Level 6 History - A Major Success with Student Questions

PEEL in Practice: 1300 ideas for quality teaching
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My Year 10 Australian History class was starting a unit on Federation. To start this topic, we started reading from the textbook, Experience of a Nation. Following the reading of a few pages I tried to generate some discussion on the ideas raised by the book - federation, nationalism and a constitution. However, it was obvious that the students weren't willing to have a discussion because they were unsure of what they had read.

I decided to use student questions to explore what they had read and to give me a guide as to what they had digested from the text. The task then was for each student to write down two or three questions about what they weren't sure about from the reading. I put all these questions together and handed them back to the students the next lesson.

These were the questions:

Note now some students misunderstood the task: and asked fact questions that they did know the answer to. Note also that repeated questions have been deleted.

- What is constitution?
- Why couldn't federation have started anyway?
- Who was the leader of the nationalism?
- When was nationalism invented?
- Why was nationalism invented?
- Who was the leader of the new nationalism when it came in?
- Why did it take the people of Australia so long to agree with Nationalism?
- Why did the first referendum fail?
- Why did W.A. vote not to join the federation?
- What made W.A. change its mind so it would join?
- What does 'Federation' mean?
- What does "Nationalism" mean?
- Name one famous writer who believed in a white Australia
- Name one famous magazine that was founded in 1887?
- Who was the last state to join federation?
- When was federation achieved?
- What were the reasons for federation?
- How do they hold a referendum?
- Explain in basic words nationalism
- Why didn't the people want to join a federation?
- Explain Federation and Nationalism more basic
- Why wasn't anyone interested in Federation when it was suggested in the 1840's
- I still don't really understand much about Nationalism?
- Have nationalism and federation changed a lot today? How?
- What effects did the new nationalism make?
What information did the magazines give?
What was achieved by Federation?
What was the referendum held for?
When was the second referendum held?
How was federation achieved?
Why didn't W.A. vote not to join the federation in 1899?
How aid they all decide to join together?
Why the sudden change in government/writers drawing about real Australian bush life? Who was Henry Parkes?
Who led the want for federation?
How long did the "Boomerang" and "Bulletin" last?
What did Henry Parkes and Alfred Deakin do?
How did the people choose who they wanted to represent them in the government?
Why did some people hesitate to vote for Federation? It seems like a good idea to me. Everyone should have jumped at the agreement!
What railway track did they decide on using? Was it N.S.W., Victoria etc?
What did the other countries think about Australia's federation and nationalism?

The students reacted much the same as other classes I have used these questions with. They couldn't believe that I had bothered to write their questions out and hand them back. One student was upset that her name appeared next to her questions. "My questions are silly Miss!" A few also asked why I had bothered, "Are you going to ask us to answer all the questions Miss?"

From this we had a discussion about what should be done with the questions. After a close look at the questions, Kelly thought it was obvious that we needed to cross some questions out because they asked the same thing. I then suggested that we categorize the questions. This process took two lessons.

The first of these lessons went very slowly as the students weren't sure exactly how to go about it. Brett suggested that the class sort out all the questions that related to Federation. Students’ reactions to this were mixed. Some like Brett participated well, however others didn't see much point. Andrew asked, "What is the use of sorting out questions?" The class took up Brett's suggestion however and began to sort, change and make decisions about which to keep. As they did this I wrote them on the board. By the end of the first lesson they were happy with their revised questions about Federation.

In the second lesson we worked the same way. This time the students wanted to work on the questions which asked about Nationalism. Once this was done they grouped together questions about writers and painters of the time, referendum and constitution.

They then decided that the questions needed subheadings and decided on the obvious: Federation, nationalism, constitution and referendum and writers and painters.

Andrew then asked, "What do we do now Miss? Do we answer the questions under each subheading?"
I put this question to the class. One student said, "Let's put them in order miss." Adam immediately said, "Can I do it on the board Miss?" So out the front came Adam and he declared that federation should go first and the class then tried to decide which should go second while Adam played teacher.

The discussion was lively with definite disagreement. Before federation, they said, you need people feeling differently, that's why federation came about, so nationalism doesn't fit. I sat at the back of the room astonished. Wow! They were actually thinking and arguing and talking about what happened before Federation. (Obviously their understanding at this point was better than even they had first thought when they wrote their original questions or had it grown with the exploration of the questions?)

Brett then suggested we look at the textbook again. "What does the textbook start with?" Some students then turned to the text and remembered that it started with Federation. "But that's not right Miss, why does it start with Federation?" asked Louise. The class then decided that federation should not be the first group. So with Adam at the board off they went again and decided that for this topic it was best to study the painters and writers and magazines of the 1880's and 1890's first because this is what led to changes and people feeling and belonging to the land. Once a majority of people felt nationalistic, this was argued led to the call for referendums and for a constitution which brought on Federation.

I was astonished that the students did this seriously and were able to decide what they thought was important and what they believed should come first and not just be passive learners and follow the textbook.

After discussing this with other teachers in my PEEL group meetings it was suggested that I ask students to rewrite the first few pages of their textbook when I suggested this to the class. Their initial reaction was, "What for miss - who cares about what we think or write?" After some discussion they decided however that it wasn't such a worthless task and then Brett asked, "What do we do with it once we write it?" I suggested that we print it and make it available for the next year's year tens or send it to the publisher. The students were concerned about the second idea as they felt the published might be offended. I told them that we could write a note explaining our reasons for rewriting the first few pages and that the writer would therefore understand.

Well, I hope he does because the students are busy working on what they see as the start of their textbook.

The class felt comfortable enough and confident enough in their own knowledge and ideas to challenge the text. They were also prepared by the final lessons to self direct the progress only turning to the teacher when they felt they had completed something and seeking further direction.

More important though than this independence alone, is that they showed a deep understanding of the concepts behind the facts. They had learnt something about change and how it comes about. I for one would be interested in hearing the students' impressions of what they had learned throughout the unit not only about Australian history but about themselves and learning.
This brings me to another point: I think it would have been worth pointing out what they had achieved on their own and the value of their early questions as well as the other aspects of good learning that they demonstrated.

*In subsequent years, we learnt that Joanne's final suggestion here is a very worthwhile thing to do. We developed a list of "Good Learning Behaviours." One role of this list was that it provided a concrete way of talking to our students about learning and of praising students for specific aspects of good learning. We found that Joanne's suggestion helps students reflect on and learn about their learning and is a very effective way of building their intellectual self esteem. (Ed)*

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