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Australian Tertiary Students' Attitudes to Studying Australian Literature in English Education

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Australian literature, fundamental to an understanding of Australian culture and heritage, is a key resource in the teaching of the subject area of English in Australian schools. However this enquiry found that many Australian students undertaking a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) course in preparation for a career in teaching English exhibited little interest in, or liking for, their country's writings. Four consecutive student intakes of over one hundred pre-service student teachers enrolled in a second year English course which focused on Australian literature, were surveyed as to their attitudes towards this literature prior to the commencement and at the completion of the course. The data offered showed that although there was a positive increase of interest in reading Australian literature for didactic purposes there was little change in attitude to reading such works for personal pleasure. Whilst a positive change in attitude is elusive potential causes of students' disaffection are referred to for continuing reflection.

Introduction

Australian literature is studied in tertiary educational institutions around the world including the United Kingdom, Austria, the United States, and China. In the United Kingdom it is offered principally as a study in postcolonialism in which there is a comparative and cultural focus as exemplified in the interplay between Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Carey's *Jack Maggs* (Colhoun, 2002).

The University of London (Menzie's Centre for Australian Studies, King's College) offers Bachelor of Arts courses in Australian history, literature, and film as well as Master and Doctorate programmes in Australian history and literature. The Master of Arts degree in Australian Studies includes units in Australian literature which offer "exciting insight into the political, economic, social, cultural and external forces which have shaped the modern nation of Australia and which have underpinned its development or posed it with its most critical dilemmas and crises" (Menzie's, 2004, The MA in Australian Studies).

The University of Stirling (English – Centre Of Commonwealth Studies) offers a Master of Arts and Master of Philosophy in *Postcolonial Diasporas: Aboriginal Writing And Painting* and in *Modern Poetry In English: Australian Modernist Poetry And Painting*. (Spencer, 2003, B: Literature). At the University of Belfast (School of English) the Master of Arts

degree in Modern Literary Studies birthed the website *The History and Literature of Australia* which "Aims to provide general background information on the colonial project which began in Australia in the late 18th Century, and which in many ways is still ongoing" and to "provide summaries of political, social and cultural changes brought about by the colonial process, and the effects which these changes have had on the indigenous people of Australia, and also on the colonisers themselves" (Litvack, 2003, p. 1).

Other British institutions offer various Australian literature based courses within English programmes: South Bank University – *Australasian And South Pacific Writing*; University Of Leeds – *Contemporary Australian Fiction & Film*; University of Exeter – *Postcolonial Studies, Australian Studies, Literary Theory*; Manchester Metropolitan University – *Aboriginal Australian and Canadian First Nations Writing: Colonial/Postcolonial Literatures and Theory* including Australia; University Of Hull – *Recent Australian Writing and Film*; and, within American Studies at Manchester University – *Canadian And Australian Literature* (Spencer, 2003, B: Literature).

In the United States of America there is a call for similar comparative studies, albeit placed within the secondary school social studies programmes. In justifying why Australian literature should be included, Prior (1990) stated that "Australian studies offers many opportunities for American teachers and students to analyze critically aspects of their own culture" (p. 2) and suggested that "in world history courses worthwhile comparative examples can include the investigations of trans-Pacific culture flows in film, literature, and popular music, or discussions of issues of assimilation or integration in multicultural societies, or examination of comparative issues in federal-state relations" (p. 8). Prior (1990) also believed that "an inquiry focus on these issues can heighten students' awareness of the universal nature and significance of these concepts" and that "the use of a range of Australian literature, art, films, and visual and oral primary source materials can be a useful entry into an understanding of the values and assumptions underlying Australian culture" (p. 14).

In 1997 Walter, in the ARC Strategic Disciplinary Review on Research & Research Training, also argued that

Australian Studies are particularly useful in directing attention to fundamental cultural questions. Settler societies like Australia are forced to make choices about issues crucial to the nature of culture and society. The general process of cultural and institutional formation are more apparent within a settler society, and thus more open to analysis, because they are inevitably more self-conscious. This gives a particular quality to the 'new' literature, cinema and so on, of the settler society, which amply rewards study (The International Dimension, p. 4).

