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**RE-EXAMINING
CONSERVATION
PRECEPTS – IMPLICATIONS
FOR CONSERVATION
EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

In recognising a changing social future, this paper posits that the future relevance and sustainability of conservation is dependent on a re-evaluation of our professional precepts, ethics, and working practices to more fully embrace and reflect interdisciplinary and cross-cultural ways of working. It argues that conservators must locate our practice within overarching global issues of poverty, human rights, ethics, climate change and sustainability. The implications for conservation pedagogy are examined, and the benefits of collaboration between universities and industry partners are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Prenant acte de l'évolution de la société, cet article postule que la pertinence future et la durabilité de la conservation exigent une réévaluation de nos préceptes professionnels, de nos principes déontologiques et de nos pratiques de travail afin de mieux embrasser et refléter les méthodes de travail interdisciplinaires et interculturelles. Il avance que les restaurateurs doivent inscrire leurs pratiques dans le cadre des enjeux globaux que sont la pauvreté, les droits de l'homme, l'éthique, le changement climatique et la durabilité. Les implications pour l'enseignement de la conservation sont examinées, et les avantages d'une collaboration entre les universités et les partenaires industriels sont débattus.

RESUMEN

Considerando que el entorno social está y seguirá cambiando en el futuro, este artículo propone que la relevancia y la sustentabilidad de la conservación de cara al futuro dependen de la reevaluación de nuestros preceptos profesionales, de nuestra ética y de nuestras

INTRODUCTION

The cross-cultural and interdisciplinary nature of cultural materials conservation has been a prominent feature of the field's discourse in recent decades. However, in considering the cross-cultural aspects of conservation practice, the authors and others have argued that conservators' consultation and collaboration with community groups and indigenous people is frequently mediated by others (see for example Smith and Scott 2009, Edmonds and Wild 2000). In practice, much interdisciplinary activity in conservation to date could be critically described as multidisciplinary, characterized by Petrie (1976, 9) as a situation where '...everyone [does] his or her thing with little or no necessity for any one participant to be aware of any other participant's work.'

More recently, conservation as a social act has gained prominence in the literature. In the introduction to the book *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, Richmond and Bracker acknowledge that conservation 'is a socially constructed activity with numerous public stakeholders and those of us who act in the name of conservation do so 'on behalf of society' (2009, xvi–xiv). Global concerns of sustainability, often discussed in terms of environmental, economic and social impacts, are now fundamental to conservation decision-making. In 2000 the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) introduced a new clause into the code of ethics to acknowledge the potential for conservation practices to negatively impact the environment, one of the few professional codes internationally to do so, although presumably this will change in the near future. In previous research by the authors (Smith and Scott 2009), members of the AICCM and the New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Materials Pu Manaaki Kahurangi (NZCCM) were surveyed on their views of the respective bodies' codes. While the majority of respondents did consider the new clause important, a number were not sure that the clause itself had influenced practice. It was suggested that the changes which had occurred were as a result of general shifts in private and social philosophies and actions. While certainly reflecting a widely held opinion of the broader population, the AICCM acknowledgement of environmental impact is one of the few statements that translate personal practice into the professional conservation canon.

prácticas de trabajo, para poder adoptar y reflejar formas de trabajo interdisciplinarias e interculturales de una manera más completa. Plantea que los conservadores debemos situar nuestra práctica en el marco de cuestiones globales tales como la pobreza, los derechos humanos, la ética, el cambio climático y la sustentabilidad. Se analizan las implicaciones en la pedagogía de la conservación, así como los beneficios de la colaboración entre universidades y socios de la industria.

