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MAKING FAMILIAR, MAKING STRANGE: INTRODUCING SOURCES IN MONASTIC HISTORY TO CONTEMPORARY ADULTS

Katharine Massam

The "Society for Creative Anachronism" is an international network of historical enthusiasts focused on "researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th century-Europe."1 The only proviso on participation in the weekend tournaments, revelries, and training in special interests is "an attempt at clothing from before 1600."2 Year by year some 17,500 members in nineteen sectors of the globe,3 seek to "recreate the middle ages as they should have been."4 The Society is a vibrant, quirky, often learned and usually creative forum for generating a pastiche of the past. It is not what this article is about.

Instead, I am interested to explore the ways in which historians and theologians can guard against anachronism and its opposite demon, inaccessibility. Seeking to find a way through these "misplaced certainties,"5 concerning church history, this article examines "on-site, live-in" experiences designed to introduce historical sources of monasticism to contemporary adults. These are, firstly, the graduate and undergraduate subjects I have taught on location at a Benedictine monastery since 2003 under the broad title "Living by the Rule" as a collaboration between Melbourne’s United Faculty of Theology (UFT), and the Benedictine community of New Norcia. The subjects developed from public programs first offered in 1992, and were accredited as degree subjects by the Melbourne College of Divinity (an ecumenical consortium of theological colleges founded in 1911,

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5 Rowan Williams, Why Study the Past?: The Quest for the Historical Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 88 ff.
forerunner to the present MCD University Divinity).\textsuperscript{6} Secondly, the paper draws on a related offering in the public retreat program at the same monastery on “Gertrude of Helfta: Woman of Prayer.” Both offerings aim to introduce contemporary adults to historical sources on monasticism.

While the small monastic settlement of New Norcia rises abruptly against the horizon of Western Australia’s Great Northern Highway, and the elegant towers of its Spanish-inspired buildings might seem strange relics as the trucks roll through to the iron-ore mines, I argue here that programs in monastic history developed in collaboration with New Norcia encourage students away from anachronistic pastiche and towards building the bridges of understanding that enable contemporary Christians to see themselves as part of a lived and living tradition. Exploring the methodological discussion of “reciprocity” in historical work,\textsuperscript{7} and also Lave and Wenger’s model of situated adult learning,\textsuperscript{8} I argue that when students and the retreatants develop a “community of practice” with the monastery, the programs foster an analogical and dialogical engagement with the historical material that is potentially transformative. In particular I want to suggest that the experience of independent archival research undertaken by the tertiary students is itself formational, not only shaping participants’ self-understanding as scholars, but also making an impact on their identity as people of faith and potential leaders in the Christian community.

The discussion that follows has three main sections: an outline of the programs, both the accredited subjects and the retreat that does not require assessable work from participants; then, consideration of the methodological questions confronting historians who abandon assumptions of objectivity and distance without collapsing the distinction between truth and fiction; and finally, a discussion of the model of situated learning, and its connection with the Rule of Benedict.


\textsuperscript{7} Louise D’Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, “Introduction” in Maistresse of My Wit: Modern Women, Modern Scholars, ed. Louise D’Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout:Belg: Brepols,2004) 1-23; Rowan Williams, Why Study the Past?


The monastic town of New Norcia is a significant resource for teaching monastic history in general and the history of Catholic mission to Aboriginal people in Australia in particular. Founded by the charismatic Spanish Benedictine Rosendo Salvado in March, 1846, as an outreach to the Yuat Noongar people of the Victoria Plains a short 20 years after Britain claimed the western half of the Australian continent, the mission at New Norcia was celebrated as a success in the nineteenth century, and continues to be a focus for reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians in the twenty-first century. Within the broadly Anglo-Celtic culture of Catholic Australia, New Norcia has consistently provoked comment as a “town like no other,” and its resources make a range of educational ventures possible. It is a Benedictine monastery with a global network offering rich collections of art and artefacts, a large library especially strong in monastic theology, an involvement with Aboriginal Australians spanning more than 160 years, and archival holdings that offer unique insight into the complex history of the multi-faceted enterprise and its diverse key leaders. Importantly, New Norcia also continues to be the home of a Benedictine community, and the public programs under discussion here are grounded in the rhythm of a monastic timetable and the presence of the monks.

