

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Teaching Island Studies: On Whose Terms?

*Kathleen Stuart*

*PhD Candidate, Fenner School of Environment and Society  
Australian National University*

&

*Research Associate, Institute of Island Studies  
University of Prince Edward Island, Canada*

[stuart.kathy@gmail.com](mailto:stuart.kathy@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Island studies can be deceptively difficult for inexperienced undergraduates due to the field's trans-disciplinary and international scope, advanced academic content and engagement with a wide range of cognitive processes and methodologies. At the same time, island studies can potentially transform and motivate students on a personal level by tapping into their experiential knowledge when they adopt an island-centred standpoint. Such a stance is challenging to measure and not automatically or readily achieved. A teacher of island studies must therefore be sensitive to presenting and studying islands 'on their own terms', but realistic as to what progress can be made at an introductory level by general students. This paper draws upon the author's experience in teaching the core introductory survey course in island studies to undergraduates at the University of Prince Edward Island from 2007 to 2009. That experience is examined in light of the dilemmas which relate to indigenous island geographies.

*Keywords:* experiential learning, interdisciplinarity in education, island studies, spatial behaviour, teaching, undergraduates

© 2010: Institute of Island Studies, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada.

---

### Introduction

*Nissology* is the study of islands 'on their own terms', a definition generally accepted within island studies. Baldacchino has reviewed the "sparse literature" of the past two decades to unpack this definition, calling for "a re-centering of focus from mainland to island, away from the discourse of conquest of mainlanders, giving voice and platform for the expression of island narratives" (Baldacchino, 2008: 37). If it is true that much of what is written about islands has been conceived by outsiders, how can such a call for studying islands 'on their own terms' be effectively interpreted in the classroom? In answering that question, this paper draws upon the author's experience in teaching the core introductory survey course in island studies to undergraduates at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), Canada.

Island Studies courses at the Master's level provide an opportunity for advanced scholars to intensively debate local, regional, global and transdisciplinary themes as well as engage

with a wide range of cognitive processes and methodologies<sup>1</sup>. The context is quite different at the early undergraduate level where students in their late teens and early twenties are generally preoccupied with the trials and tribulations of gaining maturity, achieving good grades and acquiring skills for the workplace. For undergraduates facing student loans and tough economic circumstances, an uncharted career in island studies is beyond imagination, with few pursuing the formal Minor Program in Island Studies (available at UPEI since 1999) when other options are more secure. However, the introductory one-semester core course in island studies has been a popular choice for many undergraduates, providing a broad-ranging, interdisciplinary alternative to applied and more narrowly-focused courses in other disciplines.

Yet, very little has been written about pedagogy specific to island studies. There can be little disagreement that using island studies material is successful in developing academic curiosity in early undergraduate education; this is reviewed in some depth by Sunderlin & Xu (2008) who outline a one-semester course in natural history at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, USA. These authors document the pedagogical strategy of using isolation and island biogeography themes to provide a topical platform for the development of critical and creative thinking for research and analysis among entry-level undergraduates.

With the aim of starting dialogue about the context and manner in which undergraduates in particular are introduced to island studies, this article, written in a semi-autobiographical style, documents my teaching experience as I attempted to engage inner and outer worlds from an island-centred standpoint within the confines of a relatively large class. The case focuses specifically on three semesters from 2007 to 2009 during which I taught the core survey course at the undergraduate level, 'IS 201: Introduction to Island Studies'.

### **Island Studies 201 at the University of Prince Edward Island**

The value of teaching island studies was officially recognized by the University of Prince Edward Island over a decade ago when specific courses in the subject were first introduced at the undergraduate level. Students may choose the Island Studies Minor as a component of a Bachelor degree, drawing material from across a wide range of disciplines. As the UPEI calendar reads:

The lessons of the 'island studies' perspective come from many disciplines. They include geography, sociology, education, economics and political studies; from biology and ecology; from literature and history. As an interdisciplinary program, UPEI's Minor in Island Studies encourages students to make critical connections among studies from diverse fields: obliged to focus on islands, they can witness how the different disciplinary foci can come to connect and converge on specific events or locations. ([www.upei.ca/islandstudies/minorprogram](http://www.upei.ca/islandstudies/minorprogram))

Island Studies 201 is the introductory core course for the Island Studies Minor but can be taken as an elective in any discipline and year. To indicate the popularity of the course, no

---

<sup>1</sup> Such courses also exist at the University of Malta, apart from at UPEI: [www.um.edu.mt/islands/courses/postgraduate](http://www.um.edu.mt/islands/courses/postgraduate) and [www.upei.ca/mais](http://www.upei.ca/mais) respectively. The UPEI program was launched in 2003.

less than 55 students were enrolled in the one-semester class in 2009, a significant number for a small campus. Students arrived from a broad spectrum of disciplines and interests ranging from liberal arts, education and science to business, journalism, nursing and veterinary medicine. For many, especially for students in their third or fourth year in an applied field, it was their final choice as an elective in the Arts. The class consisted of men and women largely in their late teens and early twenties, full time and part time, distributed roughly equally among first, second, third or fourth years.

