

On the road again: Reaching out to isolated school communities

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Abstract

Country New South Wales is very isolated from the urban environment of Sydney. As such, country schools find it difficult to access ancient museum material to support the teaching of the school curriculum in ancient history. With the financial burdens of distance, along with severe drought, many schools cannot make the journey to Sydney to see the archaeological material held in the Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University, one of only a handful of such museums in Australia.

Consequently we have developed a 'traveling road show', which takes our education programs to them. In this way we also fulfill our strategic obligations to our parent university in the core area of community outreach. In return the university benefits from the on-going goodwill of teachers, students, their families and the local communities. It is through such networks and the loyalty our programs foster, that we help the university attract students to Macquarie.

This paper looks at the approaches we take to support disadvantaged rural communities. It also suggests that this traveling program may serve as a model for other university museums in similar geographical circumstances to follow, as they also seek to reach out to wider audiences and increase interest in, and access to, their unique collections.

Introduction

University museums by their very nature are concerned with education. As educational theory has developed throughout the twentieth century, the approaches taken in developing museum-based education programs have also changed. Today those concerned with such programs in museums (HEIN 1991; HOOPER-GREENHILL 1999) espouse the constructivist model whereby the learner



Fig. 1 - Two Year 11 students from Leeton High School in southwestern NSW handling ancient objects from the Museum of Ancient Cultures collection © P. Medcalf

constructs meaning as he or she learns in the museum context (HEIN 1991: 1).

For over twenty years, the education programs offered at the Museum of Ancient Cultures, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia have allowed students such experiences when they visit us on campus. At the museum, these students engage directly with ancient artifacts, under the supervision and guidance of our Education Officers who are also trained teachers. The museum contains archaeological material from the ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Cypriot and Near Eastern worlds, and is somewhat unique in the Australian context. Unlike

UK and European museums, in Australia there are few museums that contain ancient antiquities, and fewer still that allow students to handle, study and experience these artifacts in the learning process.

However schools in outlying rural communities have been at a significant disadvantage to their city counterparts, being affected by a number of factors that have precluded their students from attending the programs we offer.

The first is the *Tyranny of distance*, identified by the Australian historian Prof. Geoffrey Blainey (1977). Country students have limited access to educational support services such as major library collections, universities or galleries, and travel costs to Sydney are high. While various organizations, such as the NSW Department of Education and Training, the NSW Board of Studies and NSW HSC Online, provide information and resources via the internet, it is not the same experience as actually handling and interacting with ancient artifacts.

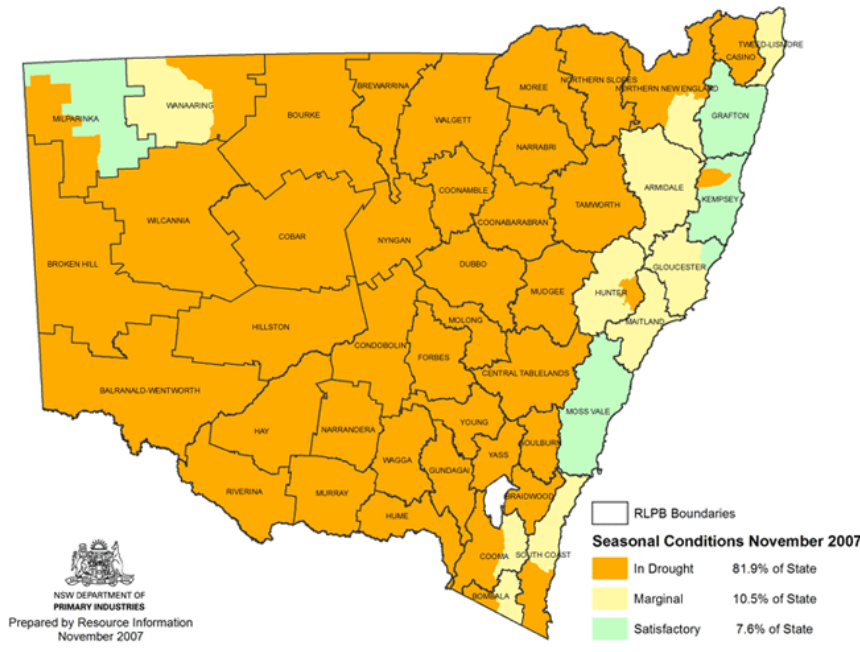


Fig. 2 - A NSW Department of Primary Industries map showing the extent of drought across the state of NSW in November 2007 © NSW Dept. of Primary Industries

The second factor is drought where vast areas of rural NSW have been affected, with some communities having no rain for the last ten years!

This has economically devastated many communities, with families often earning less than \$20,000 p.a. (c. £9,000). When local schools try to organize a museum excursion, in some cases for up to five days where they might have to travel 800 kilometers each way, the costs (transportation, accommodation, museum entry, general spending money for food, general

entertainment and entry to other venues) is beyond their reach. Such an excursion also takes students away from part-time jobs or from responsibilities they have on family farms.

Lastly, there is internal school disruption. Students on a protracted excursion are absent from other subject classes and miss out on class work, and there is general turmoil in school administration. As a result, many school principals do not allow such excursions.

Social exclusion is at work as disadvantaged communities are further marginalized. As a consequence, over the last six years, we have devised an educational *Traveling road show*.



