**Citizen Social Science in the Classroom: Criminology Students’ Perceptions of Prisoner Records**

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**Abstract**

Inspired by the longer established citizen science, citizen social science projects in the classroom can have positive effects on student engagement and learning outcomes. This article reports on the incorporation of a citizen social science assessment task requiring students to undertake the transcription of digitised historical prisoner records in Criminology and History courses at two Australian universities in 2020. Analysis of student responses (Criminology n = 42 and History n = 6) found that students were highly engaged by the exercise and gained new insights into change in criminal justice systems, the impact of social inequality on criminalisation and understandings of offender motivation. We conclude that the incorporation of citizen social science into the criminology classroom can lead to significant benefits in terms of student engagement, deep learning and enhancing the teaching-research nexus.

Keywords: history, Australia, prisoners, citizen social science

**Introduction**

Finding ways to keep students engaged within digital environments has led to innovative pedagogy in higher education. With online study a growing part of the university experience – even pre-COVID-19 – academics are grappling with how to keep students connected to each other and course material while using new technologies to teach. Concurrently, there is a push for academics to develop assessments aimed at replicating authentic experiences of work and research, and heightened pressure for the humanities and social sciences in particular to foreground their real-world relevance. In this article we report on one strategy for addressing these challenges: the use of a citizen social science-based exercise as an assessment task in a Criminology course at an Australian university.

We argue that involving students in current research projects gives academic staff an opportunity to break down barriers between theoretical and practical forms of knowledge for their students, making the course content more engaging and giving the opportunity to better understand scholarly research by directly contributing to it.

**Citizen Science, Citizen History and Digital Humanities**

There has been growing interest across the last three decades in research-led teaching and research-based learning. These approaches integrate teaching and academic research to provide students with direct experiences of the research processes, methodologies and findings in their field of study. Research-led teaching has been welcomed as a means of promoting active and inquiry-based learning (Brew 2002), enabling students to develop transferable skills in research, professional practice, critical inquiry and problem-solving (Haaker & Morgan-Brett 2017), and representing authentic experiences valued by and engaging to students themselves (Deakin 2006). Given the interdisciplinary nature of much contemporary academic research, in some cases the same research-led teaching activity has applications across different disciplinary contexts, suggesting that the approach can be particularly suitable for programmes or subjects that are transdisciplinary in nature, or that aim to foster transdisciplinary approaches in their students (Holbrook & Devonshire 2005).

Citizen science is a method of conducting research that particularly lends itself to integration with a research-led teaching approach (Haaker & Morgan-Brett 2017). Also referred to as ‘crowdsourcing’, citizen science is a term used to describe a broad range of activities where volunteers contribute their time and work to complete small tasks necessary to a wider research project (Piper 2020). Typical tasks requested of volunteers involved in crowdsourcing initiatives include capturing and/or classifying images or transcribing handwritten records. These are tasks that require human processing of information but not an advanced level of technical skill or training.

The sciences have been the disciplines to most quickly and enthusiastically embrace the use of academic crowdsourcing in research projects, drawing on an established tradition in which even prior to the Internet, “amateur” researchers or citizen scientists made contributions to fields such as astronomy, zoology and botany (Hendon 2011). In the humanities, particularly the field of history, existing communities of heritage enthusiasts and family historians provide a ready pool of volunteers for citizen humanities projects set up by academic researchers, or more often, by collecting institutions like galleries, libraries, archives and museums (Hedges & Dunn, 2018). Equivalent ‘citizen social science’ projects that involve ordinary citizens in the process of social science research – as researchers, rather than subjects of study – have been slower to develop.

As Fischer et al. (2021) note, in comparison to the sciences and humanities, the social sciences’ use of participatory research is underdeveloped, with much of the discussion still at the conceptual level. A brake on the development of citizen social science is the nature of the constituent disciplines’ research materials. Whether data are collected by government institutions in aid of public service initiatives or by researchers in purpose designed surveys or interviews, they are protected under privacy acts and ethical protocols. They cannot be made openly accessible in the way which is central to crowdsourcing projects.

