

Archives in the Classroom: The Development and Evaluation of National Archives Teachers' Resources

Esther Robinson

Esther Robinson was the Education and Events Manager at the National Archives of Australia until February 2001. While in that position she was project manager for the production of two school kits, assisted with the distribution, marketing and evaluation of another and commissioned the professional evaluations of two kits. Esther has a Bachelor of Education, has previously worked as a secondary school teacher and with the development of a distance education training scheme.

This article examines the mutually beneficial relationship between an audience of teachers and the National Archives of Australia. The author explains why the Archives selected this audience to target, how an understanding of this sector's needs influenced the products which the Archives developed and the role of evaluation in each project. She particularly focuses on the development and evaluation of two teachers' resource kits demonstrating how the evaluation of one kit influenced the development of the other.

In December 2000 I received an unsolicited fax from a Victorian teacher who said:

My history team and I have inspected your book *1901 and All That*. We are agreed that it is absolutely stunning – the activities are practical and workable, they are educationally valid and useful, the info is accurate/relevant and in suitable doses for middle school students. We are truly impressed. Congratulations!

This unsolicited praise was gratifying indeed! But was it representative of all teachers? Furthermore, what did it really mean?

1901 and All That is one of four teachers' kits produced by the National Archives, based on its collection. In this article I am going to address how and why the National

Archives selected teachers as an important sector of its audience; what the Archives has produced for this sector, with an emphasis on its last two projects; and the role of evaluation in each of these projects.

Targeting teachers

In 1994 Helen Nosworthy, then Director of Public Programs at the Archives, identified a range of audience groups for the Archives to address including 'educators and students'.¹ Why did she identify this group as an important group to reach? Teachers, along with journalists, were identified as a key target audience because they are a conduit; through them we reach many others. This is important for the National Archives because many Australians don't know what archives are, let alone what is in our collection.²

By educating teachers, and through them their students, about what archives are and why they are important, the message will be passed to many more people, year after year. School students are, after all, our next generation. If effective, this education will result in more Australians knowing what archives are, more being likely to use archives and more supporting the retention of archives.

Given the size and breadth of the education audience, it was important to segment it further and to adopt a strategic approach. One way to do this was to target teachers of particular subject areas. History teachers were an obvious (but by no means the only) choice, as our collection documents what has happened in Australia's past. History is often taught as part of combined social studies courses such as Study of Society and the Environment (SOSE), or Human Society in Its Environment (HSIE), so we targeted this broader group.

We could also segment the market by looking at the age and level of students, eg we could target only primary school teachers or only secondary school teachers. In making that decision, we needed to consider the complexity of the message we are trying to communicate to our audience. The Archives wants teachers to understand what archives are; to feel the excitement of using archives and to understand that history is based on the interpretation of evidence such as archives.

We decided it was inappropriate to try to reach the youngest audience (ie primary students) at this stage, because of the level of complexity of our message. In terms of which part of the secondary school audience we would target, the decision for each kit was based on a balance between three factors: selecting a level where the students would understand the message; reaching as many students as possible; and the level where specific topics are taught. Generally speaking, we aimed at lower or middle secondary level.

Finally, we could have segmented the audience group by State. This was ruled out as the National Archives is a federal, government-funded institution, so it was considered important to cater for a national audience. Our target audience was therefore all Australian secondary history teachers.

Delivering the message

There are many different ways we could have reached out to teachers. These include presenting lectures at conferences and professional development sessions. We could have submitted articles to their professional publications about why archives are important. But our message was about archives, about using archives, the importance of archives – so we wanted to bring teachers and archives together. This didn't mean we wanted teachers to bring their classes to the Reading Room. Archival research is slow, it's methodical and the materials are precious and fragile. Class groups researching in the Reading Room would not have been an efficient or manageable way to increase the community's understanding of archives.

Deciding the best way to reach this audience was based on a thorough knowledge of teachers, schools and the education system. But before I explain this further, I need to mention another Archives' project.

For some time, the numbers of students studying history in Australia had been declining.³ As a way of encouraging greater participation in the study of history and recognising student achievement in the subject, a group of stakeholders including the Archives had been investigating the possibility of a National History Day similar to the annual event sponsored by the National Archives in Washington. An annual National History Challenge was decided upon with the first being held in 1996. The Archives has ongoing involvement in this program by sponsoring and judging the annual award of State and national prizes for the best use of archival material in an essay or other form of presentation on the topic chosen for the Challenge.

