude* debate about them in class. So it's not the teaching of values to Australian children that is problematic, or even the pride that so many of them obviously have in their heroic representation. The limitation stems from whether these ideas tend to lock in an exclusive understanding of Australian history and identity, or whether they can be launching pads for its very discussion in class. Legends such as Simpson and his donkey may have helped galvanise public interest in the Anzac story. But unless there is space for these figures to be critically analysed in class there is a risk they will come to represent a very narrow interpretation of Australia's history and identity.

And that's exactly what many teachers say too. As Jenny, a teacher at a public high school in suburban Brisbane explains, kids are naturally connected to Australia's military history, but they can respond even better when they're critically engaged. She says students are 'often happy to be engaged with' Australians at war because these historical periods are 'also points of contrast,' she adds, 'which kids often hold onto in terms of differing opinions and how things are represented differently by different sources'.²² When former Perth teacher Jan Bishop reflected on what her students had enjoyed most about Australian history, she said they tended to remember the questions it raised in class. They would often say things like 'Well look, we thought it was going to be boring but we actually liked that bit about conscription and we liked the debate we had about the Anzac Legend, was it a myth not?'²³

In fact, several teachers explained how they try to achieve this 'balance' to their history classes. At a public high school in Adelaide, Lara says that she always teaches about Australia's war history 'and the students enjoy it', but 'I won't teach it as a wonderful promotion of the Anzac Legend', she adds. 'I mean, that is part of it and it shaped our national identity, but there are parts of that national identity that are not all that great, you know, there's negative and positive aspects, and I would always teach a balance in my class.'²⁴ Andrew, a teacher at an independent school in Hobart talked about his teaching in similar terms: 'we give them a balanced view', he said. 'We like to think it's a very balanced view rather than geared towards one side.'²⁵

That doesn't mean the Anzac story isn't important to learn, however. 'Of course it's important', says Tanya, a history teacher near Darwin. 'I mean the whole Anzac myth and Anzac Legend needs to be explained to them, especially when teaching them history, you're also making relevant links to the present and why we're here'.²⁶

Many Australians believe history should be a source of pride, and that kids should have an affirming national story with appropriate heroes and values to aspire to. But are we actually any closer to defining what it means to be 'Australian'? The values framework certainly refined and presented worthy ideals, but it quickly became bogged down in a politicised and exclusive debate over national identity. The Anzac revival has clearly resonated with many students. And it's clear

²¹ Interview with students, independent girls school, Canberra, 17 August 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²² 'Jenny' history teacher, public high school, Brisbane, 25 July 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²³ Jan Bishop, former history teacher, Perth, 23 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²⁴ 'Lara', history teacher, public high school, Adelaide, 13 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²⁵ 'Andrew', history teacher, independent co-ed school, Hobart, 3 May 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

²⁶ 'Tanya', history teacher, public high school, NT, 22 June 2006. (Notes in possession of author.)

that as kids flock to honour Australia's wartime past, their growing commemoration of Simpson and other Anzac legends in the classroom needs to be accommodated. But it needs to be done so that their own understandings and values are expanded rather than limited to a simplistic and uncontested national narrative. As long as there's social and political pressure to define our national character, surely the best way for students to deal with contrasting ideas about Australian history and identity is to bring the discussion into the classroom. That way they can actually *contribute* to the debate itself.