Turning to the case of criminology, the ethical issues of presenting contemporary crime records to the public for classification or annotation present an obvious challenge to this discipline’s engagement with citizen social science. One solution is to turn to the rich archives of historical documents related to crime. Incorporating citizen social science in the classroom through engagement with historical sources could have the additional effect of increasing criminology scholars’ awareness of what can be gained from the use of such sources, alerting both established and emerging researchers to deeper historical trends in crime and criminal justice (Nagy 2021). It offers a potential corrective to the ‘presentism’ of criminology long criticised by historians and criminologists alike (Churchill, Yeomans and Channing 2022; Roth 2017; Lawrence 2012; Nagy 2021; Pratt 1996; Dixon 1996; Weis 1971). There is an ongoing sense amongst historical criminologists that within the discipline of criminology, criminal justice is presented as having ‘no past and current policies and developments have no historical precedents’ (Jones 1994, p. 167). Active involvement with publicly-held records would also help to advance the efforts of public criminology to connect with non-criminological and non-academic audiences (Loader and Sparks 2011). The classroom and using historical sources to keep knowledge of the past alive, are good starting points for a public criminology that is about debate, and collective self-understanding (Brown and Rafter 2013; Sexton 2020).

One reason that crowdsourcing approaches have proved particularly popular in the sciences, is that the method is valued as a means of not only speeding up the process of scientific research but increasing scientific literacies among the general public (Tippins & Jensen 2012; Herodotou et al. 2018). Support for the ‘citizen humanities’ has also been linked to a capacity to develop humanities-related knowledge and abilities amongst the wider community (Hedges and Dunn 2018). This is based in part on findings that acquiring new knowledge is one of the motivations most frequently mentioned by volunteers for participating in crowdsourcing research projects (Lee et al. 2018; Jennett et al. 2016). Studies of crowdsourcing projects have found that participants emerge with new knowledge and skills (Cox et al. 2015; Meka and Vigliotti 2018). This therefore suggests that the integration of crowdsourcing into the classroom will have beneficial effects on criminology students.

The authentic and active learning opportunities provided by having students engage in real-life research tasks has led to the ready incorporation of crowdsourcing projects into classrooms from pre-school to university level (Jenkins 2011). The bulk of the attention of crowdsourcing activities in the classroom though appears to be with upper-level high school and university students. Most contemporary citizen science or crowdsourcing projects are built on online platforms through which volunteers can directly access and work with research records, with the result that they are well suited to support blended or online forms of learning (Haaker & Morgan-Brettt 2017). Consequently, some research projects that involve a citizen science element now purposively develop learning guides, lesson plans or other materials designed to help educators integrate the projects into their teaching. Some of these are useful for teaching across multiple age groups and schooling levels, for example the NASA Globe Cloud Gaze project (NASA Globe Cloud Gaze, n.d.).

The use of crowdsourcing projects in teaching does have its critics. In particular, the issue has been raised that in some cases the types of activities undertaken mean that conceptual understanding remained superficial or incoherent or did not necessarily translate into reasoning abilities that enabled participants to draw meaning from the research (Prather 2013). Digital curator Mia Ridge in particular has questioned whether history-focused crowdsourcing projects develop the types of competencies in their ‘citizen historians’ that are expected of university history graduates (Ridge 2014). The issue is that most crowdsourcing work is characterised by ‘data shaping’ tasks, such as transcribing historical documents, rather than the type of ‘knowledge shaping’ tasks, like evaluating those historical sources, that would develop the critical abilities that humanities programs typically seek to instil (Alam and Campbell 2017). Rockwell (2012) argues that humanities crowdsourcing projects should cater to differing volunteer backgrounds and motivations, accommodating those for whom simple, methodical tasks may provide a sufficient experience of research processes as well as those ready to undertake more reflective or analytical work. In the case of citizen history projects, it has been argued that they should be constructed not just to meet the needs of researchers, but in ways that develop critical literacies among the wider community by offering varied opportunities for formal and informal learning (Piper 2020). Such projects provide excellent chances to engage in research-led teaching and experience active learning.

**Settings and Method**

To test the efficacy of citizen social science projects in engaging the interest and deepening the learning of criminology students,in 2020, the authors developed a project which would introduce a citizen social science experience into a large first-year Criminology course at the University of Tasmania. The same task was run at the University of Newcastle, also in Australia, with a History cohort. We were interested in how similar or different the responses would be from the two student groups and whether there was anything that we could learn from the History cohort viewpoints on the assessment task to apply to and improve Criminology student experiences.

The jointly developed task was a Primary Source Transcription and Self-Reflection exercise which required students to transcribe hand-written prison entry records created between 1860 and 1920 in the Victorian criminal justice system. By doing so, students were actively participating in the creation of an online digital resource for the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) as part of Alana Piper’s *Criminal Characters* project. This project has relied on volunteers from across the world to transcribe the historical Victorian Central Prison Register as the foundation of a database used to inform scholarly research (Piper 2020). In addition to transcription, volunteers have undertaken data linkage with the National Library of Australia’s Trove (primarily its digitised historical newspapers) as well as making insightful commentary on the cases they transcribed. The project has to date resulted in the completion of over 196,000 transcriptions.