To emphasise the worldwide recognition of the importance of such studies Walter (1997) chronicles that "Departments with considerable momentum, and with graduate cohorts in Australian Studies have emerged, such as at Klagenfurt and Glasgow (film), Stirling, Beijing Foreign Studies, Bologna and Austin (literature), Edinburgh (history), Pennsylvania State and Tianjin (politics and economics)" (The International Dimension, p. 3).

These indications of overseas interest in Australian literature highlight their value in a range of subject areas. In Australia the study of Australian literature underpins much of education as a whole. In the Queensland secondary English Key Learning Area syllabus

for example, it states under *Learning about equity in and through English* (QSA, 2003, p. 9) that in this curriculum the students are given "opportunities to develop and enhance their knowledge and understanding of how texts construct the diversities of cultures and communities and use different forms and variants of English, both in texts by Australian authors and those from other countries". In responding to this requirement pre-service teacher training programmes for English teachers include courses which focus on Australian literature.

In the new millennium the teaching of Australian literature has become more of a positive experience than that cited by Diamond (1980) when he stated that "with some justification, Australians are often accused of suffering from a literary inferiority complex, while Australian teachers of English, it is alleged, often feel safer with a third-rate English or American book than with a first-rate Australian book" (p. 63). However, Teagus (1999) still saw "some gloom" in teaching Australian literature in an Australian University programme, "Partly this comes from the unwillingness of many students to engage with the demanding and the unfamiliar. It is not often possible in many situations to teach in any methodical historical way the 'canon' of Australian literature" (p. 2). That studying Australian literature has worth for Australian students is not in contention, in fact Teagus (1999) emphasises its significance for them since the history of the nation and confirmation of its independent identity is entwined with the development of narrative writing. However Teagus (1999) concedes that the main reason for teaching Australian literature differs little from the reason it is taught overseas, that is for "the pleasure of the text" (p. 4) and cites "literature's ability to produce human and aesthetic responses that continue to engage, almost irrespective of our methods or talents" as a motivator, as "many of our texts deal with the 'big questions', and despite the compulsions of economic rationalism, people, students included, are still asking them" (p. 4).

Background to teaching literature

In any course which utilises resource material for its basic input, motivating and keeping the students' interest in them is fundamental to successful teaching and learning. When the resources comprise printed texts there is an immediate barrier of reader reluctance to be overcome. This is evidenced by Gioia (2004) who summarises the results of the survey *Reading at risk: A survey of literary reading in America* by saying "literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young" (p. vii). Gioia (2004) also found that "society's massive shift towards electronic media for entertainment and information" which demands less "active attention and engagement" and "fosters shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification" (p. vii), is to blame. The results showed that in 2002 less than half of the adult American population read literature with the loss of 20 million potential readers since 1992 (p. ix). In a survey undertaken in an Australian school environment Manuel and Robinson (2002) found that although 94% of the 12-15 year old students surveyed did "identify at least one hour per day that is spent on reading, both within and outside school" less than half were "reading for pleasure" (p. 71). In fact, only 26% stated that "reading books in their spare time is a preferred activity" while 14.5% "would prefer not to or never read in their spare time" (p. 72).

When *traditional* or *classic* texts are studied in the classroom, there is often a further marked lack of enthusiasm. An exploration by Dean (2003) into why a small group of her college students in a course called *Introduction to the Novel* were uninterested in class discussions about the novel being studied discovered that they came to the course from secondary school study with clearly defined pre-conceived ideas about the point of such an activity. Dean (2003) suggests that this lead to a belief "that books yielded single unified, correct readings. Thus there was nothing new to be learned about reading, and particularly about these books they had read before" (p. 142). Once the structure and symbols of the text had been identified, with a reliance on *Cliffs Notes* and such like primers, the students "knew that neither they nor I could make new knowledge. They did not believe that we could all do anything other than rehearse the knowledge available to us from reading the books in the same way, again". (p. 142).

The resulting apathy is often what teachers of literature confront in their classroom, be it primary, secondary, or tertiary particularly when students are set mandatory texts to read as "even the most exciting pieces of literature lose some of their lustre when they are forced upon readers" (Cope, 1997, p. 22). To posit advice that "a successful literature teacher is enthusiastic about literature and shares that delight with others" (Goforth, 1998, p. 29) and that this "enthusiasm is contagious; young people who are around teachers who share a love for prose, poetry, and drama catch their teacher's delight and express positive reactions toward literary experiences" is appealing and certainly an important aspect of teaching per se but as a solution is somewhat naïve.