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9 David Hutchinson, A Town Like No Other: the living tradition of New Norcia (Fremantle, Aus: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995); David Barry, “New Norcia” in Historical Encyclopedia of Western Australia, ed. Jenny Gregory and Jan Gothard (Crawley, Aus: U Western Australia Press, 2009).


The environment of the town and what Michael Casey calls the "emotional ambiance"\(^\text{13}\) of a monastic community shape the learning experiences at New Norcia. Aerial photographs of the town show the Great Northern Highway running south to north, or left to right, through the picture paralleling the Moore River to the east beyond the monastic buildings. The east-west axis of the town runs through the central cloister of the monastery, through the church and the founder’s tomb within it to the graves of later abbots in the cemetery. The zones of activity within the town shape the experience of visitors and students: the monastic enterprise is broadly in the east; apostolic ventures are to the west comprising school buildings, some now converted into art gallery and museum, or education and conference centres. Historically, the apostolic zone was also gendered: the women and girls of the town, both Aboriginal and European, were to the south; the men and boys to the north as well as in the eastern monastic zone. The requirements of work blurred those boundaries, but there were quite distinctive and gendered patterns of travel through the town, inherited informally in the tour routes taken by visitors today. The church at the centre, once surrounded by cottages built for the Aboriginal workers and their families, was and remains the center of it all.

The participants in the public programs also follow a prescribed, relatively privileged path through the town. Both programs are based in the guesthouse cloister, with easy access to the monastery’s oratory. While the monks keep a monastic enclosure, a private space, the theology students are also invited into those spaces (such as the refectory and the community’s library) from time to time. The guesthouse rooms are a two-minute walk from the workrooms of the archives, and ten minutes from the library’s new reading rooms across the highway. Students also range over other locations, from olive ground to flour mill to museum storage to library stacks to sacristy to cemetery, as essay topics and interests develop. For retreatants, the chapel dedicated to Gertrude of Helfta in the college that bears her name is ten minutes on foot from the guesthouse, and in two sessions in the chapel participants read the iconography of Gertrude reproduced there and explore the story of the chapel itself. In both programs the physical spaces of the monastic town become the learning environment.

Monastic time also becomes part of the learning environment. The monastic timetable of prayer at seven times in the day underpins both

offerings, and the Offices of vigils, lauds, midday, early afternoon, vespers, and night prayer frame the seven days of the academic subjects, and the weekend of the retreat. Within this pattern of prayer, the work of the graduate and undergraduate subjects falls broadly into two halves, with input on the history of monasticism and aspects of the Australian experience in the morning, and work on the assessment tasks drawing on the archival and library resources in the afternoon and early evenings.

The opportunity to use primary material related to the mission and the monastery in a fully functioning private archive is one of the features of this subject; the fact that students work with documents and their research questions within a monastic timetable, balancing the demands of the day, and working collaboratively with the archivist, with each other, and with the teacher, to frame essay proposals and complete research tasks is a key component in the formational impact of the work. The mid-July visit to the monastic town is a genuinely intensive week, and the preparation meetings in Melbourne in May and the research meetings following on in September are important steps in the process. The two-day retreat experience is not only much shorter, but also does not assume any shared background or common purpose among participants. After introducing the historical material effectively, the key aim is to provide reflective space. For both groups, however, powerful assumptions about the relationship between the present and the past come into play.

