Shadowers of History Project 2006
Commonwealth History Project
Ruyton Girls School
Koorie Heritage Trust
Author: Catherine Hallpike
Background

About Ruyton

History at Ruyton is taught within the following organisational structures:

Senior School

There is significant chance of many girls ‘slipping through the net’ and not studying Indigenous history at all.

Year 7

History is taught as part of an Integrated Studies unit. At present the focus is on Ancient History and Archaeology.

Year 8

Medieval History

Year 9 and 10

Do a one semester electives unit. (3x50 minutes)

Students choose from the following units:

- Australian History (a unit incorporating a focus on Indigenous Culture, connections to the land and perspectives of the environment)
- Their Service Our History
- Protest and Conflict
- Florence and Venice
- Living in Cities – Focus is on Melbourne (a geography unit).

Junior School

Year 5

Term One Integrated Studies unit focuses on European settlement in Australia. There is a small side unit that focuses on Aboriginal displacement. ‘The Burnt Stick’ ‘Idjhil’ and ‘Women of the Sun’ are the main resources used to support the study.
About my personal background

My personal connection with Indigenous people has been very limited. I was not taught about Indigenous culture or history at school. I was raised to think mainly of aboriginals as a sort of mythical people who lived somewhere in the vicinity of Uluru thousands of years ago. I thought of them as primitive people who wore nothing and hunted wild animals.

I was certainly never encouraged to think about local Indigenous communities in Western Victoria. Every second weekend, the family drove from Camperdown to Warrnambool to visit my grandmother. I sometimes asked about the signpost that pointed to a place called ‘Framlingham’. I was told that this was a place for the ‘black fellas’ and that was that. There was no question of ever going there.

If we saw Indigenous people on the street, we were afraid and passed by quickly. We were told never to speak to ‘strangers’ and to me, black people were total ‘strangers’.

The subject was never mentioned at school and I can’t recall having close connection with any Indigenous person during my entire education. In my three years of teacher training at Deakin University in the mid seventies, Indigenous Studies did not exist.

It was not until I started teaching that I began to take a special interest in trying to better understand indigenous populations around the world. The first connection was with Native American Indians.

I read a truly wonderful biographical account of a well known Sioux Indian, Black Elk Speaks. After this I read Laurens Vanderpost’s books, The Lost World of the Kalahari and The Heart of the Hunter. All three books moved me deeply.

The stories revealed not only the loss and the tragedy these nations have experienced through white settlement, they also told of the wonder, beauty, power and environmental connection within the cultures. Reading these books and reflecting on them was all it took to give me a far greater awareness and appreciation of Australia’s Indigenous population.

From that time forward, I have endeavoured to incorporate teaching about Koories whenever the opportunity has arisen. In 2004, I developed a detailed unit of study on the early settlement of Australia for Year 5 children. The unit explores the key concepts in the book Dancing With Strangers in some detail.
About the host organisation

My chosen organisation was the Koorie Heritage Trust and I was hosted by Dean Stewart. Dean has been working at the Trust for the past three months and has established the two wonderful programs described later in this report.

Dean Stewart describes the main aim of the Trust as continuing “to sing the song and perpetuate and the culture”. The Trust is a place that helps to “build a bridge” between cultures.

Dean’s big push is to try to connect with other organisations in the heart of Melbourne, linking work at the Heritage Trust with work at places such as the Melbourne Museum and the Botanical Gardens. He would like all the major organisations to develop programs that complement each other, not simply give more of the same.

Dean’s description of the Koorie connection to land was straight from his heart. His strong messages about the interconnection of man and nature were all the more convincing because of his family heritage and the obvious links he still has with his past.

Disconnectedness is all that many of us know in this current day and age. Our young people certainly need the messages that many of our Indigenous people have to offer us, if we are prepared to listen.

The Koorie Heritage Trust Building

Resource Centre

The Trust includes a wonderful Resource Centre for teachers or anyone wanting to do research. The contents are largely related to Koories who have lived or are living in South Eastern Australia and include:

- information on land rights and the law
- fiction and non-fiction books suited to both primary and secondary children.