The third of the five *General Principles of Motivation* (n.d.) offered by the Faculty Development Site of the Honolulu Community College, which are said to be "applicable to learning in any situation", is that "Internal motivation is longer lasting and more self-directive than is external motivation, which must be repeatedly reinforced by praise or concrete rewards". Gross Davis (1993) gives "interest in the subject matter" as the first of many factors which "affect a given student's motivation to work and to learn" (p. 2). Strong self motivation induces the student to be actively engaged in the learning process.

Strong, Silver, and Robinson (1995) seek to define engagement in learning by using the work of Schlecty (1994), "who says students who are engaged exhibit three characteristics: (1) they are attracted to their work, (2) they persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles, and (3) they take visible delight in accomplishing their work" (p. 1). As attraction to the study of literature or an intrinsic interest in a topic content is a precondition to the process of engagement it is these factors that were surveyed in this case study.

Course case study: An Australian literary studies course

A specific Australian literary studies course was selected for a case study as the students enrolled would seem to be those who would have an optimal need to be interested in Australian literature. Nearly all are native English speakers, have completed Year 12 secondary schooling with at least a Pass in English, and it follows that by their choice of study discipline would have an interest in works of literature. In addition, it would not be naïve to assume that students interested in teaching English would be habitual if not fervent readers.

The course selected is a second year core course for pre-service student teachers preparing to be secondary English teachers. It is one of six English discipline content courses undertaken in the first half of the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) degree. The central objective of this course is to study the Australian experience as presented through written text; the Australian novel, short story and poem. The course is designed to develop within the scope of Australian literature, an appreciation of the texts themselves, proficiency in discrimination as a reader, an understanding of the ways texts are constructed, interpretative skills in the analysis of such text, and a capacity to present discursive, comparative and critical responses.

The course comprises a mass lecture providing an overview of theoretical, historical, and cultural frameworks, which are implemented by formal student presentations and by tutorial discussions. The literary criticisms covered are Historicism & New Historicism; Sociological & Political; Gender; Psychological; and Philosophical. Each literary criticism is explored over a two week period; introduced at a lecture and discussed in the tutorial in the first week; individually applied by the student to a set text in preparation for the second week tutorial discussion; applied in case studies of texts in student lecture presentations and discussed in group activities in the second week. This cycle of guided learning encourages self-directed learning whilst providing supportive scaffolding.

It has been shown that "giving students ownership over their reading has proven to be an incredibly powerful motivation" (Cope, 1997, p. 22) and that "students learn more from things they understand and want to read than when they are being forced to read something of no interest to them" (p. 3). A course, such as the one considered in this study needs careful selection of the set texts to maximise the opportunity to create interest for students. In order to encourage reading of the literature, enthusiasm, and constructive input, the range of both contemporary and non-contemporary literature covered in the course is diverse as is literary format, gender and ethnicity of author, and the nature of social and cultural discourses. Students may exercise a broad choice within a selection of texts to favour their personal preferences and examine these texts from an array of published literary criticisms. The selection provides variety and is intended to provide an introduction to the Australian literary scene. Texts which may be contentious are included as discussion stimuli. Above all there is the intent for students to acquire a certain pleasure in reading and debating Australian literature which is role modelled in the enthusiasm the lecturer and tutors demonstrate for the literature. A student entering the course already passionate about reading and knowledgeable about Australian literature will certainly be in a beneficial situation. But should this be an expectation?

Those enrolled in this course are training to be English teachers but it must be noted that there are not always altruistic reasons for this career choice which is frequently viewed as not demanding! There is always a proportion of the intake which is more interested in such aspects as "the long holidays, level of pay, and status" (Kyriacou, Hultgren, & Stephens, 1999, p. 374) and it must be accepted that the selection of English as one of two areas of discipline studies is not always governed by first choice selection by the students.

Collection and discussion of data

For four years, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004, at the start of the first class of the one semester course students were asked to fill out a written survey form responding to questions about their attitudes to reading and studying Australian literature. A Likert multiple choice scale was offered for each response using student user-friendly terms; room for written comments was also provided. In the last weeks of the one semester course the students were again asked to fill out a survey form in which the same questions were repeated. Students were asked to provide their mother's maiden name on both pre- and post- survey responses so that they could remain anonymous but be able to be matched to the same respondent.