This task offered a unique opportunity for students to get to know historical offenders through their criminal records and newspaper accounts of their lives in a way which would not be possible with contemporary data due to legal and privacy restrictions.

***Criminology Students***

The data for the Criminology discipline comes from students enrolled in the University of Tasmania (UTAS) HGA206/306 Crime and Criminal Justice unit of whom 42 consented to having their assessments used in this current analysis. The majority of the 170 students enrolled in the course were majoring in either Criminology or Sociology as part of a Bachelor of Arts or undertaking the unit as an elective within their Law or Psychology degrees. This course was taught in Semester 1, 2020 and was the first criminology unit available as part of the criminology major, meaning that for most students this was their first foray into the discipline although some were either in their second or third year.

UTAS is the only university in Tasmania, and the state is generally ranked as the poorest in Australia, only marginally better off than the Northern Territory (which is technically not a state). Tasmania is classified as a regional location. The history of Tasmania as one of the original convict colonies of the British invasion, coupled together with a history of intergenerational poverty and out-migration, lack of employment opportunities, an aging population, and a generally underfunded public infrastructure means that it is a highly disadvantaged state of Australia with a population just over 540,000 people. Secondary education completion rates are the lowest of any state with fewer than 60% completing Year 12 compared to the national average of 72% (Productivity Commission 2022). Tasmania’s adult literacy rate is also low with almost 50% of the population being functionally illiterate and there is little desire amongst the community to push for secondary education completion (Denny 2018). Therefore, the students participating in Crime and Criminal Justice are often first-in-family to attend university, coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, employed part-time/studying full-time, and entered university from disadvantaged communities.

***History Students***

The History student participants in the comparative group were enrolled in the University of Newcastle’s HIST2006 Australian Underworlds in Semester 2, 2020. In this pandemic year, the course was upgraded onto the FutureLearn platform, which provides a high-quality online learning experience. It was also a year in which students struggled to cope with any additional demands and only 6 of 79 students completed the consent form which allowed their assessment tasks to be analysed in this project. While it was a history course, many of the students had not previously studied the discipline. The largest cohorts were from the Bachelor of Education (Secondary), Bachelor of Social Science, including some Criminology majors, and Bachelor of Arts, but a range of other degrees were represented from Architecture to Social Work.

Newcastle, the lower Hunter Valley and the NSW Central Coast with a combined population of over one million people are the main drawing areas for the University of Newcastle. Just over half of students are the first in their families to attend university, 27% are from low socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds, half have significant paid work and family commitments and 57% are mature age (Student Success Strategy, 2019 – 2022). As this was a second-year course, most had some experience of studying on campus but were relatively new to online learning, after experiencing a rapid transition to recorded lectures and online tutorials as pandemic restrictions were put in place in Semester 1 2020.

***Activity***

Addressing concerns that citizen social science activities alone may not bring about the conceptual understanding or demonstration of reasoning abilities required of tertiary students, the assessment task that students were asked to complete was comprised of three parts. The first was the transcription of three prisoner records; the second required research to contextualise these individuals; and the third asked them to reflect on what they had learned. In order to ensure that both cohorts completed the assignment with the same information, the instructions and materials provided were identical.

Students were informed of the objectives of the assignment which were to:

• Develop knowledge about crime and criminal justice transferable to different professional contexts and roles;

• Interpret and evaluate information sources about crime and the law, in ways that support further development of oral and/or written communication skills;

• Critically reflect on the historical, social, legal and ethical issues that affect crime and criminal justice across different contexts.

Details of the assignment are in Appendix 1. As many of the students did not have experience with a research project or historical primary sources, a video was created by the unit co-ordinators (Nagy and Cushing) for their respective students demonstrating how to access the project and complete the transcriptions. To aid and teach notetaking an “Offender Profile Worksheet” (Appendix 2) was created and uploaded into the relevant Learning Management Systems (LMS). This was not required to be submitted but many students included the worksheet in their assignment submission, demonstrating that it had been of use to them. In order to highlight for students how they would be contributing to the disciplines of history and criminology and supporting Australian research into crime and justice, an interview was recorded between the unit coordinator and Piper emphasising the importance of not only studying but also giving back to the relevant disciplines to help further knowledge. This interview was also uploaded into the relevant LMS.