QUESTIONS OF HISTORICAL METHOD: NEITHER "OURSSELVES IN FANCY DRESS" NOR "BEYOND THE UNBRIDGEABLE CHASM"

Everyone arrives at New Norcia with assumptions. When on the first evening in town, the ten monks of the contemporary community at New Norcia file into chapel in their black habits with flowing scapulars or pleated cowls covering their belted tunics, it is salutary to remember Rowan Williams’ warning that the past is not simply “the present in fancy dress.”¹⁴ I have no doubt that some visitors, students and retreatants included, assume their “fancy dress” is a romantic tribute to the past, and are inclined to see the monastery as an immediately accessible “theme park” of simple rural life or Christian values. But this is neither the past nor even the present in fancy dress,

¹⁴ Williams, 88.
rather a monastic community in monastic dress. Historical work makes clear that there is a story that informs the decisions about wardrobe, a collective memory to be investigated. No one should assume so quickly that the reality is so simple.

When later that evening the retreat group encounters such fourteenth-century realities as child oblation and the highly-charged language of Gertrud’s visions, or when on the third morning of the academic subject the students meet at the archive, knowing but not really believing until they see it that eighty per cent of the material is in Spanish, Italian, Latin and French and that some of the English-language material comes in remarkably indecipherable handwriting, the other and contrasting warning of Rowan Williams about the past comes into view: that it is impossibly inaccessible, embedded in its own context and entirely foreign. With assessment tasks to complete based on relatively short engagement with the archives, the tertiary students sometimes face real anxiety. The first briefing in the archive implicitly acknowledges the ontological challenge, and, among assurances that the tasks are cumulative, can be collaborative, that plenty of support is built-in, and also includes the axiom that, “Research is like travel overseas. The best advice anyone can give you is: Don’t panic.”

The students’ research journals over several years now indicate that the expectation of real research is formational at the level of self-awareness and self-confidence, as much as it is about training in methods of historical investigation. More precisely, as the theorists of the community of practice approach would argue, the academic experience is formational because it involves applying theories of historical method to independent research in a working archive, among other researchers and local expert users. The gulf that students feel personally between their own initial understanding and the records is also a reality that the historical discipline navigates collectively.

Rowan Williams reminds practitioners that there is a way to navigate the chasm between the present and the past, to build a bridge between contemporary questions and inscrutable sources, and tools that can be honed for this task. No one should assume so quickly that this task is so impossible. Neither simple nor impossible: by the end of

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16 Williams, 89-90.
17 Williams, passim, but especially 24, 88-94.
the programs participants have often been surprised on the one hand and on the other, challenged, or even held accountable, by what their study of the past has uncovered for them. This is an understanding of history as an integrative, formative discipline taken up in some depth by Williams, and reflected in other recent work within the discipline.

This potentially transformative dynamic of historical work, whereby scholars are, on the one hand, surprised by and, on the other hand, connected to the past they study, cuts through the two fallacies identified by Rowan Williams and opens the way for building bridges of interpretation and understanding. Williams calls this an understanding “by analogy” that the past is both like and unlike us.18 The medieval historians Louise D’Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys discuss it as a “reciprocity” of relationship between scholars and the people they know through the texts.19 It is identified by Michael Casey in his work on monastic formation as an existential method of “reading ancient texts in the light of present reality.”20

There is no simple window through which to access an authentic view of the past, but there are lenses that reveal important vistas. It is useful to sketch the two pervasive but false images of history Williams has identified, before outlining the more fruitful and authentic stance of analogy, or reciprocity, or existential engagement. In the first misunderstanding where the past is simply ourselves “in fancy dress” there is the danger of a flattening “presentism.”21 In this view, often dear to those who claim the label “traditionalist” with a dogmatic intensity, history is an exotic theme park where everything is transparent, comprehensible and easy to re-create; nothing like a foreign country with distinct and sometimes misleading assumptions.