In order to encourage participation in the Archives' special category prize and to address our aim to promote a better understanding of archives in the community, we produced a school kit called *Celebrations in Our History*, the topic chosen for the first Challenge. This kit was sent to all high schools in Australia in 1996 in conjunction with the inaugural Challenge.

Since then, the Archives has produced another three kits, all of which used the broad themes of the National History Challenge as a starting point, though they were also designed for ongoing use in schools. These kits are *Exploring Citizenship* (1997), *Voices for Democracy* (1998) and *1901 and All That: A Federation Resource Kit* (launched in May 2000 to fit with the 2001 Challenge theme of 'Making Our Nation').

In one sense, the Archives' decision to produce the kits was connected to the National History Challenge. Deciding on the format, shape, style and content of the publication however, was based on our understanding of our target audience. To effectively communicate a message to any audience group it is important to understand and address *their* needs. This applies to any presentation, publication or exhibition. It was essential for the Archives to understand what teachers wanted and needed from us, and how we might best reach them as a national audience. Some factors outlining our understanding are explained below.

In Australia school education is managed on the whole by the States. This means the curriculum, the topics covered, the timing and length of terms (and therefore units of work), and individual teacher's direction of and control over the content varies from State to State. These elements are also affected by the system the school belongs to: government or private (independent or religious).

Even within a particular State, the way each school is managed can vary greatly. This can affect who is responsible for the subject of 'history', where educational resources are stored, how incoming mail is handled, and how much flexibility there is within the curriculum. Reaching the appropriate person or people in the school is a challenge itself!

At this stage I want to put on my ex-teacher's hat and explain just how busy and demanding a teacher's life is. Despite what many think, teaching is not a nine-to-three job for 40 weeks of the year. Most teachers work extremely long hours, undertake professional development or prepare units of work during 'holiday' periods, and are always mentally involved in their work. The school system requires that teachers constantly develop new approaches, cover different curricula, support large numbers of young people with varying needs, meet changing assessment requirements and so on. Furthermore they are bombarded with administrative requirements quite apart from their demanding load of face-to-face teaching. When it comes to educational resources, there is a multitude to select from. These might vary in quality, but will also be useful to different degrees depending on factors such as what is being taught and the teacher's experience.

Most State curricula now require history students to be taught about, and from, primary source materials. This was useful for our purposes, but our early research indicated that many teachers didn't have experience in using, let alone teaching with, primary sources. Clearly, our understanding of our audiences influenced the content, teacher support materials, design, distribution and marketing of the final product.

The task that was the lynch pin of all of the kits was to identify stories or events that could be told predominantly through documents from the National Archives collection and that were relevant to all of the State curricula. A small number of documents had

to be identified for students to work from. These needed to be representative and comprehensible and to address the topic fully for it to have meaning. Good history teachers teach students how to investigate an issue; to develop a hypothesis and substantiate that with evidence. Good history is not rote learning of dates and a series of facts. Our kits had to allow for this investigation and that made the selection of documents crucial.

Because many teachers have limited experience in teaching with primary sources, it was essential that they be given as much guidance as possible in using primary sources with a class. We tried to include a range of approaches – some quite structured, others that were dependent on students becoming interested and involved with the material. Flexibility in how the kits could be used was, therefore, very important. Some activities were designed to help teachers and students interpret a single document. Other activities focused on selecting evidence from the kit to build or justify their hypotheses. Some activities (or combinations of activities) could form entire units, or even a semester's, workload. In some instances it was likely that teachers would select a document and activity and incorporate it into an existing unit of work.

As the documents were the key component of the kit, they were central to its design. It was essential that the documents looked like the original documents. This was in contrast to the approach taken by some publishers to transcribe the relevant passages into the text, or to transcribe and then box it as a document. Furthermore, the facsimile documents needed to be clear, legible, able to be photocopied, clearly linked with the relevant unit of work or activities and, in terms of teacher and student engagement with the kit, it helped if some of the documents were visually interesting. Since many teachers decide whether to pursue a resource by giving it a very quick 'flick test', good design was absolutely essential. In two of the Archives' kits, documents were produced as loose-leaf A4 pages that are easily handled and copied but also easily misplaced and lost. In *1901 and All That* we returned to having the documents printed and bound, but the binding was such that all pages were easy to copy.