While all enrolled students completed the assessment task, only work from students who had provided their informed consent was analysed. Human research ethics protocols were secured from both UTAS (Ref.: H0018655) and the University of Newcastle (Ref.: H-2020-0166) and the approved participant information statements and consent forms were made available via the LMS. The opportunity to have their assessments used as part of this research project was advertised to students throughout the semester. At both universities, a separate folder was created by digital education support staff for the consent forms to be deposited via the LMS and this folder was not accessed by the authors until after final marks were released to students thereby preventing any possibility of bias in the marking of the assignments. Students were asked not to discuss their participation in this research project with their course coordinators until after the unit concluded. The COVID-19 pandemic, move to online-only learning, and multiple lockdowns throughout 2020 around Australia had an impact on student motivation to participate especially in the case of UON students. Due to a low response rate at Newcastle, a second approach was made to all students early in 2021, which secured a small number of additional participants.

Students received support in completing their assessments via the online discussion forums on the LMS. At UTAS, due to the size of the unit cohort two sessional tutors were also involved in supporting students through the assignment during tutorials. One of the tutors was completing their PhD in history which meant that they had experience with primary sources, transcriptions, and historical discussions of crime, whereas the other tutor did not have this background but had over 15 years’ experience working with incarcerated people. At Newcastle, support was provided by the unit convenor through a course Discussion Board and online drop-in sessions.

***Analysis***

Where students granted permission to use their assessments, those assessments were downloaded and deidentified. Deidentification involved removing student numbers and names, as well as ensuring that other identifying information such as personal information (e.g., history of victimisation or offending) in the text of the assessment tasks was removed. The deidentified responses were uploaded into university OneDrive folders that were password protected and shared with the other authors. Analysis of the respective cohort responses were undertaken by Nagy and Cushing with input from Piper. Students were given a number and the prefix UTAS or UON (e.g. UTAS01 or UON01).

Analysis of the responses was used in order to identify themes within the qualitative data and translate the reflective responses into topics that could be applied across the respective cohorts. The analysis was inductive with the collected data from students determining the themes but also reflected our own views about criminology (Nagy), history (Piper and Cushing) and pedagogy (all). Our process reflected the understanding that thematic analysis is the ‘researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process’ (Braun and Clarke 2019, p. 594).

***Findings***

Students who completed HGA206/306 overwhelmingly discussed three similar themes in their responses: change in the criminal justice system, social inequality and its impact on deviancy, and offender motivation. Student reflections also highlighted the personal meaning-making that took place in the process of completing this assignment. Results from HIST2006 are brought in to demonstrate commonalities and contrasts.

***Change***

Perhaps unsurprisingly over half of the UTAS student responses made references to the idea of change over time in the criminal justice system, especially regarding the legislation, the treatment of offenders and concepts of rehabilitation, reintegration, solitary confinement, and the punitive nature of criminal justice.

UTAS05 noted that ‘Transcribing the criminal records has given me a significant understanding of how much the criminal justice system has changed in the last two hundred years’. A more nuanced unpacking of this idea was offered by UTAS27 who noted that as the records were from the late 19th century ‘the nature of [the] criminal justice system during this period was shifting. The convict era had recently ended, and the justice system had the opportunity to expand on existing ideas of incarceration whilst also implementing new and alternative methods’.

Some of the changes were described by students as an evolution, invoking the idea that there has been progress in the criminal justice system from the past to the present. Four students specifically used the word “evolved”. In the case of UTAS01 they noted that ‘experiences and treatment of offenders has evolved’ since the late 19th century, while UTAS36 ‘reflected on how the criminal justice system has evolved in response to crime and criminality to produce better societal outcomes for both the community and offenders’. UTAS13 also noted an evolution but interestingly suggested that it was ‘criminality [that] has evolved over time’ which contrasted with some other responses. For many of the students who were writing about change and evolution this shift was highlighted as a positive and a move for the better, due to a perceived increase in focus on evidentiary demands for prosecution, and a move away from imprisoning people for petty offences. One student noted the shift from ‘a very relaxed standard of proceeding with a case to a much higher current standard’ (UTAS01) as a progressive move for the courts, while another discussed the shift from one where ‘very negligible’ crimes were prosecuted without ‘an investigation process which looks at the reasons for crimes occurring and other contributing factors to the crime’ (UTAS18). For 20 of the 42 students the changes from historical operations of the criminal justice system to what we have today were perceived as positive and necessary. They saw a change from a past that was ‘unfair and discriminatory’ to ‘a more welfare and restorative based approach’ (UTAS02) especially in relation to young people and children in the justice system.