### *Early Experimentation*

Although I had virtually no previous formal training or experience as a classroom teacher, I was energized by having just completed the Master of Arts Program in Island Studies (MAIS). I was also a native-born Prince Edward Islander with deep cultural roots and had spent most of my life there. Since island studies had been empowering for my own development, I felt excited and somewhat obligated as a member of the Island community to share this knowledge with students. Given the size of my class and heterogeneity of stages and disciplines, I explored a variety of active learning strategies and in-class group work. My approach was to provide a synthesizing framework in which PowerPoint-assisted lectures would be complemented and highlighted by those of knowledgeable others<sup>2</sup> who would stimulate discussion and learning on topics and theories within island studies. The course offered an opportunity for graduate students in the MAIS program to present their emerging research. As a result, my students would be exposed to a broad range of new work by island studies researchers, both local and from around the world, as opportunities arose. Presenters included faculty and graduate students at UPEI and visiting professors in the MAIS program. Each course consisted of 26 lectures, 75 minutes in duration, occurring twice weekly from January to mid-April, as well as occasional field trips.

I had inherited course outlines and lists of readings from previous years that had basically been defined and adapted by each sessional instructor before me to their own style and interests. The latter were primarily in history, human geography, political science, English literature or folklore. As a new professor faced with a much larger enrolment on day one than the seminar-style course first anticipated, I found myself on a steep learning curve. In that first year, 2007, I experimented with various teaching strategies to gain control of the large class which notably culminated in relatively exuberant half-hour group presentations at the end of the course. Early in the term, I had divided the class into small groups which were named by ocean or sea as a frame for the course materials. Within each group presentation at the end of the semester, which was a major component of the evaluation scheme, students gave five-minute talks derived from their term papers about a topic of their choice having to do with an island or archipelago within the ocean or sea of their

---

<sup>2</sup> I thank the following professors and graduate students who contributed to IS 201 classes in 2007, 2008 and/or 2009: Wendy Adams, Faiz Syed Ahmed, Dr. Harvey Armstrong, Roger Baird, Dr. Godfrey Baldacchino, Laurie Brinklow, Prof. Doreley Coll, Hans Connor, Doug Deacon, Crystal Fall, Heather Gushue, Laura Lee Howard, Dr. Ann Howatt, Dolores Levangie, Dr. Bjarne Lindström, Margaret Mizzi, Dr. Irene Novaczek, Karen Smith, Jordan Walker, Simone Webster-Stahl and Barbara Groome Wynne.

group. For example, a local rugby player in the South Pacific group reported on the relevance of the Tongan rugby team to national identity; another in the Mediterranean group reported on eco-tourism in Corsica, having hiked there.

The students eventually settled into working in their groups in class, gaining confidence in their presentation and evaluation skills. Many remarked in evaluations how they enjoyed the group work. Not to be overlooked was the value of having each student pass on to the rest of the class specific knowledge they had gained from their own term papers. This sharing strategy was relatively successful in ensuring that the geography and diversity of islands around the world were represented in some fashion, but it also revealed how students superficially understood *islandness* in ways shaped by the media. The young adults were given agency to respect their own knowledge, improve their communication skills and become exposed to thinking about islands in new ways. It was hoped that the course would resonate with their personal experience on an island or mainland, whether as a permanent or temporary resident (since they were all university students on an island). As the material about islands from different perspectives, as framed by the instructor and guests, unfolded from week to week, various philosophies, methods, tools and drivers of research were encountered or demonstrated so that a critical appreciation of issues in island studies and research could be gained and owned.

