

ROUND TABLE

**TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY MIDDLE EAST HISTORY
SURVEY COURSE****Making the Foreign Past Real: Teaching and Assessing
Middle Eastern History in Australia**

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Teaching modern Middle East history at the University of Melbourne raises problems of culture. Students are not generally acquainted with the Middle East and North Africa—even those whose families originate there—news coverage is patchy, and Australia is far away. Not all students are even arts students let alone history majors: our degree structure requires interdisciplinary study. The University is liberal about how to assess students, only requiring that during a twelve-week semester subject a student must write 4000 words. Within broad bounds, how teachers do this is up to them, although the Arts Faculty has a culture of avoiding unseen examinations. History major students are very accustomed to the “traditional” researched essay format, but it does not provide much variety of intellectual training; it is unfamiliar to non-Arts students; in classes that regularly number over 100 students, it is tiring and boring to assess; and large numbers of essays are freely available online. So I have introduced an assessment task to replace the standard researched essay. The purpose here is to describe an alternative approach to assessment and learning by using a simulation: in that sense the actual *topic* of the simulation is secondary. It concerns refugees, which is of course, a matter of vital current concern, but it is the reasoning behind the task that I hope is instructive.

**1. Refugees and political asylum: the expert witness project
described**

In this simulation, students role-play an expert witness in a refugee appeal tribunal, writing a report to explain the circumstances surrounding a refugee’s flight. This replicates the British refugee appeals system (which resembles Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and other common-law countries), where lawyers for a refugee appealing against a

refusal to grant political asylum, commission an expert witness for a report contextualizing the flight. Students write a report like this.

They choose one from about twenty cases, representing most countries in the Middle East and North Africa. They have two documents: the refugee's letter of application, detailing family background, ethnicity, political ideology and the events leading up to the flight; and a letter written from a Home Office civil servant explaining why the application has been rejected. Both follow the regular format of such letters. Students must deal with the points raised in both documents by referring to their content and to the general historical context. Following the structure real-life expert-witness reports commonly use, they divide their report into two sections:

Part A. The general background to the case: the history and political structure of the country of origin as far as it is relevant to this case.

Part B. The implications of the material in part A for the refugee, explaining why this individual is at risk, linking personal experiences to conditions in the country of origin.

The reports must include footnoted citations and a properly organized bibliography.

The cases are real, reconstructed from the determinations of appeal tribunals or higher courts, available online. Individuals are anonymized. I change names (or make up appropriate ones) and adjust personal dates and events, but I respect chronological relativities and social determinants such as class. Someone born in 1975 and married in 1998 becomes someone born in 1977 and married in 2000; a lawyer may become a doctor, but not a carpenter, a port-worker may become a bus driver. I rigidly maintain basic identities—a homosexual remains a homosexual, a Kurdish communist remains a Kurdish communist—and preserve events like demonstrations, mass arrests, and so on. I only choose cases where the appeals tribunal has accepted the account is credible.

I originally chose to emulate the British, not our local Australian, tribunal because until recently far more cases were reported in detail on its website. This is no longer true: those of New Zealand and Australia are now often more informative. I also wanted to avoid the Australian political dispute about refugees and I am familiar with the British system, having done expert witness reports there myself: I know how the documentation looks and can translate suitable cases from other systems.

These projects focus not on the elite, a common failing of histories of the Middle East and North Africa, but on the wider population in order

to understand what has happened there since the mid-twentieth century. I wanted to break away from top-level generalizations and stereotypes that consign the broader population to statistics (literacy, income distribution etc.) or impersonal abstractions such as “the Arab street.” The great waves of refugee flight—4 million Palestinians, 3 million Iraqis, 4 million Syrians—tell us little about the specifics of the regimes that people fled. The huge numbers distract attention from states from which thousands fled, not millions: Libya, Tunisia or Egypt, where the Arab Spring began, or Morocco, where the regime survived intact.