A smaller number of students explored the similarities between the past and the present whether in sentencing, the treatment of low socio-economic status people, access to justice, recidivism, or the treatment of domestic violence and sexual assault in society. For some the similarities were surprising (UTAS06, UTAS14), while for others they wrote that ‘it saddens me that a lot of the issues I noticed in the records, such as the overrepresentation of young minorities, the low conviction rate of ‘white-collar’ crimes and the likelihood of recidivism are still ever-present issues in the modern justice system’ (UTAS20). Noting the ‘influence [of the past] on our modern prison systems’ (UTAS16), that ‘our modern justice system arose from and is informed by this complex criminal [justice] history’ (UTAS34) due to the ‘19th century perspectives hav[ing] influenced the nature of the processes in the contemporary criminal justice system’ (UTAS27) was highlighted in responses.

For Newcastle students, comparing the material they transcribed with their knowledge of the current criminal justice system brought out two key historical concepts. They also detected change over time, and in addition, noted the importance of placing the offenders in historical context. UON3 became aware that the ‘social, political and financial context in the late nineteenth century greatly influenced the justice system’, particularly noting the importance of contemporary ideas about race and class in its functioning. UON04 raised the issue of relatively light sentences for child sex offenders relative to property crime comparing this with current heightened attention to sex crimes.

**Social Inequality**

Inequality in various forms (class, gender, mental illness, and racial diversity) and its relative lack of change from past to present was a common theme in responses with over half of the students focused on the past and present social inequalities that can lead to criminalisation. Here they found continuity rather than change. In one response, UTAS28 reflected that they had ‘made the conclusion that the offenders of the 1800s did not appear to be much different to the offenders that we see in our criminal justice system today in regards to characteristics and the crimes that were committed’, while UTAS17 stated that ‘I recognise Albert in news reports of similar crimes in the present, except that today, we might refer to him as a car thief rather than a harness thief’. For some the ‘blatant display of classism in the colonial criminal justice system’ was surprising but found that it explained why homelessness is an issue facing incarcerated people today (UTAS40). Although vagrancy as a crime appears often in the prisoner records most students used the current term “homelessness” to discuss how the lack of housing was and still is criminalised.

In the case of UTAS02 the task highlighted the interconnectedness of ‘various individual, situational and social structural issues and stigmatis[ation] by the community’, with another, UTAS20, stating that ‘I don’t believe it’s a coincidence that the people whose records I transcribed all fit into a specific category, that is, young, male, limited education, and low economic status’. None of the responses blamed the individuals for their offending and subsequent incarceration. Instead, the individual circumstance was contextualised across almost all responses with several responses noting, like UTAS25, that colonial Australia was ‘harsh and cruel’. For others completing this task brought about a realisation of ‘how overtly and heavily focused the criminal justice system of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries was on criminalising and targeting…socially excluded individuals’ (UTAS31). Concern for the victims was also high especially in cases with sexual or domestic violence (UTAS19, UTAS22, UTAS23, UTAS26, UTAS39, UTAS40, UTAS41) but also for victims of property crime who were also of low socio-economic status like the offenders (UTAS36). The reflective nature of the task in conjunction with the historical topic made these circumstances real to the students in a way that reading secondary sources had not done. As UTAS10 wrote, they had ‘never stopped to realise … the reasons for people being sentenced’ before undertaking this task.

**Offender Motivation**

Students were cognisant of how social inequality and the justice system may criminalise people from lower socio-economic or migrant backgrounds. Rather than apportioning blame to the individual, students located offender motivation in social inequality. Students noted that there appeared to be little contemporary interest from either authorities or the media in offender motivations. This led students to conclude that in the past, the criminal justice system was more punitive with little interest in trying to prevent crime (UTAS28, UTAS30, UTAS34, UTAS35, UTAS36).

Most UON students stated that their understanding had changed in significant ways. Many expressed surprise that their offenders had received prison sentences for what the students perceived as activities which should not be considered crimes at all, in particular public drunkenness, obscene language and vagrancy. They moved from a narrow moralistic view of criminality, defined by UON05 as stemming from a ‘bad criminal nature’ to understanding criminality as dynamic, nuanced, and intersectional (UON01). This shift brought new insights into how people were criminalised, a process few had previously considered. As UON02 wrote, ‘it was often the policing of certain social groups that helped to produce a criminal class’. There was such a strong sense expressed by students that prosecuting the crime of vagrancy was unjust that a conversation with vagrancy scholar Professor Catharine Coleborne explaining the concept and rationale for it was recorded and has been included in subsequent offers of the course.