As with all studies using pre/post surveys to gather data there was some problem of "incomplete data sets, where either pre- or the post- only are filled out". (Raidl et al., 2004, p. 1). However disregarding data which was incomplete 111 students (39%) responded to both surveys from 285 students enrolled in the Australian literary studies course in 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

Student responses at start of case study course

As this is a core course for students training to be English teachers and not one chosen by personal preference students were first asked to respond to the statement "I am interested generally in knowing about Australian literature". Sixty-five percent indicated some enthusiasm (49% – "a fair bit"; 17% – "a lot") with 33 % having "little" (26%) or "not much" (7%) interest. Only one student stated no interest "at all".

The next statement in the survey, "I have a personal interest in knowing more about Australian literature—not just because it's a core requirement for English" showed that students' personal interest was less than the previous "general" or "professional" interest, reported above. Only 48% showed some enthusiasm (42% – "a fair bit"; 6% – "a lot") with a higher percentage having "little" interest (42%) and six students having no interest "at all".

In response to "I read Australian literature", 21% admitted to reading "a fair bit" (19%) or "a lot" (2%), 46% to reading it "sometimes", and 30% to only reading "rarely". Four students admitted to "never" reading it.

So although more than half of these students start second year studies having read little Australian literature and without much personal interest in it, there is a general recognition of the importance of its place within their professional studies. Students may not necessarily be passionate readers of the literature but may still have strong general knowledge and interest in the culture from school study or personal involvement. As a core course student achievement is not necessarily dependent on having a passion for the material, but it is these revealed intrinsic motivators which drive active participation in class.

The survey then asked students to self-identify whether they thought they had "a good idea about what characterises Australian people and works". Twenty-six percent were "fairly confident" (23%) or were "definite" (3%) that they did. Another 42% felt that they "knew a bit". However 17% "didn't know" and 13% had "never thought about it". As few international students enrol in this programme these responses indicate a

poor background or low general interest in the students' local and national cultural and social environment.

Students in this course had already undertaken three first year English courses with varying critical theories and text types, but all centred on the critical examination of texts with the focus on becoming critically literate. In response to the statement "I think critically about the literature I read", 65% replied positively with 52% stating "mostly – in a general way" and 12% responding with "definitely". However 25% were only critical thinkers if they "made an effort" and 6% did so only rarely. Two students never thought critically about the literature they read. The above responses would seem to be a positive reflection of what the English program hopes to have achieved at this stage.

Comparison of student responses at end of course

Responses at the start and end of a semester in the course were compared. The figures below show the relative change in attitude of students in each year's cohort in percentage of the total number of students who completed both surveys. The white *Lesser* columns indicate the percentage of students who responded with a higher value response in the pre-course survey than the post-course survey—that is their response had decreased at the end of the course. The hatched *No change* columns show the percentage of students who gave the same response to the same statement in the pre- and post-course surveys. The black *Higher* columns designate the percentage of students who responded with a lower value response in the pre-course survey than the post-course survey—that is their response had increased at the end of the course.

Figure 1 shows the compared responses pre- and post-course to the statement "I am interested generally in knowing about Australian literature". This course required the reading and analysis of a range of Australian literature and the survey indicated an increase in general interest in knowing about Australian literature in 35% of the total number of students over the four years. However there was no change to 51% of the total number of students, that is, their interest remained at the same level and in 13% the interest level was lower at the end of semester than at the start.

Figure 2 shows the compared responses pre- and post-course to the statement "I have a personal interest in knowing more about Australian literature—not just because it's a core requirement for English". As well as a general interest shown above, which would be expected for didactic needs, the survey also showed an increase in the *personal* interest of students in knowing about Australian literature of 37% of the total number of students but recorded no change in the responses of 47%. A lower level of personal interest in reading at the end of semester than at the start was given by 15% of the students.

Figure 3 shows the compared responses pre- and post-course to the statement - "I read Australian literature". Of the total number of students 65% reported that they had been encouraged to increase their enthusiasm for reading of Australian literature, however, 30% responded with no change in their level of interest in reading and 5% responded with a lesser interest.