As part of our marketing strategy, all kits were entered in various awards including *The Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing*. We were delighted that *Voices for Democracy* was short-listed for an award in 1998, and that *1901 and All That* won its category in 2000. This recognition from the education sector was rewarding as well as providing additional kudos and exposure for the Archives.

Evaluation – an essential component

Attempts were made to evaluate all of the kits. The Archives was committed to evaluation being an integral part of all projects. Helen Nosworthy pointed out in 1993:

We must keep assessing: exactly what outcomes are expected from each product developed; precisely who the market for each product is; whether the way chosen to promote the Archives was the best way; individual product and overall program success or failure.⁴

An evaluation form was included with the first kit along with an invitation for teachers to contact us with further comments. Only one response was received. With the second kit, more thought went into considering what the Archives wanted to find out, how best to ask the questions and, in particular, what would encourage teachers to respond. A couple of hundred responses (constituting 6% of those we approached) was a definite improvement, but in order to improve the response rate and to ensure a better evaluation the Archives called on professional expertise for the evaluations of the third and fourth kits.

It will be evident that the Archives thought long and hard about what we were producing and why, and carefully planned the content, structure and design of all the teachers' resource kits. This being the case – why was evaluation necessary?

There are three basic types of evaluation: front-end, formative and summative. These take place before, during and after production respectively.

Front-end evaluation helps to focus on the end-user – what they want and need, what they contribute when using the product, and sets priorities that help determine the final product. The front-end evaluation for the *1901 and All That* kit included an investigation of what resources about Australia's Federation were already in schools and at what level Federation was being taught. Had the evaluation shown there were plenty of exciting resources currently available, full of primary sources, the Archives would probably not have been justified in going ahead with this project.

Formative evaluation helps to shape the product as it is being developed. The consultants who developed the content of *1901 and All That* sent draft units of work to a group of teachers (covering all States) for use and comment. Their responses told us which activities worked, where further information and instruction was needed and so on.

Summative evaluation, which occurs at the end of a project, is seen by the Archives as an integral component of the project. We saw the summative evaluation of *Voices for Democracy* and *1901 and All That* as:

- part of an audit process, ie examining whether the expenditure was worthwhile;
- suggesting ways to enhance the final product, such as adding material to the Archives website or producing sample units based on the documents in the kit;

- a way to market the final product; and
- a source of information that would influence expenditure on and development of future related products, ensuring they continue to be relevant and useful.

The evaluations of *Voices for Democracy* and *1901 and All That* were conducted by a consultant, Dr Elizabeth Beckmann. Her input and experience resulted in a marked improvement in the response rate as well as a more informed result.

In both cases, deciding the process of evaluation was an important consideration. Teachers are not an easy group to contact and we needed to ensure we heard from a representative sample covering all States and territories; from rural, regional and urban schools; and from teachers in private, Catholic and government schools.

We decided on self-administered mail-out surveys on both occasions, with reminder letters being sent to those who did not respond initially. Telephone surveys were considered unsuitable because of teachers' classroom commitments. Focus groups, ie a facilitator meeting with a random group of the specified audience, were also ruled out as these would have meant feedback came from far fewer teachers. As an incentive to encourage teachers to respond to the survey, the Archives offered prizes of their publications.

For the evaluation of *Voices for Democracy* we decided on a two-stage process. In the first stage the evaluation forms were posted to everyone who had been sent a copy of the kit using exactly the same mailing list. We had a 38% response rate. This broad coverage was important and effective in gaining information about the distribution of the kit and establishing a database of teachers who were prepared to assist with further evaluation work. The second stage was a questionnaire which was much more detailed and sent only to those teachers who had offered to help further and had already used the kit.

There were three components to the evaluation of *1901 and All That*: a self-administered questionnaire, which was sent to all teachers on our database; reviews of the kit; and observations by the consultant of classroom lessons based on the kit. This evaluation was hampered slightly by its timing as it was conducted late in term three and early term four; always difficult times to reach teachers. This was unavoidable, however, because of conditions attached to the grant from the Centenary of Federation History and Education program. Despite this difficulty, it was useful for gaining information at this stage of the marketing.

The evaluations of both kits focused on finding out:

- whether each kit met its stated aims (which included encouraging the use of

primary source material);

- the level of teacher awareness of the kit (ie whether the marketing had reached them and the effectiveness of the distribution); and
- teachers' reaction to the content (ie whether it was appropriate and useful, and for which level and subjects was it used).

Two other issues raised in the evaluations were the experience and background of history teachers and teacher access to technology including the Internet.

