



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Studying global heritage

I'm Rodney Harrison, I'm the course chair of AD281, Understanding global heritage.

AD281 is a second level course which introduces students to the diversity of global heritage and provides them with the tools to think critically about the ways that professionals or people in the broader community make judgements about heritage and the underlying value systems on which these judgements are based. By looking at a really diverse range of international case studies students learn about changing approaches to heritage and conservation in both western and non-western societies, and the global implications of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, which is one of the key elements of contemporary heritage practice. So the course is really aimed at students who are interested in cultural and environmental management, public history, archaeology and public archaeology, and art and architectural conservation, and people who are interested in the museum or gallery sector.

AD281 is a Level 2 course and so although there are no prerequisites in the sense in which students don't need to have taken other Open University courses before this one, the course is written assuming that students registered will have acquired the skills that result from Level 1 study - logical thinking and essay-writing, and clear, written expression, and that they'll be able to select and interpret relevant materials from their studies. It's a 32-week course and the course helps introduce students to the study of heritage and the way it functions at local, regional, national and global levels. The course is presented through three course books and an online week-by-week study guide that students will have access to over the internet, and the books' chapters are supplemented by readings from another set book and a set reader, and students will also be provided with a DVD, course DVD, that contains course audio-visual materials that they'll watch every week, and all of these course materials are designed to build the students' skills of critical evaluation and argument, and the way they use evidence to interpret different sorts of arguments in heritage.

Students will also have a tutor who is assigned to them who'll help them with their course material, and they'll mark and comment on their written work, and they're also a person that students will be able to go to for advice and guidance as they're working through the online study guide, so students aren't left to their own devices, and even though students are able to study in their own time, they'll also have the support of a staff tutor that works closely with them throughout the course. Heritage is a global issue and it's an industry that is a growth industry. We're constantly presented with things purporting to be heritage with messages about the past and about tradition that are portrayed to us through the media, in museums, in country houses, and I think it's important that students are able to develop skills that allow them to think about what messages heritage is conveying critically, and it's also a topic which is inherently interesting, it's a global topic, the topic allows students to look at case studies from around the world, we have case studies from all of the countries in the world – South Africa, Australia, Alaska, as well as things from the UK and the US – and in this sense I think it's a topic that will excite students and which students can really bring their own interests to, and they can develop their own interests in heritage throughout the course.

And the other really important aspect of the course is that it helps students and encourages students to ask questions about whose history and whose heritage is being presented to them, and to think about the messages and aspects of the past which have been suppressed or passed over by other interpretations of heritage, and it encourages students to think about the active role of heritage in their own communities, and the way in which heritage helps us make meaning of who we are today, and I think that's very important in contemporary societies where we are experiencing a sense of constant change to have the skills to think about how we can produce a sense of heritage and produce a sense of tradition in the communities in which we live.

When I talk about global heritage I'm really thinking about all of the different ways in which we present the past in the present. One of the key messages in the course is that heritage is not really about the past, it's about how we think about the past in the present, and heritage is generally mobilised to do something, heritage isn't something which is abstract and sits alone, heritage is there to do something, it's there to produce a sense, a national story, a sort of vision of citizenship within the nation, or it's there to help people in local communities to produce a sense of who they are, so heritage is very much about messages that are mobilised in the present, which draw on the power of tradition and the power of the past to do something in the contemporary world. But I think the course will equip students to be more analytical with the way in which they approach heritage as well as the way in which they approach a whole range of different topics in their lives, and for those students that are going to go on to pursue a professional career in heritage this course will provide them with skills to contextualise their work as professional heritage practitioners and hopefully change the way that they feel and think about heritage.