**Personal understanding**

Other than remarking on learning about the past, or the historical basis upon which contemporary criminal justice responses are or are not based, many UTAS responses displayed a meaning-making process in the telling of the stories of those whose records they transcribed and whose lives they attempted to research. The narratives created by the students were based upon their criminological study in the unit alongside the work they undertook for the task. Although not asked to create a “backstory” and instead asked to answer three questions that sought to elicit information found during their research, some students crafted a narrative about the people whose records they transcribed. UTAS04 used biometric information from the prisoner records to explain their person’s looks and life leading to offending; ‘his weight suggests he was so poor he couldn’t afford regular meals. He was found nearly blind of the left eye, slightly deaf and had a damaged nose indicating clear disabilities which would have impaired his professional skills and hiring chances’. Another also using the prisoner biometric data explored how one prisoner’s tattoos ‘may have led to criminal labels, increased police interactions or influence[d] case outcomes’ (UTAS34).

For two students the media reporting at the time about two separate prisoners was what made those lives accessible and interesting, with UTAS12 noting that they were focusing on one particular prisoner specifically ‘because he had an incredible story’. As another student wrote, history and historical records can render ‘criminal profiles as curiosities’ (UTAS39) but the process of engaging with, transcribing, researching, and applying criminological theories to these individuals ‘required me to project myself in the offenders’ shoes and walk their path’ (UTAS04). As UTAS41 articulated, ‘what I enjoyed most was that this activity felt more engaging and personal in comparison to writing an essay on how crime and criminality have changed over the years…I was able to learn about them and actually imagine what they looked like and what they were experiencing’.

Personal understanding about the individuals was important to UON respondents too. Many went well beyond the requirements of the assignment, following the life course of offenders through to their death notices. Working closely with primary sources led to new insights into how historical research is done. Student UON01 became aware of how the idea of a criminal class permeated primary records and articulated a new understanding of the importance of historians approaching their sources critically, that is ‘considering how emerging notions of criminality [at the time when the record was created] can influence our historical lens’. UON06 showed attention to the importance of understanding the records themselves and how these portray offenders’ prosecutions and punishments as well ordered and proportionate. They demonstrated an awareness of the need for diverse perspectives in suggesting that ‘it would be beneficial to read prisoner accounts of how they were treated by the justice system and the public to draw an accurate balanced opinion’.

***Skill Building***

Beyond their learning from the content of the transcribed records, students reflected on how their own scholarly skill set had grown by completing the assignment. This included overcoming limitations in finding sources (UTAS13, UTAS10 and UTAS15). Many had had concerns about their capacity to read handwritten documents and were proud of their attainment in applying the techniques set out on the Criminal Characters site to complete the transcription (UTAS18, UTAS32, UTAS42, and UTAS10). Finally, several were conscious of having applied the key transferable skill of deductive reasoning in moving from the records to their responses to the set questions (UTAS03, UTAS06, and UTAS25).

***Discussion***

The feedback from the students in both cohorts indicated that regardless of discipline, students found this type of assessment task engaging even if some of the prisoners were ‘more ordinary than expected’ (UTAS23) or ‘not very exciting’ (UTAS10). Using citizen social science, criminology students were able to develop a new appreciation for their discipline and their place in it, as well as the social, political, and financial contexts of offending in the late nineteenth/ early twentieth centuries. Working directly with historical records both gave them access to the lives and experiences of past offenders and new insights into contemporary issues with the criminal justice system. For the History students, the assessment fit well with their expectations that they would be studying past crime, but the opportunity to work directly with jail records helped make past offenders more real for them and the prompts within the assignment led them to think more deeply about crime as a social phenomenon. Not equipped with the theorised understanding of crime and criminalisation possessed by the criminology students, they nonetheless moved from a simple sense that offenders were bad people to see them as shaped by the interplay of race, class, gender, politics and social economic status. In articulating similar insights to those of the criminology students, they demonstrated the value of transdisciplinary approaches to the study of crime.