Against this, Williams reminds his readers that “superficial correspondence in what is done or said [across time] should not mislead us as to the labour needed for understanding.”22 Words and gestures, images and rituals can all have vastly different meaning in one context compared to another. Williams argues that to assume the meaning of past texts and events translates easily “is to treat the texts of the past as closing off history, putting an end to our self-awareness as historical persons involved in unpredictable growth.”23 Instead, influenced by

18 Williams, 101-2.
20 Casey, 159.
22 Williams, 88.
23 Williams, 94.
Michel de Certeau among others, he holds the task of the historian is to make the past “strange,” and to make our own ways of being and thinking “strange” to ourselves by the careful engagement with other ways of thinking, other ways of ordering life.\(^24\) Not being open to being surprised by the past, simply holding it to be familiar, is the first fallacy.

The opposite error to approaching history as a theme park of ourselves is the view that the past is lost on the other side of an unbridgeable chasm of difference. This position holds that to approach another era outside its own terms is inevitably to distort it irretrievably. More commonly held by those who claim the label “progressive,” this view privileges the contemporary context and discounts the possibility and also the worth of engaging with a past that is not simply strange, but “radically foreign.”\(^25\) Rather than recognizing a present that has “become” out of the past,\(^26\) this “misplaced certainty”\(^27\) disengages the contemporary world from other times so that “everything begins with us.” The past may be a series of unsuccessful attempts to “be” the present (as enlightened, as educated, as healthy, as technologically adept, etc.) but it certainly cannot raise questions for the present.

However, Williams reminds readers that understanding always involves recognizing and engaging “the other.”\(^28\) Human minds do this instinctively, he argues, and all the more in communities shaped by a “charismatic memory”\(^29\) of relationship. To assume that it is not possible to build a bridge of memory and interpretation across the chasm of strangeness, to close the possibility of being challenged by the past, is the second fallacy. The quick despatch of two attractive but unsatisfactory misunderstandings should not suggest that the task of historical understanding is simple, but it is important.

The past matters. Williams argues that the past matters, as a matter of faith, to Christians because it is important to stand in solidarity and continuity with other believers in other times as well as in other places.\(^30\)

\(^{24}\) Williams, 24.
\(^{25}\) Williams, 89.
\(^{26}\) Williams, 101.
\(^{27}\) Williams, 88.
\(^{28}\) Williams, 89-90. He associates the view that the past is inaccessible especially with Denis Nineham, Christianity, Medieval and Modern (London: SCM Press, 1993).
\(^{30}\) Williams, 105.
There are no hermetic seals between who I am as a Christian and the life of a believer in, say, twelfth-century Iraq, any more than between myself and a believer in twenty-first century Congo, Arkansas or Vanuatu. I do not know theologically where my debts begin and end.\(^\text{31}\)

The Christian church aims to bring members into relationship with Jesus Christ, and in an important sense to become contemporaries with Jesus, and with each other, across time as well as place, under what Williams calls “the alien sovereignty of God.”\(^\text{32}\) This relationship, the bond through time that bridges the historical gulf between Jesus in his context and believers in our own time, is necessary for the ongoing discipleship of the church. The bond through time in Jesus Christ is part of accepting the alien sovereignty of God, and forges believers into radical and transformative relationship with our own context.\(^\text{33}\)

As the work to dismiss both anachronistic recreation and blind ignorance shows, the understanding of the past is not simple. Williams comments on the delicate balancing act of interpretation, and cites Henri de Lubac on the significance of both critique and commitment especially when people of faith read documents of faith:

We are liable to erode the real difference between present and past, ignoring what makes the past genuinely strange to us; we are equally liable to treat the past simply as a set of inadequate attempts to think or do what we now know how to think and do. But a theologically intelligent reading of our history requires something more serious. For a grasp of real difference as well as real continuity, we need what de Lubac calls the critic; we need to allow critical scholarship to suspect and turn inside out what is before us, to do its worst; but we cannot lose sight of the fact that, if this history is indeed ours, to examine it is to examine our own identity.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{31}\) Williams, 27.
\(^{32}\) Williams, 114. For the centrality of God’s alien sovereignty for Williams see Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams, a Critical Introduction* (London: T & T Clark, 2012).
\(^{33}\) Williams, 7-10, 28-31, 113-14.
Believers therefore understand the past of the Christian community “analogically,” that it is both like and unlike us. Historical work connects believers with “the unceasing conversation of the Body of Christ in time.”35 Engaging with the Christian past is a critical, scientific and also spiritual task that “decenters” current certainties.36

