

Shadows of History

Commonwealth History Project

**Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School, Park St
Campus**

Caulfield Grammar, Wheelers Hill Campus

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Background

About Penleigh and Essendon Grammar School

I teach at a girls' Middle School (7-10) campus. History is taught as a compulsory subject from Years 7 to 10 and students at Year 10 can take a second history as an elective.

There are three history subjects offered at Year 12 level. Classes are held five times each fortnight at Years 7 and 8, and six times each fortnight at Years 9 and 10.

We are working towards implementing common assessment tasks at each year level. Currently these exist at Year 10 and will be implemented for other years in 2007. Students at all year levels sit an examination at the conclusion of each semester.

About my personal background

The recent history debate has no doubt prompted most history teachers to reconsider their beliefs and understandings about history and the teaching of this discipline. Why do we teach history? What knowledge, skills and values do we want our students to come away with? Facts and dates, skills and values, or all of the above?

In attempting to answer these questions, I can look at my own practice. I am a second year teacher of Australian History, so am relatively inexperienced as a history teacher. I am still discovering what I believe is important.

I know that I don't want to teach students only for them to know the significance of 1066, 1788 and 1901. Names and dates are important. However, I believe we should encourage inquiry-based methods so content is acquired by the student rather than transmitted to them.

All students, whether they are keen history students or not, should come away from their education with the ability and more importantly, the desire, to be active participants in our society.

I believe that when history is 'done' well, it is related to the present. I always try to link things to students' everyday lives and to look at patterns across time.

The implementation of VELS has been a positive step towards highlighting the importance of teaching skills and values. By teaching students to understand the values of our society and encouraging them to compare these with conflicting values, we can hopefully teach them to engage in critical inquiry. When they form their own views and opinions, they can be active and informed citizens later in life.

About the host organisation

For this project, I was paired with Rik Malone from Caulfield Grammar School.

History is a compulsory subject in Years 7 and 8 at Caulfield. It alternates with Geography and is allocated four 65 minute periods a week for one semester at these year levels.

At Year 9, History is an elective for six periods per fortnight. At Year 10 and 11, classes are held seven times per fortnight. Caulfield offers three histories at Year 12 level and each class is allocated eight periods per fortnight.

To try to get a more level marking scheme amongst teachers Every Year 7 to 10, Humanities course at Caulfield has three common assessment tasks with common marking rubrics. Students sit examinations at all year levels.

I observed five History classes during my visit to Caulfield Grammar School in:

- Year 10
- Year 11 (Twentieth Century)
- Year 12 (Revolutions).

About the experience

Year 11

The Year 11 classes that I observed were part of a 'Biographies' unit on world reformers. Case studies included MLK, Gandhi, Mother Theresa and Mandela. Following the anniversary of the Martin Luther King Jr. speech, Year 11 students were presenting 'I have a Dream' speeches on an issue they identified as being important to our society. Topics included:

- Poverty
- Rights at Work
- Fair Trade
- Homelessness.

Students were asked to empathise with world reformers and recognise the achievements of these individuals by selecting their own global issues and offering solutions to the problems of our society. This was a great example of linking historical issues with students' everyday lives.

The second of the Year 11 classes was working through the same speeches. However, a Year 8 class had been invited to join them. The Year 8 students had been working on multimodal presentations that dealt with issues they believed to be a problem in our society.

The students who had focussed on racism were invited to give their presentations in front of the Year 11 class - a daunting task for any Year 8 student! The Year 11 students outlined what they enjoyed about the Year 8 presentations and highlighted the themes that were similar to those in their own study.

As well as being a great confidence-builder for young students, this was important as it demonstrated to the younger students that there is continuity in study. It was a great way to 'sell' the Year 11 course, as the Year 8 students had obviously found completing their own projects very engaging.

Year 12

On entering the Year 12 Revolutions classroom, there was a real sense that History was more than just facts and dates to these students. The facts and dates were still there. In fact, the timeline around the classroom walls showed all of the 'big' events of world history.

This was a great way to demonstrate that historical events happen everywhere. Not in isolation from one another and not only in the period you are studying. The students came ready to discuss and analyse rather than just to cover content.

The students had been set readings for homework. The major details of this activity were checked using a crossword at the beginning of the class, which was a great engagement activity.

Students then began an informal discussion and analysis of the image on the front cover of their new reading pack. The discussion was scaffolded by Rik, however, the students did the bulk of the talking.

This was again, a great exercise in teaching visual analysis as the more confident students were essentially modelling visual analysis skills. It was also an effective engagement tool for a new unit, as students were making predictions from the knowledge they already had about what was coming next in the 'story' of the French Revolution.

There was a real focus on Multiple Intelligences in this class. The VCAA study design was presented to the students in three different ways, including written and visual forms.

The students were also given a 'fairytale' version of the French Revolution (written by a former student) and a comic strip of the Revolution. While some people may be horrified at the thought of condensing the events of the French Revolution into fairytale or comic form, the students clearly enjoyed this and it emphasised the 'story' aspect of the Revolution.

Year 10

In terms of my own professional development, perhaps the most exciting part of the day for me was observing the Year 10 students working on their applied project.

This was a collaborative project and students worked in groups of six. In this unit, six non-fictional characters, for example Castro, Ruby, LBJ or Nixon, are put on trial for the murder of JFK.

Groups are assigned to either the prosecution or defence of one character. They research the case as though they are preparing for court. The characters are put on trial in front of the school on 'JFK Day' and all students come in costume.

The project sounded like a wonderful learning opportunity. The fact that the whole thing was student-centred made it all the more appealing. It encouraged:

- a focus on research and critical thinking skills
- using evidence to construct historical arguments
- questioning and proving or disproving theories.

It was great to see students who weren't 'studying history'. Rather, young historians were learning through inquiry.

New knowledge and practice

The chance to discuss professional practice was undoubtedly the most valuable part of this experience. I was forced to really think about what is important to me in terms of history teaching and how I go about helping students to value history and take with them as much as they possibly can.

In the hectic lives of teachers, I suppose we don't sit down and reflect enough on our professional practice. It is a valuable experience.

I also simply appreciated the chance to see how other schools do it. Once you finish teaching rounds, you rarely get a chance to look at best practice or snoop around in someone else's classroom. If anything, it is even more valuable to get the chance for firsthand observation of other schools once you have some experience, rather than hearing about it at a conference.

Discussion with colleagues about the experience has led us to examine our own practices. We have had a close look at where we could enhance our own program through the incorporation of some of the ideas from Caulfield Grammar School.

We liked the idea of the applied project. After further discussion with Rik, we will aim to include something like this in our Year 9 program during the Politics unit. Students will research the history and policies of political parties and hold elections, with students representing 'real' parties.