Non-traditional techniques which have been used in teaching criminology include textual analysis of written media (predominantly newspaper articles), audio-visual sources (fictional or documentary films or television) or other digital media (e.g. computer game or podcasts) (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2015; Oliver 2011; Cook and Bacot 1993). The UK has been a leader in applying these pedagogical methods (Davies, Peel and Balderstone 2015; Yeomans 2014). Our transcription and reflection task required awareness of different genres of writing as students conducted close readings of official prisoner records (a non-sensational representation of prisoners) and newspaper records (often where sensationalism about offending is presented). At least 15 UTAS students made mention of the media reporting and its ‘judgemental, moralising and voyeuristic…tone’ (UTAS17), as did a number of the UON students. UTAS students also noted the lack of information (due to crime type e.g., vandalism or vagrancy) as frustrating their efforts to understand motivation for the offending or relationships between victims and offenders. This could therefore offer a useful lesson to students that while crime is made up mostly of prosaic rather than sensational forms of offending, it is the latter which receive more attention and are therefore better documented.

Student responses demonstrated the benefits of using alternative pedagogical methods in criminology teaching. Replies highlighted that this closer engagement with the stories of offenders through primary prisoner records linked with newspaper (or other) primary sources elicited emotions and empathy that traditional forms of criminology education may be unable to induce. Early concern that students would struggle to engage with the material due to the challenges of reading cursive script were not warranted. Instead, those who initially lacked confidence were left with the satisfaction of acquiring new skills. Application of material learned at other points throughout the unit, and higher-level skills such as critical thinking and synthesis, were evidenced in responses. Students also indicated a sense of accomplishment in terms of research activity, with many noting that they went well beyond the requirements of the assessment and in fact shared the project link with friends and family to make this a communal activity that could be shared and discussed outside of the classroom. Citizen social science in criminology classrooms could therefore aid not only in bringing about deeper, student-led learning within higher education, but also further extend criminological research amongst members of the public.

Focusing particularly on the criminology students, the task also helped, in part, to overcome some issues of “presentism” in criminology. However, there is a broader issue that this use of citizen social science clearly highlighted. The bulk of the criminology students, but also some from the history cohort, presented contemporary criminal justice system issues in a positive light in comparison to the historical justice system. This requires addressing not only in these two units but certainly across criminology (as it is in history). Presumably such a perception indicates that in teaching about the current criminal justice system, we are presenting it to our students as being superior to the criminal justice systems of the past. Such pedagogy may fail to present counterarguments to current criminological practice thereby ignoring Indigenous traditions, prohibiting the effective exploration of how the systems currently in place are an extension of the laws used in the past to govern colonies, and blocking the global perspective that needs to be part of criminology education to overcome these limitations (Moore 2020, p.489). Certainly, criminology students demonstrated that they could see commonalities between the past and present criminal justice systems. Failing to disabuse our students of this belief that all changes to the criminal justice system have been a positive, that we are more enlightened and evolved in comparison with past times, prevents criminology from moving away from its ‘positivist and administrative tendencies’ (Menzies 2001).

**Conclusion**

Citizen social science in the criminology classroom has, as this article has outlined, the possibility to engage students in their studies in new and exciting ways. The benefits to students are myriad, through the development of new skills, application of theory to case studies that overcome issues of privacy or data acquisition, as well as emotional connection to the work they are performing. Using this method to engage students also highlights where the pedagogical gaps are in criminology currently, particularly regarding demonstrating both change and continuity as well as possible responses between past and present structures and practices in criminalisation and incarceration.

**Appendix 1**

The following were the instructions provided.

**Part 1: Transcription of 3 criminal records**  
**Value: 30% - marked on pass/ fail basis**

1. Visit the website – [https://criminalcharacters.com/.](https://criminalcharacters.com/) Make sure you register your details and note your username- this needs to be entered in Part 3 of the assignment. Click the button ‘Transcribe Prison Records’.  
On the transcription interface, click the ‘About’ button and then select the ‘FAQ’ section.  
2. Read carefully through the information provided.  
3. Click the ‘Classify’ button to be taken to a prison record to transcribe. Read through the step-by-step tutorial, and then transcribe information from the prison record into the boxes provided.  
As you transcribe the information, make a note of details about the offender in the offender profile worksheet provided with this assignment- this will help you with Parts 2 and 3 (you do not need to submit the worksheet with Part 3).  
Remember if you have any trouble with reading the handwriting or completing the transcription that you can seek help on the site. The transcription does not need to be perfect as all transcriptions are checked by other volunteers in the project but must be as complete as possible.

Complete this process for THREE offenders.

**Note:** If you receive a long record with more than 3 convictions and numerous details about the person’s behaviour while incarcerated (i.e. more than 3) then you may choose to only transcribe two records. Please note in your response to Part 3 that you have done this.