Accepting that history is understood as well as told for a purpose challenges some clichés about “history as fact,” but such narrow, scientific definitions of the discipline have always had to encounter the reality that “facts” do not speak for themselves, until historians give them a voice. E. H. Carr’s enduring essay from 1961 described this interdependence as “a continuous process of interaction between the historian[s and their] facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”37 The dual vocality of history underpins the discipline in ways that more recent theoreticians have also recognised. Michel de Certeau has pointed to the “split structure” (structure dedoublée) of historical writing as a key feature that distinguishes history from fiction,38 and embeds the discourse in both the present of the historian and the past of the sources being explored.39 Both realities are crucial; “we cannot understand what [historical discourses] say independently of the practice from which they result.”40 and the “split structure” makes this clear. History presents the past through a network of citations that establishes both the sources and the community of conversation around them and, simultaneously, through the historian’s own narrative that “transforms the quoted elements into something else.”41 Perhaps, this something else is a narrative bridge of understanding.

It has been easier for recent historians to claim the importance of the present in shaping the text, than to own the claims of the past. The innovative collection Maistresse of My Wit sought to explore the ways in which medieval women were not simply objects of study but also guides and teachers for the scholars who worked through their texts and found themselves “to be transformed, conspicuously or subtly, in

35 Williams, 110.
36 Williams, 110.
39 Certeau, 95.
40 Certeau, 20.

D'Arcens and Feros Ruys, “Preface” in Maistresse of My Wit, ix.


become, not an authentic version of the community that once upon a
time already existed, but to be more authentically the new humanity in
this context.⁴⁸

ADULT LEARNING AND HISTORICAL SOURCES: THE
MONASTERY AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The persuasive case made by Williams and the others that
understanding the interplay between the present and the past is an
essential dimension of discipleship, or membership of any community
that prizes charismatic memory, does not in itself explain why there is
any particular reason to study the past on location. Why is it that the
context of the small monastic community should make such a difference
to both the engagement with and analysis of historical material?

Three influential and interconnected concepts of adult learning
identified by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 seem to suggest an
answer.⁴⁹ Their model of “situated learning,” in which “communities
of practice” and “legitimate peripheral participation” are central, has
become a frequently cited touchstone in understanding the complex
interactions that constitute “informal learning.” First articulated to
explain how people learned traditional skills or were inducted into a
profession, and applied to midwifery training in Peru and master tailoring
in Liberia as well as to professional faculties in the West, they argue for
“a view of learning that goes beyond mere transfer of knowledge.”⁵⁰
Instead, learning “is a process of participation in communities of
practice, participation that is at first legitimately peripheral but that
increases gradually in engagement and complexity.”⁵¹

Focused on how cultural and social practices are conveyed along
with formal knowledge, “situated learning” is differentiated from field
education and study abroad programs most clearly because it assumes
that transfer of knowledge is embodied. “Situated learning” is focused
on the ways in which knowledge is conveyed, and looks beyond the
cerebral acceptance or rejection of concepts to how knowledge is used

⁴⁸ Williams, 102.
⁴⁹ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation
(Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge U, 1991). I am grateful to Sharon Hollis and Christine Sorenson
for conversations on this material. On the influence of this work see for example, Ian Lang and
Roy Canning, “The use of citations in educational research: the instance of the concept ‘situated
⁵⁰ Lave and Wenger, 47.
to explain and interpret experience. "[N]either wholly subjective, nor
fully encompassed in social interaction, [learning] is not constituted
separately from the social world (with its own structures and meanings)
of which it is a part." 52 They argue that such learning is essentially
communal and contextual, negotiated between "newcomers" and "old
timers" familiar with the community’s practice.