Given the limited travel and life experience of many students and their shocking lack of geographic knowledge, group work was a successful strategy enabling voice, especially for first and second year students who were placed in groups with more senior students. Overall scores achieved by each cohort indicated that performance was not correlated with years of university experience. Because the learning process throughout the term involved not only many topics and speakers but also ongoing reflection on the entire syllabus, attendance in class was important: those individuals who participated in every class significantly outperformed those who were absent repeatedly. I recognized early that this was not a class of graduate students in island studies and few intended to pursue the field further. Despite this, 93% of the students who began the course completed it successfully, a clear indication of their commitment. The course was undoubtedly challenging: student work was evaluated with the aid of rubrics that weighted a range of criteria; critical written feedback was given to each student on every assignment except for the experiential exercises. Even though final presentations varied according to student ability and motivation, I observed that almost all of the students had grown in their knowledge, communication skills and appreciation of islands. Overall, the time spent organizing and coordinating the students and their groups that first year, along with nurturing, evaluating and administering a very full and wide-ranging course outline was clearly a challenge, both for the students and an inexperienced sessional instructor. Undaunted, I was determined to improve my teaching skills and streamline my strategies in the following year with a new set of objectives and tools.

Later in 2007, I benefited greatly from attending the UPEI Faculty Development Summer Institute on Active Learning and Teaching, held every August: a week-long intensive program which attracts faculty from universities and colleges across North America. By my second year of teaching, I adopted an open source Course Management System (CMS) known at UPEI as Moodle - <http://moodle.org/> - which was being implemented at UPEI,

adapting it for Island Studies. The Moodle program which has become very popular among educators enabled online communication with my students. Once learned, the program is easy to use, offers a suite of administrative tools and is excellent for a course like island studies which can be drawn from a wealth of online written, aural and visual materials. Moodle allowed my students to have immediate access to the syllabus, readings and materials on reserve in the library, as well as PowerPoint presentations and class notes.

### *Course Content*

Because the field of island studies is broad-reaching and interdisciplinary, the introductory undergraduate survey course was framed to sample many topics to create an overarching awareness of the subject, not venturing too deeply into any one theme, enabling students to progress toward the following outcomes:

- an awareness of the symbolic, material and experiential significance of islands in artistic imagination;
- an understanding and appreciation of social, cultural and literary themes involving islands;
- an ability to locate PEI and the world's islands in relation to one another through archaeology, history, geopolitics, physical and environmental sciences;
- an ability to apply knowledge from this course to analyze strategies for public policy and prosperity in PEI and other islands; and
- an awareness of applying a conceptual toolbox for critical thinking and basic research.

The course was organized into four main themes which provided convenient divisions for focused short-answer written assignments. In addition to required readings which were discussed briefly in class, optional articles were suggested in most topics for advanced students.

The first of the themes, social and cultural, included material on islands in human imagination, insularity, islands in the past, human migration patterns, contemporary migration issues, population strategies (case of Prince Edward Island), social capital, the social economy, and islands in pop culture and literature. The start of each class was signalled by short soundtracks of traditional and contemporary music from islands, highlighting cultural diversity. At the beginning of the term, as another experiential component to explore islandness, students were given several outdoor exercises to introduce rudimentary observation, reflection and note-taking for research purposes. Students were asked to take a solitary walk on their own time along a local city boardwalk by the sea to reflect upon boundedness and to imagine being on the edge of any island; they were then to write a paragraph both before and after reading the course materials which included a short chapter of D.H. Lawrence's *The Man Who Loved Islands* (Lawrence, 1928). The same reflective process was used to prepare for a class on social

networking and social capital. Individual written responses to the exercises were original, subjective and generally enthusiastic, ranging from precise and observant descriptions of sights and sounds to an outpouring of thoughtful essays and poetry about islands and PEI in particular. The experience aided in penetrating the students' awareness and interest in island issues early in the term. It also aided the instructor's understanding of students' capabilities and needs: indeed, the frigid January walk in island studies became a hallmark of the course and a way to discuss, understand and connect with islands and academic work in new ways.

During the second major segment of the course, students were led through physical and environmental themes until the mid-term break. This was after island climate, culture and social life had been literally 'experienced', and a grounded appreciation of the scientific method had been introduced during the first theme. It was hoped that such a counter-intuitive ordering of themes could disrupt established patterns of thinking about islands: away from being merely peripheral spaces, GIS coordinates or exploitable resources. At the same time, students were introduced to practical and applied tools and matters of map work, latitude and longitude, island geology and landscape, island environments, biodiversity, gender issues in Pacific islands, artisanal fisheries and sea plant harvesting, and a case study from the island of Dominica on human health and well-being. The problem that most of my young students had with mapping and spatial concepts persisted, as most were unable to name or locate islands in relation to other islands, continents and bodies of water. This presented a challenge as I tried to introduce historical material on Captain Cook's contribution to the development of longitude through his South Pacific exploits, and J. D. Hooker's 1866 musings on differences in biodiversity amongst the Atlantic Islands. Such tales provide a rich context for exploring concepts such as colonial expansion and imperialism. Although considerably fluent with GIS concepts and proprietary online map software (like Google Maps), many of my students had trouble naming islands, particularly beyond their immediate region, except perhaps for Hawaii and Cuba; they had difficulty finding oceans and were generally unfamiliar with atlases, flat maps or globes which they deemed obsolete.