These examples of the ways in which the field's precepts and accepted norms are described, contested, advanced and refined demonstrate a change in focus and an expanding role for conservation, beyond the material and the single object focus. Drawing on the ICOM-CC 2011 conference theme this paper seeks to contribute to the burgeoning discussion calling for a broader, more inclusive role for conservation. The authors concur with the view that the future relevance and sustainability of conservation is dependent on a re-evaluation of our professional precepts, ethics, and working practices to more fully embrace and reflect interdisciplinary and cross-cultural ways of working, and that conservators must locate our practice within overarching global issues of poverty, human rights, ethics, climate change and sustainability. As more and more members of the conservation community are actively calling for broader engagement then it behoves educational programmes to incorporate these elements into the curriculum. This paper considers the implications of this changing role for conservation pedagogy.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

An understanding of a discipline's epistemology, as well as the wider political context within which it operates can inform an understanding of the discipline itself. The following selected view of recent conservation history is included to elucidate the sequential development of, and change in, conservation 'norms'.

Since the early 20th century scientific principles and methods have been routinely applied to conservation research, the identification of deterioration processes, and the development of preservation strategies. However, as Ward cautions (1986, 29) 'science deals in measurement, produces quantifiable results, and enjoys the benefits of precision. Conservation applies those results to problems of infinite variety, the solution of which have no absolutes.'

By the early 1950s some of the first professional bodies were formed. Harold Plenderleith remarked that the incorporation of the International Institute for the Conservation of Museum Objects (IIC) in 1950 was 'the beginning of the modern age of conservation' (cited in Boothroyd Brooks 2000, 1). During the next thirty or so years, numerous professional bodies were formed, codes of ethics and practice were articulated and tertiary programs in conservation were established. Shön (1983 cited in Lester 2000) has argued that the knowledge-based technical occupations of the industrial era embraced academic training to add legitimacy to their claim for professional status, and used the dominance of scientific method espoused in that training to develop what Bines (1992 cited in Lester 2000) calls the technocratic model to frame and accredit professional practice.

By contrast, Hassard (2008, 99) argues that the 'paradigm shift from craft to science which ... underpins practice in the field today', has had a polarising effect; and that 'by distinguishing the conservator from the craftsman' the profession has 'contributed to a decline in traditional restoration skills'.

Jones and Holden (2008) identify the truly sustainable nature of conservation: how preservation as an activity is the antithesis of use-up culture, and therefore promotion of the discipline in this way embeds its broad cultural relevance in the context of global concerns of pollution and climate change. Undoubtedly interdisciplinary and cross cultural-participation by conservators is another key feature of achieving the goal of providing social benefits (Jones and Holden 2008). Of particular interest to the authors is promotion of ethical interactions (particularly with founder-culture stakeholders) and more inclusive conservation work (see for example Smith and Winkelbauer 2006, Smith and Scott 2009, and Smith, Te Kanawa, and White, this volume), where preservation of cultural heritage sustains culture and cultural values.

Additionally it could be argued that conservation as a profession is at a crossroads. The recent economic climate has seen conservation perceived as an unnecessary expense for museums, and the closure of conservation programmes. For conservation as a profession to survive and thrive it needs to be perceived and situated as broadly relevant and cognisant of global issues.

These examples show that despite a long history of development in the field, rigorous tertiary education, and a number of codifying documents, there remains a range of perspectives about the nature and form that conservation approaches ‘should’ take.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

The need to incorporate complex social, political, economic and environmental concepts into conservation curricula, while maintaining and indeed strengthening the teaching of the disciplinary-specific skills and knowledge that are a central feature of the profession, presents significant challenges to teachers and students.

A research-led teaching model, where the teaching team is aware of and actively refer to content relationships across the course, can provide powerful learning opportunities. Explicit links between subject content and current disciplinary discourse and where critical evaluation of the literature and of various conservation approaches is encouraged, can strengthen students’ understanding, and add to overall course coherency. The hallmarks of good practice in research-led teaching as described by Baldwin (2005) apply directly to professional courses, where students need to learn to ‘think like’ practitioners in their chosen field. Implicit in this statement is the requirement for educators to instil in students the ethos of the field. To achieve this, professional education programmes need to assist students to develop the intellectual agility and professional flexibility to be able to apply their expertise within a changing social, cultural and economic context, in other words to *learn to be* professionals; to adopt the values, language and praxis of the field. Yet this simple sounding aim belies the complexities involved in teaching/learning explicit (facts, theories, concepts) and tacit (ways of working) professional knowledge. As John

Seeley Brown (2001) states tacit knowledge domains are challenging to define and therefore to teach because ‘a lot of what we know we don’t even know that we know’.