Resources can’t be borrowed because many of the books and videos are now out of print. However, you can copy the videos on site and there are photocopying and scanning services available.

It is a very comfortable place and teachers are encouraged to spend time browsing and doing research. The head librarian, Judy Williams, is known as the ‘gate keeper’ of the Trust as she has a wealth of knowledge and substantial contact with Koorie people and other significant places.
The library is open seven days a week and people are advised to phone first to ensure that the librarian is available. The shop at the front of the gallery has a range of books, art and artifacts.

**Gallery**

A range of original artifacts, artworks, etchings, clothes and other items have been given to the custodianship of the Aboriginal Heritage Trust. The Jewish community provides much of the necessary funding to keep the Trust going.

Artworks and artifacts are on display at the Gallery, which often has special exhibitions on show. The work aims to encourage a deeper appreciation of the issues surrounding Koorie culture today, including:

- displacement
- stereotypes
- contemporary life
- reconnection.

The gallery is not just about collecting and showing great works of Koorie art. The Trust also buys the work of their current painters and artists. The current work of ‘Turbo’, a young aboriginal boy who lives locally, was everywhere in the Trust building on the day we visited. There was lots of packing going on because the work was being sent to another gallery interstate.

**Oral histories**

The Oral History unit visits Indigenous people living in all sorts of places. As one person put it – ‘we can have many beautiful wooden artifacts to look at, but it is the oral traditions and the stories that will bind it all together and make the cross cultural connections work.’

Traditionally, each community would dance their ‘chapter’ when they met and share their stories or ‘chapters’. They would then ‘sing the country’ as they moved through it. In this way, they kept their history alive and were kept up-to-date with the latest events and information from other clans.

The Oral Histories section of the Trust is an important part of the overall unit. It was this unit that put together a wonderful resource titled Mission Voices. Mission Voices is related to Victorian Indigenous populations and contains local information, personal stories and connections.

According to one of the teachers attending with me, the Mission Voices website was an invaluable resource when her group of Year 9’s studied Aboriginal culture recently. The kids really connected with the stories.
There is increasing interest in these stories from large businesses and organisations. They are becoming an integral part of the training and professional development for people in places such as the Department of Sustainability and the Environment or the Medical Faculty at Monash University. The Oral Histories section of the Trust is also trying to work together with the State Library and also to establish relations with ACMI. In this way, perceptions and assumptions are being changed.

**Education room**

In this room, we saw and held the beautiful possum skin coats. Everyone had one and Dean likened them to the Scottish tartans. By wearing your particular possum coat, everyone would know who was coming towards them.

There was also a large powerpoint demonstration, showing 8 different language groups across Victoria, a huge map of Australia and local Victorian map.

There were clear explanations of words and concepts and their meaning to aboriginal people. For example: community, nation, clan, tribal boundaries, importance of permission, movement across tribal boundaries and the location of boundaries.

An introduction to the WOIWORUNG people of the Melbourne City area through artifacts and text was also provided.

**Other resources and references**

I also became aware of other resources and references while on the tour of the Trust Building. For example:

- *My Brother Vinnie* – a film about cross-cultural difficulties and challenges
- A DVD of Stolen Generation, produced at the Oral History unit which will come into all Victorian schools later this year.
About the experience

When I first arrived at the Koorie Heritage Trust building, I was told to go upstairs. I entered the room where I thought I was supposed to be. There was a large circle of people gathered and the general introductions of key presenters had just finished.

It was then time for each participant in the circle to share their personal background and give a brief overview of any personal connection or learning in relation to Aboriginal Australia. Key questions included:

- What's your mob?
- What's your connection to Koorie culture?
- What's your thinking/aim/goal/experience in relation to Indigenous culture?

It was a wonderful way to start an inservice session with a group of people who did not know each other and who were there to participate fully in the day’s events.

People loved telling about their cultural heritage or roots. Only one person had nothing to contribute and it certainly made us all very aware of the wonderful multiplicity of cultures represented in everyday Australia.