The next theme of politics and public policy was introduced with a keynote lecture on power and powerlessness, formal and informal political power and jurisdiction as a resource by Godfrey Baldacchino, the UPEI-based Canada Research Chair in Island Studies. Lectures followed: on governance and public policy; politics, land-use and traditional medicine on Chiloé Island, Chile; international relations of small island states; offshore banking and taxation strategies; Åland as a sub-national island jurisdiction in Finland; and colonial influences in the Caribbean and Latin America. One lecture focused on early colonial expansion, imperialism and its legacy for land use, natural resources and human resources in islands today. What I first thought would be a challenging problem for inexperienced undergraduates became a successful assignment on public policy in Prince Edward Island, generating much discussion and impassioned responses. A class was also devoted to attending presentations by MAIS students during the annual UPEI Graduate Research Day as a means to identify and connect with island studies research underway by other, fellow UPEI students.

The final weeks of the course turned to economic themes where many students, particularly those in applied fields, felt more at home. This theme was left until the end of the course in a deliberately counter-intuitive progression to stimulate critical thinking and reduce the usual dominance of this theme in decision-making. It was also a theme which was more likely to receive attention in other courses. Topics included manufacturing on islands, types of island economies, island branding, tourism and municipal governments in small places.

In 2009, the course wrap-up was devoted to hearing each student give a précis of their 10-page term papers in the context of small discussion groups arranged by theme. Given the wide range of backgrounds and competencies, it was suggested that students choose a topic of their interest using the syllabus as a guide, then formulate a question to pursue by ocean then by island. Students were encouraged to corroborate their findings with primary data gathered directly from the island or community they chose for study in order to reinforce what they had learned about the research process and methods. Written work and participation were evaluated on critical thinking, content and presentation. Despite issues with literacy which surfaced throughout the course for some students, the calibre of final papers was impressive, ranging from the humanities to the sciences, often expressing a local rather than global focus. For instance, one student in his second year reflected upon his own experience to argue for improvements in youth programming in Prince Edward Island; he had obtained federal and provincial data which he corroborated through personal contact with deputy ministers and social workers; he then delivered his own creative and credible recommendations for change. Another wrote a grounded, intense personal account of the crisis in the hog industry in PEI. Some students did tackle issues on islands elsewhere: one provided an excellent review of the scientific literature in analyzing conflict over traditional dolphin harvesting practices on a remote island of Japan; another paper reported on air quality issues due to fallout from volcanoes in Hawai'i.

I was very pleased to see the growth and achievement of my students given the prodigious scope and breadth of interdisciplinary material they were required to digest. Some frustration was expressed over the counter-intuitive sequencing of course themes; term evaluations by the students included such comments as “I was frustrated at the beginning, but ended up enjoying the course” and “I really enjoyed the uniqueness of the class, the topics and the guest speakers”. Assignments with many choices provided a suite of opportunities for learning: the fifty-five students in my 2009 class attended twice-weekly lectures and readings, handed in four written assignments, ventured on two experiential exercises, researched and wrote a 10-page term paper, took a field trip, completed a mid-term test, gave group presentations in class and wrote a final examination. Several of my students have been empowered to proceed to higher education as a result of finding island studies material that speaks to their situation on Prince Edward Island; at the very least, they will be able to incorporate awareness of island studies into such disciplines as history, political science or environmental studies. Island studies will also surely sensitize those students in applied disciplines to appreciate the smaller scale and bounded context when they treat patients, listen to clients, hear children, design roundabouts, advertise tourism, or investigate stories.

## Conclusion

It is generally agreed that a liberal education system needs to provide interdisciplinary approaches to solving complex problems that have no unique or solitary cause or effect (Sunderlin & Xu, 2008: 199). Sustainability science, for one, aspires to being applied and policy relevant: it has been critiqued for needing to span and transcend many disciplines as well as a wide range of spatial as well as temporal scales between diverse phenomena (Sherren *et al.*, 2009: 3). There is also a wide range of outlooks regarding what makes knowledge usable within both science and society (Kates *et al.*, 2001: 641). A comprehensive survey course devoted exclusively to island studies can certainly provide an interdisciplinary approach. The study of islands around the world in all their diversity can also serve to highlight the four key “pillars” of sustainability described by Hawkes (2001: 25): economic viability, environmental responsibility, social justice and cultural vitality. Granted, the nuances of island studies subject matter become unexpectedly challenging and intense for early undergraduates who may also be struggling with unrelated academic issues and standards. Courses such as ‘global studies’, recently introduced into the early undergraduate curriculum at the University of Prince Edward Island, are addressing this need for more focused solutions to enhance learning and critical thinking; but they have also drawn the focus away from the unique value of island studies as a broadly-based, integrated and demonstrative field of study.