Developing conservation expertise is a career-long journey requiring personal and professional reflection, continuous learning, an open mind, and the ability to think critically. As Richmond and Bracker remind us ‘...although conservation principles are changing rapidly, they require time and space for debate to occur’ (2009, xvii). In other words, becoming an expert takes time, and the ability to learn and *unlearn* the discipline (McWilliam 2005). In their study of music pedagogy, McWilliam, Carey, Draper and Lebler (2006, 25) take this concept further and argue that ‘...changing social futures will require learners of all persuasions to unlearn certain practices and processes at the same time that they will learn and embrace others’.

In tandem with a rigorous and relevant ‘curriculum of engagement’, experiential and practice-based learning models are widely used to provide a framework within which students can develop and apply their expertise within authentic environments. These models are familiar to conservation educators and have formed the pedagogical framework for a number of conservation courses (see for example Brooks, Cronyn and Lister 1999, Lennard and Brooks 2008, Scott 2008).

Current approaches in the University of Melbourne programme

Learning to be a conservator is a recurrent theme throughout the two-year conservation master’s programme at the University of Melbourne. The challenge within such a context is to teach the skills required for contemporary practice, while preparing students for what may be a quite different future practice; encouraging the skills and confidence to unlearn where appropriate. Anecdotal comments from students elucidate some of these challenges. Calls for students to challenge some established beliefs and practices have been countered by comments that this is fine for established conservators with little to lose, but risky for students still to establish their professional personae. Such insights suggest that students are thinking critically about the field and their place within it, and have realistic expectations of how, when, and even if, they might adopt and drive change. They also reflect a risk averse view, driven by a natural desire to enhance, or at least not harm, their employment prospects.

Two subjects, one taught at the beginning of the Masters course and the other, the capstone industry-placement subject, are briefly discussed below to outline how these challenges are currently addressed.

The subject Conservation Professional Practices (CPP) is a foundation subject that explores conservation epistemology, political contexts, codes of ethics and decision-making frameworks to contextualise the profession. In the first half of the subject students are required to demonstrate that they have learned and can apply the basic tenets of conservation in a range

of scenarios. In the second half of the subject, students are asked to think critically about these models, to challenge the norms and to ultimately advocate for conservation within the broader social context described above; in other words, to unlearn some of the basic precepts. At best this results in robust discussion, and deep two-way learning; at worst this can be overwhelming for students who can be left feeling uncertain about conservation options in various situations. Each of the other subjects in the course, the majority of which are technical and treatment focussed, provide opportunities to overcome these uncertainties and to test and apply assumptions and learning from the CPP subject. This aims to embed consideration of ethical values, social benefits, and the need for advocacy and sustainability into every conservation decision and practice.

The industry-placement subject is a deliberate step to align students and conservation experts; to provide students with a unique opportunity for formal one-on-one intensive mentoring; and, to provide industry partners with the opportunity to interact with students. Recently, these relationships have expanded to include collaborative research, where industry partners have identified topics of relevance, and jointly supervised students for their research thesis. These provide benefits to all parties, and add the real-world situation that is a feature of the deep-learning which Schneider refers to as ‘hands-on pedagogy’ (Schneider 2001). At the same time, industry collaborations of this type foster closer relationships between universities and their professional communities, helping to ensure a curriculum of engagement and relevance. Certainly, the quality of the research results indicates the experience was rigorous and productive; the extent of students’ engagement with the broader societal issues discussed in this paper requires further study.