Fig. 3 - On the road to Leeton, NSW, looking at drought-affected countryside
© K. Van Dyke

Traveling road show

When schools ask us to visit, we create a program in consultation with the teacher/s to suit their classroom or syllabus needs. A museum team is put together, the necessary equipment (data projectors, computers, padded table covers and gloves) is assembled and relevant, robust artifacts are selected from our teaching collection and packed up. We drive to the school in either my car or a hire car. Occasionally we fly. The university covers travel and personal

insurance and the team is either billeted in a teacher's home or is accommodated in a local motel at the school's expense. Many schools receive special government funding for such events.

Meanwhile, at least one other staff member is left behind to keep the museum open and functioning, or to conduct in-house education programs where we have a booking.

The away team then spends a few days with both the senior ancient history and the junior history students (often up to 250 students in total) at their school and enjoys the hospitality of the local community. In many cases our visit also attracts publicity via local newspaper, radio or TV coverage – good public relations for us, the university and for the school.

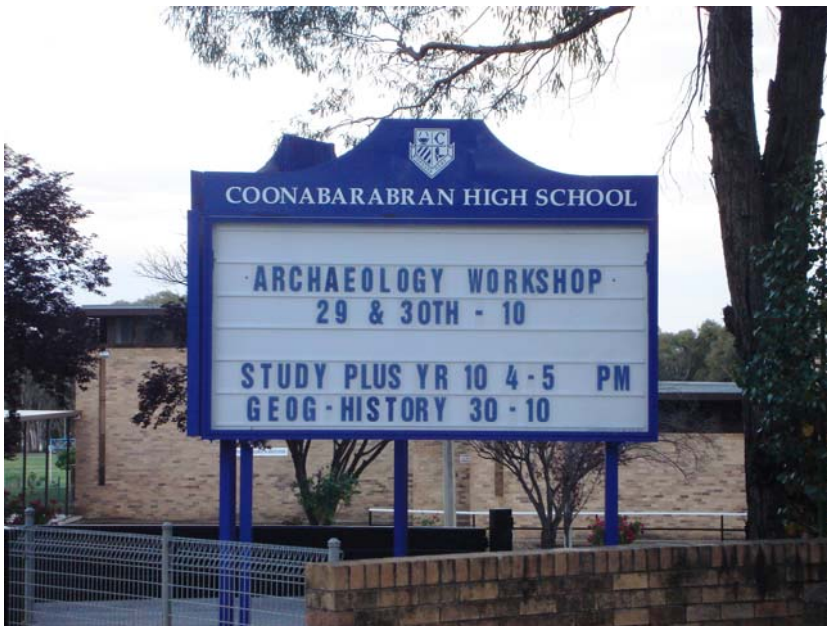


Fig. 4 – The public noticeboard at Coonabarabran High School announcing the two-day visit of the museum team presenting an archaeology workshop

The education program

The education program is designed around a number of activities carried out in booked classrooms, the school library, the school hall, or a combination of these, depending on student numbers.

Large groups or combined classes can take part in PowerPoint presentations on relevant curriculum



Fig. 5 - Dr. Jaye Mackenzie-Clark, an Education Officer with the Museum of Ancient Cultures, setting up furniture for a hands-on session in the Leeton High School hall © K. Van Dyke

topics, along with exam stimulus work or historical role-plays.

Single classes, with their supervising teachers, can don gloves and work with the artifacts over padded tables in a 'hands-on' session, or carry out archaeological sherd-based exercises.

All the activities operate within the school's regular class times, students take their normal recess and lunch breaks and there is minimal internal disruption to the school's daily routine.

The disadvantages for the road show team are that we are away from our homes, we make the tiring, long-distance journeys and we run an increased risk to equipment, artifacts and ourselves. The benefits, however, far outweigh these.

The disadvantages for the

Community engagement

By providing this service to students and teachers, we are the first point of contact for students thinking about enrolling at Macquarie University. Through our museum programs we see students from primary and junior high school levels and then as senior students, with a flow-on effect into undergraduate studies. Our programs, especially in the country, create a loyalty pathway into our university. For us, community engagement is part of student recruitment.

We also build up a huge professional network of teachers who attend the annual Ancient History Teachers' Conference, professional seminars and student Study Days. They also seek our advice regarding syllabus topics or resources and many also sign up for postgraduate studies, often by distance education.

The students, their parents and the broader local communities that we serve also become a source of support for the museum. For us, they are a positive force giving endorsements to the university about our relevance and usefulness to their educational needs. However, given that many university museums and collections in Australia were identified as being in a 'parlous' state (McMICHAEL 1996: 1), and a number of museums overseas may be in a similar position, it is vital to enlist the support of advocates who can champion their cause when they are in peril or in need of support.

Strategic alignment

The traveling road show is one part of the strategic alignment of the museum to the university. It links with the concept of 'engagement', one of the core values of Macquarie University (MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY 2008: 6). It also echoes the themes of the university, namely "Macquarie's commitment to



Fig. 6 - Students from Leeton High School wearing gloves and working with ancient Egyptian artifacts over padded tables © P. Medcalf

social inclusion and equity ..." (SCHWARTZ 2008). Our active involvement with the broader community has, in turn, been recognized by the University through awards for Excellence in Community Engagement (2005, 2007, 2008).

In providing the away program to country schools, the museum also generates an income from the fees charged. While staff salaries and travel costs are paid from these monies, any remainder is invested back into the museum to offset university expenses or is used to purchase more artifacts.

Where to from here?

Based on our experiences, I would suggest that the traveling road show may be a model for other university museums to adopt and adapt in order to reach isolated school communities. In this way they find wider audiences and increase interest in, and access to, their unique collections, while at the same time providing an invaluable community service.

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