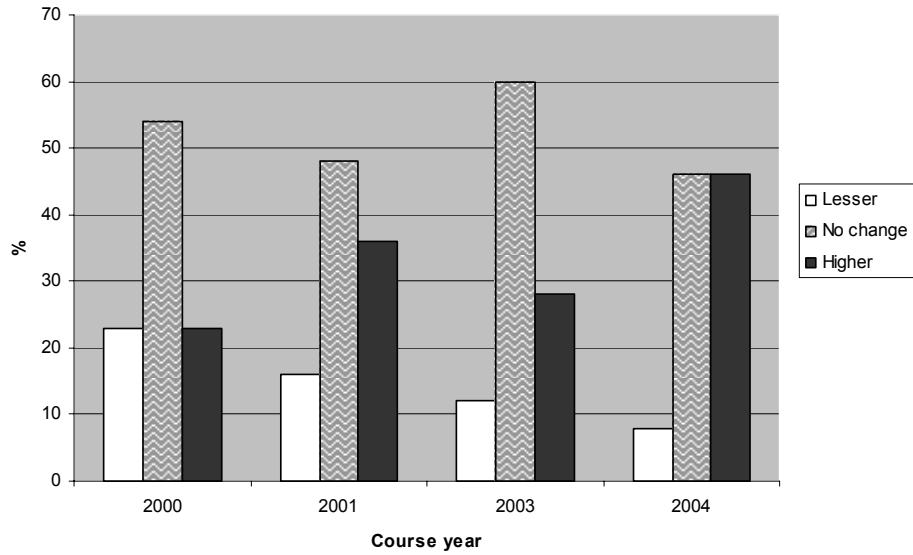


Figure 1.
Change in general interest in Australian literature.

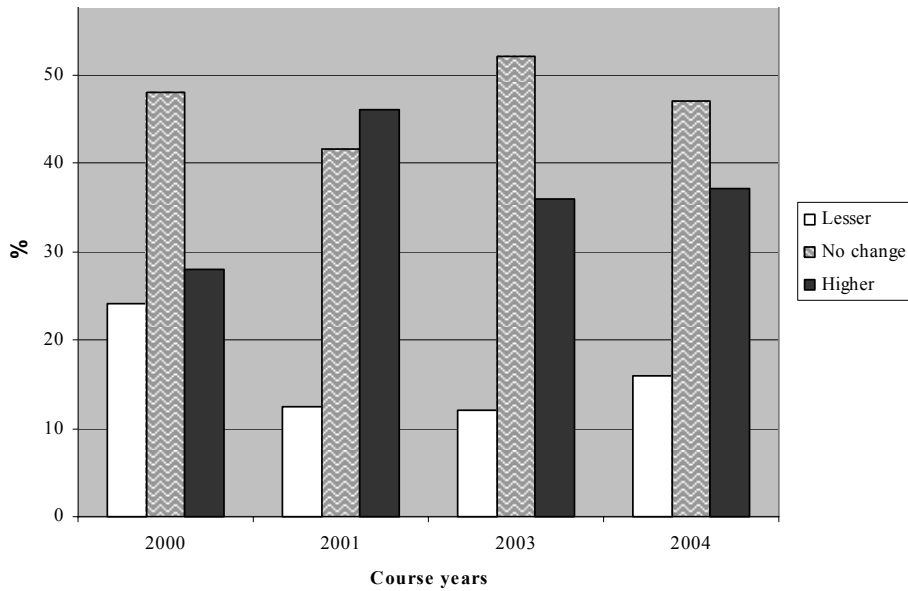


Figure 2.
Change in personal interest in knowing more about Australian literature.