**Part 2: Research**  
Primary: See what other information you can find out about the offender by searching for newspaper articles about them on Trove – <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/?q=> – and add any additional details to the offender profile.  
The best way to find articles about the offender is to enter their full name in the search function within quotation marks, e.g. ‘William King’, then refine the results returned by the options provided at the left-hand side of the screen. In particular, you will want to select the colony or state in which the offender’s convictions occurred under ‘Place’, and ‘Article’ under category.  
If you are still left with a large number of results, select the decade that the individual was convicted within – after which you can also select the year and month as necessary.

Secondary: Draw upon materials provided in this course, those listed on the Criminal Characters website and your own additional research to develop an understanding of the period in which your offenders were being prosecuted, the types of crimes they committed and how the criminal justice system operated at that time. When writing your reflection, remember to use criminological terms and concepts.

**Part 3: Reflection**  
**Value: 70%**  
**Length: 1000 words**

Answer the following questions drawing upon the material from the transcripts, additional primary sources and academic sources, and your own responses to learning more about the offenders. Remember to include your username from the Criminal Characters website at the top of the first page so your transcriptions can be checked.  
**a) What did you learn about the offenders whose records you transcribed? (20 points)**  
Start with the biographical details of each person but also consider their histories of offending, their behaviour and punishment in prison, what the authorities did or did not know about their other offending and any other relevant observations, such as their age, sex, Indigeneity, class, religion and ethnicity.

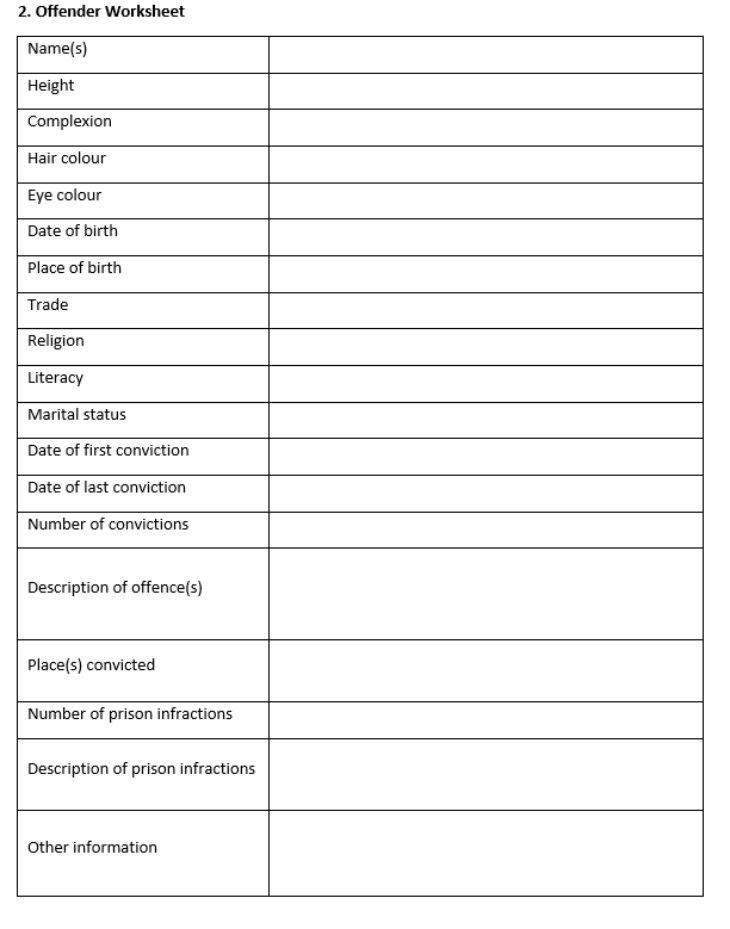
**b) What did you learn about the nature of the justice system? (20 points)**  
Think about the legal processes experienced by the offenders, how they progressed through the legal system and the punishments that the offenders received. How do their experiences relate to the period during which they were being prosecuted? Did these processes change over time?

**c) What did you learn about changing criminality and popular understandings of crime and criminality? (20 points)**  
Were you able to find your cases or similar ones in newspapers or in other sources? How were they treated? What are the scholarly understandings of this type of crime and offender? Can you see evidence of change over time in how cases were presented and offenders were understood?  
**d) How has transcribing these criminal records affected your understandings of offenders in the past and present? (10 points)**

**Referencing:**References are required in the form used in this course – Harvard. In-text citations are included in the word count; reference lists are not.

**Appendix 2**

The Offender Profile Worksheet



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