Individual accounts provide detail and nuance. For example, a woman of Palestinian parentage, born in Iraq, married a rising member of the Ba‘ath Party, who lost her husband after the American-led invasion of 2003 (he was kidnapped and never returned), found her remaining family persecuted by Shi‘i militias and fled to Britain in 2006. Her story captures many elements in the history of modern Iraq—Ba‘athist privilege, Saddam’s relationship with the Palestinians, the multifaced Sunni versus Shi‘i violence after 2003. An Egyptian woman, who married a tailor in the late 1950s, faced a half-century of persecution because both were active in the Muslim Brotherhood. They were tortured, exiled to Saudi Arabia for nearly 20 years until her husband died in a suspicious accident and when she returned to Egypt, alone, the secret police repeatedly arrested her. In 2002, she sought refuge in New Zealand where her daughter lived. This now very elderly woman’s story encapsulates the Nasserist state’s long repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. Such accounts shift students’ historical analyses away from the rulers to those who suffered the consequences. Many involve a woman, which allows space to discuss gender as part of an overall pattern.

2. How the students do the project

A student role-playing an expert witness faces “real world” constraints. Expert witnesses must not advocate, they must dispassionately provide well-founded, researched, unemotional and precisely stated evidence. That is sometimes hard for students to do, when dealing with a region in which loyalties and sympathies can be fierce. Accuracy is at a high premium: expert witnesses must not get facts wrong because it shows they are not expert. Tribunals and higher courts reject selective or misrepresentative use of source material, lack of analysis, irrelevance, inaccuracy, inconsistency, and poor referencing. Those are also requirements of a researched essay or paper, but with the difference that, notwithstanding the need for dispassion, these cases *matter*. They are directly relevant in a way that “Why did Saddam’s regime fall in 2003?” is not, because students can and do identify with their

subjects, but avoiding emotion in describing emotive events is a skill that has “real world” considerations.

Students use a wide variety of unpublished sources such as other refugee cases reproduced on different countries’ legal websites, country-specific reports from the US State Department, the UNHCR, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, and material from newspapers and broadcasters. This variety is wider than for most history essays, although it still must be contextualized with the general secondary literature.

I reach a grade by assigning 40 percent of the mark to Section A (general background) and 30 percent to Section B (direct implications for this particular refugee). This covers use of source material, commentary and analysis, and accuracy and relevance. Quality of research makes up 20 percent of the mark: the range of sources and their relevance and suitability. Grammar, writing style and the correct citation of sources receive the final 10 percent. Clearly these overlap: students must think about both discovering knowledge and communicating it.

3. Methodological and practical questions

Most obviously, the project limits plagiarism. Copying written or online sources is useless, because the result would be irrelevant and score poorly and essay banks do not help for the same reason. Over the past five years, checking with *Turnitin* has picked up no demonstrable case of widespread plagiarism. The project is specialized and relies on classroom discussion, so paying someone else to write it would be difficult.

It is easier to grade than a regular essay. Clear requirements and criteria allow a marker to see whether students have covered the most crucial elements, giving a greater differentiation in those mid-grades that are so difficult to assess; good students, who go beyond the essential issues, can be rewarded. Graduate students who often mark these projects have produced consistent results.

The University administers a “Student Experience Survey” online. About 40 percent to 50 percent of students responded in 2014. Most did not go beyond the check-boxes to comment on particular issues. Of those that did, there were two unfavorable comments from students in the history major (they said so without revealing their names), who complained that the project was not what they were used to (“... I have only done essays for the past 3 years and have largely forgotten how to do anything else!”) All the other comments were favourable. One student, not a history major, believed that the assessment structure and concept were much fairer for students who had never taken a history subject before, another that he or she worked

harder because the project was more difficult than the “standard research essay.” Others appreciated the “real world” simulation.

The disadvantage is that it would be hard to adapt this form of assessment to regions without the terrible record of oppression and flight from the Middle East and North Africa and can only work in this format for the period after the Second World War. But this may be an inherent strength, by making the foreign past more real. On the other hand, there is nothing to prevent this particular project being used in other university-level courses surveying the history of the Middle East and North Africa. There are, unfortunately, so very many cases to choose from.