I am going to outline briefly some of the evaluations' findings in relation to the aims and contents of the two kits and also explain how the development of *1901 and All That* was affected by the evaluation of *Voices for Democracy*.

Did the kit meet its stated aims?

Both kits had as a central aim 'to excite secondary teachers and through them, secondary students about the role primary sources play in historical research and to get them to use primary sources in their teaching'. The evaluation of *Voices for Democracy* found that:

A majority of respondents felt that the kit had helped them (71%) and/or their students (70%) to understand better the role of primary sources, with 22% reporting this effect also in their teaching colleagues.⁵

Respondents to the *1901 and All That* evaluation were asked to comment on a range of aspects about the kit including 'the selection and reproduction of the primary source documents'. This type of open-ended question made a statistical analysis difficult. However, 95% of those who responded to the question used positive words or phrases including 'excellent', 'useful', 'original' and so on.⁶ Some specific comments were:

- Provides primary sources we've not had access to.
- Once again access to hard-to-find sources made available.
- Original and previously unseen documents help provide a different perspective of the topic.
- A very good variety of sources .
- Very good – some resources I had not seen before.
- [The sources are] excellent (and one of the MAIN reasons for using it).
- Interesting – a lot of useful original documents I hadn't seen before.⁷

Was the content of the kit useful?

Topics for the kits were selected based on each State's curriculum and linked to the broad National History Challenge themes. In 1998 the theme for the Challenge was 'Discovering Democracy' and *Voices for Democracy* sought to cover four issues, each one through an important historical figure. *1901 and All That* investigated a range of issues relating to Australia's Federation which not only met the 2001 Challenge theme ('Making Our Nation'), but was also a popular topic in the Centenary year.

There were clearly different usage patterns for each of the different sections in *Voices for Democracy*. While not unexpected, the results demonstrated the importance in finding suitable, widely used topics. The units on John Curtin and Vida Goldstein were clearly the most used and most useful in the kit. The unit on Paul Hasluck was the least used (only 7.5% described it as 'very useful') and also likely to be the least useful (a further 7.5% described it as 'not useful').

Federation was inevitably a topic that would receive scrutiny in 2001. As this topic often receives only cursory attention in schools the Archives was keen to promote the study of Federation through the production of another teachers' resource kit. Furthermore, we hoped interest in the topic would not dissipate immediately!

In our front-end evaluation many teachers reported they and their students found the topic dull. One of the objectives of *1901 and All That* therefore was to excite teachers, and through them their students, about Australia's Federation. Efforts were made to address the topic in new ways. In particular, we were keen for students to empathise with the people who lived at the time of Federation.

In the evaluation report of *1901 and All That*, Beckmann made the following comment and supported it with direct quotes from some of the respondents:

... some teachers reported that the kit had encouraged them to consider teaching Federation more widely or comprehensively, or sometimes for the first time:

- I feared teaching Federation before [this kit]
- Made it far more interesting – took Federation out of the dry and dusty compartment in my brain!⁸

A further finding in the report was that 'almost half the respondent teachers reported that the kit had provided them with a new perspective on the teaching of Federation'.⁹ This is a pleasing result.

Our decision about how much guidance and support to include in the kits was based on the belief that some teachers didn't have a lot of qualifications or experience in the teaching of history. Our evaluations confirmed this:

... while most (62%) had a degree in history as well as specific training in secondary history teaching, and 17% had specific training as secondary history teachers, a significant minority (22%) were not specialist-trained history teachers.¹⁰

This result did not mean we made changes in *1901 and All That*, but it did justify our efforts to include activities introducing teachers and students to using primary sources and to develop structured units of work which made it easier for teachers to use the primary sources. Numerous responses to the survey supported this decision.¹¹

Access to technology

While technology has become integral to the workplace, we weren't certain this had been matched in all classrooms. Consequently, when conducting the evaluation of *Voices for Democracy*, we were keen to investigate teacher access to computers and the Internet. This information contributed to the development of future resources for teachers, including the Archives website.

The results indicated that while teachers had a high rate of access to the Internet at school (95.8%), student access with history/SOSE class groups wasn't as common (32.5%).¹² It was more likely for students to be able to access the Internet through the library/resource centre (78%), at home (75%), or during IT classes (60%).

In the same survey we asked teachers about what form they would prefer for future resources from the Archives. While print-based teachers' kits were the preferred option, followed closely by theme-based document packs, respondents also indicated some interest in short videos, CD-ROMs and Internet resources.