The setting of the monastic community is then not simply an
evocative backdrop for the exploration of the monastic sources, it
shapes a culture in which the sources of the monastic tradition are taken
seriously and expected to make an impact. The monks themselves
and the sites that make the life and work of the Benedictines and the
Aboriginal people visible are central to this, but the rural setting itself
is also significant. Recent research on human cognition is pointing
to the positive impact of quiet and nature on people’s capacity for
deep thinking and processing of information. Warning against the
overstimulation of electronic media, Nicholas Carr cites work to
show that "after spending time in a quiet rural setting, close to nature,
people exhibit greater attentiveness, stronger memory, and generally
improved cognition." 53 Against cultural practices that keep human
minds in "perpetual locomotion," 54 and encourage the "strip-mining
of ‘relevant content’" 55 via the web, people in an environment where
silence is the norm, and texts are heard or read from printed pages, are
free to "read deeply" and pay attention to their own reflection rather
than follow a set of hyperlinks. The absence of distraction restores
cognitive abilities. Even more importantly it allows the slower
patterns of neural processing necessary for developing empathy
and compassion. 56 Monastic practices of lectio divina are entirely
compatible with this understanding of the significance of letting the
text work deeply on the mind and heart; 57 and Carr’s work shows
that a similarly prayerful, or at least contemplative, stance underpins
human thought itself.

Both the retreat program and the tertiary subjects benefit from
the context and, in different ways, they each form a “community
of practice.” In the retreat, this is focused strongly on the monastic

52 Lave and Wenger, 64.
53 Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains (New York:
54 Carr, 168.
55 Carr, 166.
56 Carr, 219-224.
57 Michael Casey, Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina (Liguori, MO:
Liguori/Triumph, 1996).
patterns of prayer; in the tertiary subjects it extends to include the research work required in the archives and library. Both also operate within a "legitimate periphery of participation," defined spatially by the guesthouse cloister and involving a range of interactions with the Benedictine community and the permanent staff of the town. The invitation to join the monks in prayer underpins both programs, and while retreatants and students do not necessarily choose to do so, all are aware they are welcome to participate in a range of ways without disrupting the pattern. The fit between the Rule of Benedict and the model of "situated learning" is striking. Benedict famously sought to establish a "school for the Lord's service" in which individual capacities would be recognized so that "the strong are challenged and the feeble are not overwhelmed." His Rule is a set of guidelines to be lived, not a set of precepts to be recited.

A monastic community is nothing if not a community of practice. The monks share an explicit commitment to the common goal of seeking eternal life though living the Gospel well together. Benedictines are inducted into the life primarily by living it. Each of the three key principles: obedience to the Rule and an abbot, "stability" of commitment to the community, and the somewhat untranslatable promise of "conversatio morum" or living the life and keeping its disciplined practices, shares a practical quality of getting on with the commitment as the chief way of appreciating its nuances. The first word of the Rule also identifies its central exhortation: "Listen." Listening "with the ear of your heart" commits the monastics to give "complete attention of the whole person" to listen alertly and deeply, so as to form relationships and networks of connectivity.

The Benedictine community lives in the awareness they have not exhausted their understanding of the Rule or the Gospel that they seek to live together through structures of shared prayer and work. The ongoing listening, or "traditioning" is mutual, and involves newcomers and guests. The Rule deals with the process of moving from the peripheral status of newcomer or guest: it happens steadily