The opening activity also made it very clear that there was a lot of ignorance in relation to Australia’s Indigenous population, and in particular Victoria’s Koorie people and their history and culture.

There were only one or two participants who had been exposed to Koorie education in any form at all. It highlighted that there are many people who have little or no knowledge of Indigenous culture who hold positions of power and influence.

As these people presented, I realised that I was sitting amongst a people from diverse professional backgrounds. For example, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Heritage Victoria and Landcare Victoria. No one else besides me and the facilitator of the session had a background in Education. Then I realised that I was in the wrong room!

Nonetheless, this was a very rich and rewarding way to start the day. The biggest lesson was that it is imperative that Koorie education is high on our teaching agenda. I was also reminded of the need to give time to people to tell their story and contribute or share their knowledge and background whenever a new group of people gets together for the first time.

When morning tea commenced, I was taken to meet the group I was supposed to be with. There were two other female teachers, one from an independent school in Melbourne and a secondary teacher from Bendigo Catholic College. I was introduced to my host Dean Stewart and I told them about the wonderful introductory session I had ‘accidentally’ become part of.
We then took part in the program put together by Dean Stewart. The outline of this program is in the appendix of this report.

I experienced Dean’s programs first hand on the day and cannot speak highly enough about his presentation skills, the content and the structure of the program. I had the opportunity to take in all that Heritage Trust building had to offer. It was truly fascinating and caused a number of ‘jolts’ when we went out together to explore Indigenous heritage and culture in the heart of Melbourne.

First, we spent time in Flagstaff Hill Gardens and then walked and talked our way along the banks of the Yarra. Through the style of presentation, we were continually transported back and forth from one time in history to another time and place. One minute we were in bustling downtown Melbourne as it is today, the next we were in the time of early European settlement.

Dean used original etchings by early Europeans to demonstrate the different sites as they were seen and experienced by the white settlers and to show early contact with local Indigenous groups.

We heard the stories of first settlement from the perspective of the white settlement and a desire to create a new colony. At the same time, we were given insight into the impact of colonisation on the minds and hearts of the local Indigenous people who had lived in the area for thousands of years.

Two very different mindsets emerged as the story unfolded. There were two different ways of viewing and appreciating the world but both groups of people wanted to satisfy similar desires, such as access to:

- the best views and vantage points
- the most effective river crossing
- the most convenient places for meetings and community gatherings.

I began to understand why the ‘clash of cultures’ was immediate. Although Dean never cast judgment or blame in any direction, there was no doubt left in my mind that the Indigenous people became ‘displaced’ and in many ways dysfunctional soon after white settlement. It is a sad story and one that we never seem to learn from. Even today, it is still happening in some parts of the world.

Dean is passionate about what he does and his presentation was excellent. He is a young, modern Indigenous man who has a wealth of knowledge, appreciation and understanding of ‘both’ worlds.

I have thought of myself as a ‘tree hugger’, but after Dean’s presentation, I will always look differently at the one remaining ‘original’ eucalypt tree in the Flagstaff Hill Gardens. I will never pass it by without going over to give it a pat.
New knowledge and practice

I have been enriched by this wonderful experience and have a great enthusiasm for the experience. Since I have completed the walking tours, I have taken a few of my friends to places we visited and talked about issues and ideas with them in context. They have all responded positively to this.

After completing the ‘Shadowers’ experience, I ran an in-service session for Junior School staff and spoke to the Head of Senior School History about what I had experienced on the day. I stressed that this was ‘good history teaching in action’.

History teachers in Senior School are in the middle of planning new units to suit VELS, just as we are in the Junior School. It is our aim to develop and include further units that involve Indigenous Studies.

From 2007 the children in Year 4 will do a unit of study that focuses on the growth and development of Melbourne. We will do this within the context of Indigenous perspectives and hopefully the girls will engage in a number of the rich and wonderful first hand experiences that I have experienced.
APPENDIX

Overview of programs (produced by Dean Stewart)

Program 1

Culture to hear, to talk with, to experience … To Share!