Data drawn from a collaborative research project investigating industry partners’ experiences of hosting students showed practice-supervisors ‘... had a clear sense of their roles as educators, and felt it was essential for universities to recognise them as such.’ When asked about their reasons for being involved they identified three particular motivations: a professional obligation to nurture future colleagues; the desire to expose students to real world realities; and their desire to expand their own contact with universities (Hodge et al. 2011). The research reinforced the important role of mentoring, with a majority of supervisors noting their desire to be proactive in this regard. Feedback from industry supervisors to the question ‘how could the student enhance their prospects for employment?’ has almost universally focussed on more ‘hands-on treatment experience’. This response is interesting on a number of levels. It does reflect the traditional/central focus of the field, yet many conservators bemoan the fact that they spend so little time at the bench; it highlights opportunities for greater mentoring within the field; or, by contrast, it may indicate that the question itself is at fault. Supervisors seem on the whole to be happy with the students’ abilities, and the question may therefore be leading to the somewhat inevitable response that students need more experience. Future re-framing of this question is planned to gain a deeper insight

into supervisors' views on student performance and by association the curriculum. Of particular interest is the value that supervisors/employers place on graduates abilities to locate their practice within the broader social concerns discussed above.

One of the final assessable components of the course is a reflective essay, in which students are expected to consider how their studies have prepared them for practice, and how the internship challenged or reinforced their understanding of the field. They are encouraged to revisit the literature and the discussions introduced in the CPP subject, having had some 'time and space' (Richmond and Bracker 2009, xvii) to reflect on the concepts discussed. Recently, a student took the risk of veering from the standard academic essay, and instead lead the reader on a journey of discovery that traversed the gamut of emotions experienced as a student: from insecurity to exhaustion; from feeling intellectually overwhelmed to developing understanding; from anxiety at the start of the industry placement to a new found collegiality with her supervisor and mentor that culminated in her having the confidence to finally be able to declare that she had indeed 'learned to be' a conservator.

CONCLUSION

The need to teach discipline specific skills as well as the range of higher order generic skills (communication, problem-solving, cross-cultural understandings, environmental sensitivity, etc.) that are so highly valued by employers, governments and university policy-makers, remains central to conservation education.

As the complexity and range of conservation practices continues to expand, conservation curricula, pedagogical frameworks, and teaching methods require regular review and fine tuning. The incorporation of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches and new topics into an already complex syllabus, presents continual challenges to students and educators alike. No-one would argue for a diminution of disciplinary expertise, which in conservation is still focused on the material object. However, as Avrami argues 'conservation is not simply about the objective stewardship of heritage resources, but is largely bound up in the very subjective relationships between people and places (2009, 178).

Previous work by the authors has shown how the divergent cultural and political circumstances in New Zealand and Australia are also reflected in the conservation ethics and practices of both countries (Smith and Scott 2009, 184). This paper has sought to show that cultural and political contexts and conservation epistemologies all work to shape and inform the discipline. An understanding, respect for, and an ability to work in cross-cultural and interdisciplinary ways is critical if we are to produce graduates with the attributes required by the sector and with the capacity for the sophisticated, reflective practice expected of professionals in contemporary society. While interdisciplinary in nature, the field of conservation embodies characteristics that define it as a distinctive discipline. These characteristics

have the potential to position conservation professionals as leaders in a ‘forward looking discipline’. To realize this opportunity practitioners and students need to critically examine the profession’s precepts, and to make interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approaches central to our practice. Continual revision of conservation research, curricula and teaching approaches plays a central role in driving the discipline by empowering students to proactively engage in broader enquiry. Industry collaboration can reinforce these approaches by supporting and mentoring students and new graduates. The study presented here outlines the approach taken at the University of Melbourne to teach the complex range of skills and attributes required of conservation professionals through a curriculum of engagement, and industry collaboration, in which the skills required to ‘think like a professional’ are central.

If Erica Avrami’s prediction that ‘...the most significant contribution of heritage to social sustainability is the role of the conservation *process* in building community, recognizing differences, and enhancing social cohesion’ (2009, 182) is to be realized, then conservation curricula must engage students in discussion and debate around the field’s precepts, in questions about what is conserved and why, and about the social benefits of conservation as an act of civic engagement, just as much as the physical act of how this is achieved.

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