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58 Lave and Wengle, 64.
60 Kardong, 527. (64:19)
61 Kardong, 3. (Prol.1).
62 Kardong, 3. (RB Prol.1).
63 Kardong, 6, citing Aquinata Böckmann, Perspectiven der Regula Benedicti, Münsterschwarzach, Ger.: Vier Türme-Verlag, 1986), 20.
64 Kardong, 69 (RB 3.1-3.2); 420 (RB 53.1, 53.8, 53.9); 463-4 (RB 58.1-58.26); 493 (RB 60); 498 (RB 61).
rather than swiftly, the spirits are tested, it is a mutual and relational
decision in the light of the shared project (or not) at each step. There
is recognition of the process of self-investment, mirrored in the
educational literature especially in relation to immersion programs
for language students. Benedict also establishes a life in which the
experienced monks continue to learn. The most senior members of the
community are as committed to the pattern of prayer, work, reading,
and rest as the juniors. People are formed and re-formed in the life
by collaborating with respected practitioners. The abbot as leader is
held accountable by and to the Rule for “deeds more than words,”
and encouraged (even warned) to “be aware of his own brittleness” in
guiding the community together toward God.

Within the broad commitment to Benedictine life the monastic
stance towards study and research is significant for the tertiary students
in particular. Commitment to reading as part of community life can
orient everyone (even the non-scholars) away from settled certainties and
towards continuing exploration. It is not for the sake of the students that
reading from classical and contemporary theology accompanies meals,
that genuine issues of translation arrive by email, or that there are real
concerns to be settled about the provenance of artifacts, writing projects
and collaborative sharing of research going on in the archive; the scholarly
practices are part of the life of the community. This reality has the important
effect of including the academy, the book learning of the students, directly
as a partner in the experience. Rather than an opposition between “formal
or aquisitional” learning of the classroom or the published resource and
the “informal learning” of the situation, or the “practical application of
the skills,” the monastery models an equal partnership between the two. The
monastery also looks to the expertise of students as theologians too.
Those who have published in the journal New Norcia Studies are only one
example; others who take the Benedictine principles into their ministry,
or make recommendations for the New Norcia library, or challenge the
monks on issues of reconciliation, or feminism, or ecumenical practice,
are all part of the reality of the community of practice.

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(Web, 22 July 2012).
66 Kardong, 236-8 (RB 25); 240 (RB 27).
67 Kardong, 47-48 (RB 2.12); see also Kardong’s discussion, 53-4.
68 Kardong, 527 (RB 64.13).
69 Paul Hodge and others, “Revisiting ‘how we learn’ in academia: practice-based learning
The formal assessment tasks give the tertiary students a particular entrée into the reality of the monastic pattern. Over the week of the subject they have genuine work to do, and this collective commitment distinguishes them from other interested visitors or less focused retreatants. The formal assessment tasks are designed around the primary sources available in the archive. In one exercise, students write in two contrasting genres in response to specified source material. Students are free to work collaboratively in the archive, and often do, sharing insights on the material and possible approaches. The simple reality that the source material can prompt more than one response and that no two responses are alike opens out the discussion of the past that can both surprise and engage us in the present. A second requirement is to write an essay on a topic defined in response to their own interests and the material in the archives. Work on the essay begins in the preparation sessions 6-8 weeks before the onsite intensive, but projects often change direction and focus as the experience unfolds.

A proportion of students choose essays on aspects of monastic life: obedience, authority, hospitality, stability; others focus on the encounter between the early missionaries and the Aboriginal people, or the ongoing life of the mission and surrounding community. There have been essays on the plans to build a large cathedral in the town, on the history of the New Norcia golf club, the olive grove, the last work of the composer Dom Stephen Moreno, the heritage trail through the town, and various aspects of iconography, on the centennial celebrations, and more. The group in July 2013 developed topics in response to the sites marked in the town’s “river walk” and made the “community of practice” one step more formal in structured discussions with members of the monastic community about their reading of these sites. Students also complete a reflective journal outlining their experience.

When the students reflect on the experience of the monastery in their subject journals they write most often about relationship: with their own sense of vocation and self, with the monastic community, with each other and with God. Within the space provided by the concentrated week, individuals with strikingly idiosyncratic concerns find their needs met in one way or another through the quite particular monastic hospitality that New Norcia offers to the students as their guests, and as members on the legitimate periphery of their community.