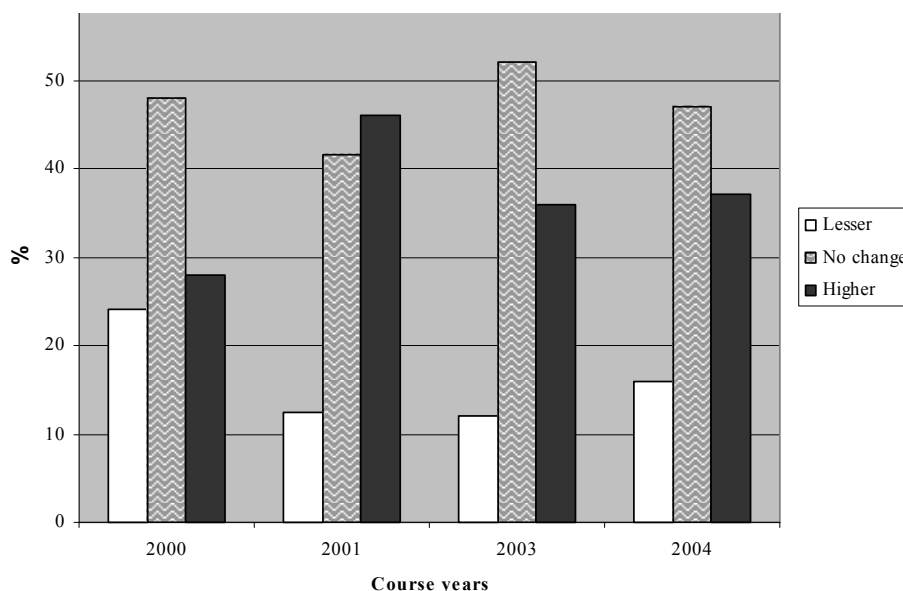


Figure 3.
Change in interest in reading Australian literature.

In addition to the responses to these main statements of interest illustrated above, there were two additional statements analysed. Analysis of the pre- and post-course survey responses to the first statement, "I think I have a good idea about what characterises Australian people and works", showed a higher level in knowledge at the end of the course in 58% of the students, but with no change in 35%. As about a third of the students undertaking English take Social Sciences (Study of Society and the Environment, History or Geography) as their second teaching discipline with *Indigenous Australian Studies* and *Australian Studies* as core courses it is not surprising that about this number felt they already had knowledge in this area. At the completion of the course 8% of the students responded at a lower level to the question. As well, over half of the total number of students (51%) showed a more positive response to the statement "I think that my ability to present a written critical response about literature is ..." in the post-course survey, whereas the responses of 39% showed that there had been no change in their critical thinking behaviour.

Discussion

There are three main possible reasons why student responses may be lower in the post-course survey than the pre-course survey: that the conduct of the course did not match students' expectations; that by progressing through the course material at a second year level the students have realised that their knowledge of the subject matter which they thought was high at the start of the course, is in fact, much lower; and that there was a

change of mood or self-confidence between the two surveys and an inability to differentiate between not much/a little or a little/a fair bit. Raidl et al. (2004) refers to the latter as " 'response-shift bias', where participants overestimate their behaviours on the pre-survey and underestimate their behaviours on the post-survey due to a change in frame of reference" (p. 1). In addition, there are many external factors which may impinge on students' lives and which may have affected their attitude to their studies over the semester: daily travel of long distances, part-time work, family commitments to name a few.

Overall students commented that they enjoyed the course and felt that their "depth of understanding had developed" (2001) with one stating that he or she had had "no prior interest but now a fair bit of interest from studying this course" (2003); that the course was "challenging" and "very interesting" (2001) as well as "valuable and well set out and appropriate" to their studies (2003); that they had a "lovely time learning interesting information" (2003); and that it opened up thought on "something we never thought about – what makes someone an Australian" (2003).

Conclusion

The methodology of pre/post surveys to determine the degree of satisfaction that a reader may have for a body of works labelled "Australian literature" may be open to debate. Raidl et al. (2004) suggested a "retrospective" survey where two questions are asked for each behaviour being measured: the first being a "post-test question" asking about the respondent's behaviour after the event; the second, a "pre-test question" asking about the respondent to retrospectively consider his or her behaviour before the event. This methodology would be a consideration for further study in this area.

The students surveyed in this second year course are pre-service secondary school English teachers who have progressed to this level without the appropriate breadth and depth of knowledge, experience, and even interest in the course subject matter. However the author's experience in the classroom does suggest that while expressions of pleasure may not be frequent there is sporadic interest across the cohort depending on the content under discussion. However, it seems not unreasonable to expect intending professionals to exhibit at least intrinsic interest in Australian literature, if not pleasure.

This situation poses a quandary on the role of pleasure in study to which there are no easy solutions, although it might be cited that among the causes that contribute to a lack of enthusiasm are the following: the absence of an innate sense of national identity; a symptom of the substitution of cultural isolation by the adoption of alien behaviours under commercial pressure; and the contemporary technological environment in which information and intellectual and emotional stimulation are fleetingly presented via electronic visual communication eliciting, in the main, passive response.

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