This information was useful when developing the project brief for the *1901 and All That*. The print-based teachers' kit remained the basis of the product, but we added a further dimension with a game on CD-ROM. As with the kits, flexibility in how the game was used by the teacher was built into the concept so that it could be used as a stand-alone game played by one person, it could be used with a whole class playing together in various ways or, if computer technology wasn't available in the classroom, a print-based version could be used. While the last solution didn't use the technology, it did mean those teachers who didn't have access to, or weren't comfortable using, the technology didn't miss out on this component of the kit.

The evaluation of the CD-ROM game found that it had been used by a quarter of those who had used the kit. Mostly it had been used as an individual activity and its use was spread across all secondary year levels from years 7 and 8 (38%) to years 11 and 12 (30%). The two main reasons for not using the CD-ROM were time constraints (52%) and technological problems (41%). Those who used it had mixed responses that were as much to do with the concept and content of the game as with the media.

The students who were observed as part of the evaluation remembered it positively because of the technology, making comments such as:

- It was fun and we didn't have to do much writing.
- I liked ... the fact it was different from the other things we do.¹³

Many of these students also commented on the crux of the activity which was an exercise in decision-making:

- Things can be worked out if you think hard.
- ...[Shows] it is good to share responsibility in decision-making.
- How the two schools had to compromise.

More valuable here was the feedback that teachers required additional guidance in using the CD-ROM. While it was too late to include this information in the published kit, it can be added to the Archives website and made available at future professional development sessions. This feedback will also serve to guide the development of future resources.

Conclusion

What have the evaluations told us about these two products? Has the Archives achieved its aims? Has the information been useful for the ongoing development of teachers' resources? We know that both kits were well received in the educational community:

The kit was acclaimed by almost all respondents to the teacher survey, and by all the curriculum specialists and published reviews. The easy to use structure of the kit, the variety and availability of primary sources, and the quality of the associated activities were all features commonly praised.¹⁴

We know teachers value our efforts at making the records in our collection available in a form that meets their specific needs. We know both kits are being well used.

But these kits reveal only a very few items of the immensely rich collection held by the National Archives. Furthermore, the evaluations confirmed our understanding that because teachers work in such a wide variety of situations, a range of solutions is required.

We need to continue to help teachers understand and use archives in their classrooms. In this way the community will increasingly gain a better understanding of archives and in time this will mean they become supporters and champions of archival organisations as the teacher quoted at the beginning of this article has become.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Helen Nosworthy, 'Reaching out: A Core Program for Australian Archives', in Michael Piggott and Sue McKemmish, *The Records Continuum*, Ancora Press in association with the Australian Archives, Clayton, Vic, 1994, p. 71.
- 2 Environmetrics, *Market Perceptions of Australian Archives*, 1995 (unpublished), p. 21. This study found 3% of Australian adults knew a lot about the Australian Archives, 23% knew a little and 41% knew the name 'Australian Archives' but not the functions it performed. The remaining 34% had not heard of the Australian Archives.
- 3 A later study addressing this issue was released in 2000. *The Future of the Past: Final Report of the National Inquiry into School History* was completed by Tony Taylor from Monash University. See online copy at www.dest.gov.au/schools/Publications/2000/future/report.htm.
- 4 Nosworthy, p. 71.
- 5 Dr Elizabeth Beckmann, *Evaluation of the Voices for Democracy Teachers' Resource Kit*, 1999 (unpublished), p. ix.
- 6 Dr Elizabeth Beckmann, *Evaluation of 1901 and All That: A Federation Resource Kit*, 2001, (unpublished), p. 37.
- 7 *ibid.*, Appendix 5, pp. 17–19.
- 8 *ibid.*, Executive Summary, p. 2.
- 9 *ibid.*, Executive Summary, p. 2.
- 10 Beckmann, *Voices*, p. ix.
- 11 Many responses to the question 'What features of the kit helped you decide to use it in the class' commented positively on the activities and guidance. All the responses to this question are listed on pp. 3–6 of Appendix 5 of the 1901 Evaluation. Dr Beckmann's summary and interpretation of these comments is on pp. 24–25 of the report.
- 12 Beckmann, *Voices*, p. xii.
- 13 These quotes are reported in the 1901 evaluation on p. 33.
- 14 Beckmann, 1901, Executive Summary, p. 1.