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of practice. The journals attest to the reality that the experience makes a difference. Often assumptions about the past are challenged, and both romantic ideals and under-examined prejudices are put aside: history is neither a theme park nor irrelevant, but an arena in which creative links and new understandings are forged.

Frequently it is the pattern of prayer with the monks that emerges as the core of the experience, even for those students who are most excited about primary sources in the archives or most angry about Aboriginal dispossession in the town. Rowan Williams would suggest that this is to be expected; that in the context of worship, of shared and patterned prayer, there is a bridge of community that transcends distinctions of time and place. In the Benedictine tradition this is anything but otherworldly. It is grounded in the repetition of psalms, in the listening to Scripture; it is placed.

This same bridge of deeper listening is also a path that the students travel as researchers, moving from the knowledge that is information to the knowledge that is transformational, more traditionally understood as wisdom. It seems significant that not only in student work at New Norcia but also in other projects, researchers find that defining a topic and developing an argument within the work can proceed (and perhaps most innovatively does proceed) from something like a meditative stance, in which people acknowledge they are open to being changed by the material, in dialogue with it. This is not new, but the formative power of research is perhaps something for the academy to reclaim.

The reciprocal relationship between a story and its teller was so important to Socrates that he feared the technology of writing; the danger was that a disembodied text would offer “no true wisdom ... but only its semblance.” Real knowledge needed to be held “by heart” and conveyed from an internal knowing not by a shallow encounter in which information was read. With the steady development of text-based literary culture in the West, readers learned “the discipline to follow a line of argument or narrative through a succession of printed pages.” As solitary, silent readers merged with the writer to bring the book into consciousness, they became at once, “more contemplative, reflective and imaginative.” Socrates feared that readers would store wisdom on shelves rather than in their heads. Reading certainly replaced memory, but it also meant that as people used books they

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71 Williams, 92-3; 66-70.
72 Socrates in Plato’s Phaedrus, cited Carr, 54.
73 Carr, 75.
74 Carr, 75.
filled their minds with memories of their own choosing, creating idiosyncratic stores of knowledge and moving outside the contours of the expected syllabus.\textsuperscript{75} The relationship between a reader (or researcher) and a text is not static. Readers do not just store information from a text; rather via the crucible of memory they integrate it into a network of other knowing to create something new and unique. In this sense the relationship between the text and the reader remains reciprocal and ontological. Research tasks, and even retreat work, that require readers to engage with strange and non-transparent texts, are inherently creative and fundamentally human; the work cannot be performed by machine. To read not simply for content but with the eyes of the historian’s “split structure,”\textsuperscript{76} to uncover implications, to synthesize and integrate the concerns of the text with questions from the present, is to hone the human capacity to engage the “other.” For Christians, it is to hone the capacity to welcome the stranger and to foster the wisdom that supports “a certain conversational humility in our garrulous and unself-critical culture”\textsuperscript{77} as well as “awareness of the labour involved in historical self-understanding.”\textsuperscript{78}

Augustine did not polarize scientia (knowledge) and sapientia (wisdom) in the way later generations have tended to do, but he did distinguish between them. His treatise \textit{On the Holy Trinity} in particular discusses the interconnection between knowledge and wisdom, and the particular ways in which they form a bridge on which human beings might travel towards God.\textsuperscript{79} For Augustine sapientia or wisdom is something close to worship, the human response of loving God once the mind has learnt of God.\textsuperscript{80} Seeking wisdom is then godly work, and the wisdom we are committed to seek in scholarship, book learning, is also the Wisdom who first seeks us. Rather than mere information or knowledge for its own sake, wisdom draws us into God and then turns us outward. It is, as Augustine implies, the practical, transformative dimension of doing theology well, the transformative dimension of all human knowledge.

\textsuperscript{75} Carr, 172.
\textsuperscript{76} Certeau, 39.
\textsuperscript{77} Williams, 114
\textsuperscript{78} Williams 114.