Where interdisciplinary approaches in island studies are contemplated in undergraduate education, it is advisable to provide a unifying theme for the whole semester, such as the comprehensive framework grounded in island studies described earlier, or the more specific isolation and natural history theme described by Sunderlin & Xu (2008). Otherwise, important aspects of island studies scholarship can dissolve into a confusing stream of anecdotes and footnotes shaped by a multitude of other disciplines.

Studies about islands do not necessarily constitute ‘island studies’, which is nuanced by the concept of ‘on their own terms’ and other concerns for island studies scholars. As Prof. Baldacchino (2008: 44) notes, “There will always be epistemological and methodological challenges associated with studying islands because we are grappling with the impact, conditioning and paradigmatic effects of the hybrid identity and ‘location’ of subjects as well as those who would study them”. Nissological dilemmas all contribute to the field’s complexity, for example, in day-to-day communicative behaviour in a small society there is the risk of disclosure and engagement; there are often expectations around extended colonial relationships; and there is even the inability to categorically define islands, islanders and island studies (*ibid.*). Topics such as these surfaced from time to time throughout the undergraduate survey course and were integrated into discussion in various contexts. Any one of these dilemmas could easily be made the subject of a full course in island studies at an advanced level.

Despite these concerns, results from term papers, experiential exercises, class discussions and my conversations with students indicate that island studies has the potential to transform and motivate students on a personal level by tapping into experiential knowledge when an island-centred standpoint is adopted. However, such a stance requires reflection, not simply ‘making the strange familiar’ but also ‘making the familiar strange’: it is not automatically or readily achieved. It is difficult to detect, needing to be evaluated

subjectively; this task is made even more complex when students are in early stages of reading and communicating in traditional Western academic form. In graduate work where the scrutiny of islandness is more intense, an awareness of the island-centred standpoint is developing, if not already present (although it may take months or even years to emerge).

My own sense of place and local knowledge of Prince Edward Island geography and culture were advantages in teaching island studies to some of my students but many other factors were at play. Having students in the undergraduate class experience spatial concepts directly by walking along the sea and reflecting upon boundaries of various kinds was successful in raising awareness of their own island-centred standpoint, as inferred from their written submissions. For many, it was also a rare experience in undergraduate education. The notion that undergraduate students are generally unfamiliar with spatial concepts also warrants further research since it may be misunderstood. Islands and their nissological dilemmas demand a deeper understanding of behaviour which is so dependent upon setting. As geographer David N. Livingstone writes: “the standards of practical rationality—what passes as a good reason for believing something—are spatially referenced” (2003: 184). While there is no magic bullet for assuring that island studies are being taught ‘on their own terms’, a teacher of island studies who is experientially aware of spatial (and temporal) references and how they are expressed is better equipped to convey a deeper appreciation for life on islands.

## References

Baldacchino, G. (2008) ‘Studying Islands: On Whose Terms? Some Epistemological and Methodological Challenges to the Pursuit of Island Studies’, *Island Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 37-56.

Hawkes, J. (2001) *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning*, Melbourne, Australia, Common Ground and the Cultural Development Network.

Kates, R.W., Clark, W.C., Corell, R., Hall, J.M., Jaeger, C.C., Lowe, I., McCarthy, J. J., Schellnhuber, H.J., Bolin, B., Dickson, N.M., Faucheux, S., Gallopin, G.C., Grubler, A., Huntley, B., Jager, J., Jodha, N.S., Kasperson, R.E., Mabogunje, A., Matson, P. & Mooney, H (2001) ‘Sustainability Science’, *Science*, Vol. 292, No. 5517, pp. 641-642.

Lawrence, D.H., Mehl, D. & Jansohn, C. (1995) *The Woman Who Rode Away and Other Stories (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D.H. Lawrence)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Livingstone, D.N. (2003) *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press.

Sherren, K., Klovdahl, A.S., Robin, L., Butler, L. & Dovers, S. (2009) ‘Collaborative Research on Sustainability: Myths and Conundrums of Interdisciplinary Departments’, *Journal of Research Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Article M1. <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/163/167>.

Sunderlin, D. & Xu, L. (2008) 'An Island Studies Course at a Liberal Arts Institution: Pedagogy from a Natural History Perspective', *Island Studies Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 199-210.