‘INTRODUCTION TO KOORIE CULTURE’

Koorie Heritage Trust Education

Session length:
1.45-2.00 hr...

Program Structure:

40 mins: “Walking Kulin Country” – a cultural wander through Flagstaff Gardens and a look at this CBD recreation reserve, unfolding some of the history of early Melbourne and importantly this site’s deep indigenous cultural significance.

5 mins: Walk back to Koorie Heritage Trust Cultural Centre.

15 mins: “Meet the Trust” Tours – An introduction to Victoria’s premier Koori Keeping Place and exhibitions.

45-50 mins: Education Room: Cultural talk and showcase. Through maps and numerous Koorie artefacts from our extensive KHT collection participants are revealed to the richness and diversity of South-Eastern indigenous Australians. Dispelling the stereotyped myth of Aboriginal Australia.

10-15 mins: A specific space to ask your Aboriginal educator those innumerable questions that arise from your time together.

Your Aboriginal education program “Introduction to Koori Culture” begins where it must – on the LAND, where we must all walk ‘country’!
Directions:
Your bus can drop off at the Williams St side, next to the cnr of Latrobe & Williams St. Alternatively if using public transport exit via Flagstaff station. Your Aboriginal educator shall be awaiting your arrival, at the only truly indigenous tree still surviving in this CBD reserve ~ a River Red Gum tree, (located near the cnr Latrobe/Williams St.)
MEL ref: 43F7
*" BE-AL" is the local Kulin name for the River Red Gum.

Main Themes:
Aboriginal Connection and Spirituality to Land, Belonging, Land-use, Plant use, History of Melbourne and sense of place, effects of European occupation and people and place and your own place within this.

Connects to VELS Domain:
Personal learning, Civic & Citizenship, Humanities, Communication, Thinking

Program 2
Culture to hear, to talk with, to experience … To Share!

“Walkin Birrarung” ~ a Cultural Yarra Tour

As the very first white explorers rowed their way up a log-tangled river, they found their passage blocked by a small but formidable waterfall. Unable to go further they gave this river the local Aboriginal name “Yarra Yarra”. It was not until later this same party realized they had misunderstood the local Aboriginal inhabitants, the Kulin people, and had incorrectly named the river. The Ancestral Kulin name is Birrarung : the ‘River of Mists’.

In around sixty minutes this special walk gives patrons a sense of a small but significant portion of the ancestral lands of the Kulin people. A place we today call Melbourne. This experience evokes the memories of a vibrant natural, and cultural landscape. A memory that now lies beneath our urban existence today. Come and dispel some old misunderstandings for yourself and see the city with new eyes.

Find Melbourne’s CBD waterfall, its rich wetlands, and its Aboriginal people ~ Still here and still ‘Walkin’ Birrarung’ … Please come walk with us

Tour details:
This cultural experience, lead by Aboriginal Cultural Interpreters is designed with Melbournians in mind. It is a walk back through time. Back through the place we now call
the CBD of Melbourne. It is a journey not only through the natural heritage, but equally the cultural heritage and the dramatic irrevocable changes of both people, and place.

Beginning at Enterprise Park (next to the Aquarium) the group journeys up the Yarra River (‘Birrarung’) walking along Southbank shopping precinct and concluding at Princes Bridge and Federation Square. A short walk, further on into Birrarung Marr and the new Common Ground Aboriginal public art space is an optional but very worthwhile addition to the experience.

Several stops are made along the way highlighting important Aboriginal Kulin sites, sites now trapped beneath the asphalt and the high-rise apartments of our 21st century.

At each stop photos, colonial imagery and cultural stories are revealed by your Aboriginal Cultural Interpreter ~ enriching the experience and unravelling the layers of history, and that undeniable spirit under our feet.

‘Walkin Birrarung’ is not only a cultural and history journey of understanding, but is an intimate personal one connecting everyone regardless of age or background back to a connection with a Spirit of Place.