Shadowers of History
Commonwealth History Project
Gisborne Secondary College
Melbourne Museum
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Background

About Gisborne Secondary College
Gisborne Secondary College (GSC) has a student population of about 1200 students with a staff of around 100.

The History Faculty has maintained its identity on the timetable and has fought hard to avoid the SOSE/Integrated Studies tag which seems to make the subject so anonymous in many schools.

The History Coordinator has a two period allowance and usually undertaken by an ‘Expert Teacher’. Over the past 10 to 15 years, the amount of time allocated to history has decreased as competition on the timetable increased. Across the 7 – 10 curriculums, time has been reduced by up to 50 percent.

In 2006, the school introduced a four period day, 10 day timetable in an attempt to have students engage with the curriculum more deeply. This led to a further reduction in time for History. At GSC, students have four periods of history over the course of the 10 day timetable, for one semester. History is compulsory at Years 7 - 10.

Content covered at the 7 -10 levels includes:
- What is History?
- Ancient Civilisations – the usual suspects
- The Dark Ages
- The Middle Ages
- Australian History from Aborigines to present day
- The Jewish Holocaust
- Twentieth Century Aboriginal Issues.

At VCE level, the school runs one to two classes at Years 11 and 12. History seems to be quite popular and numbers are strong. Subjects regularly offered are Revolutions and Twentieth Century History. As with many schools today, Australian History is not seen as exciting as Revolutions by the students (and possibly teachers).

In 2007, delivery of the curriculum will undergo a major change at Years 7 and 8. Students will work together in open class rooms with a small group of teachers. Learning will be student-based with a strong ICT focus.

Much of the curriculum will be integrated. VELS and the new reporting requirements will add to changes we are facing. How the delivery and teaching of history is affected is yet to be seen. Much work needs to be done.
About my personal background
After teaching history for almost thirty years, it is difficult to fully explain my experiences, beliefs and understandings about history.

For me, my teaching incorporates a number of ideas, including the need for chronology, narrative and story telling, working with evidence, development of writing and essay skills and an investigation of our humanity (all the nasty, gory, funny and weird bits).

It usually involves outlining a topic, hopefully building on student interest, followed by individual or group investigations and a variety of assessment tasks.

Importantly, students are encouraged to critically analyse sources and opinions at all times. Textbooks are helpful but I have never seen a good one yet!
About the host organisation

Melbourne Museum has the highest profile and the most funding of all the museums in Victoria. It offers a wide range of programs, materials and experiences for students of all ages. The variety of activities on offer is indicative of the resources and effort behind the organisation.

A small group of educationalists work with the management of the Museum to develop experiences that will capture the imagination of the public, ranging from new exhibitions such as ‘First contact in the Western Desert’ to old favourites such as ‘Phar Lap’.

Online materials help to make some of these resources more accessible to schools but it is important for teachers to visit and experience the museum firsthand.

Flexibility seems to be the key word when it comes to assessment and accountability at the Museum. The self-directed worksheets and activities are designed to make the task of viewing as easy as possible for students. A good idea, given the reluctance of many of our clients! Teamwork is encouraged and follow up back in the class room is essential.

All programs and activities address the various strands of VELS and this could be helpful when assessing students against a range of standards.

The Museum offers professional development sessions and orientation programs so teachers can prepare students for their visit.

The focus of the experience for students is:

- learner-centred education
- cooperative small group work
- talking and sharing of ideas.
About the experience
The visit was scheduled for Thursday August 17th, 2006. We attended the Museum with a small group of teachers from other schools.

The first session included:
- a general introduction about the organisational structure
- how the education unit is funded and operates
- the philosophy of the Museum
- the way they go about designing and presenting exhibitions.

On our visit, they were about to present the outline for a new exhibition in the planning stage. We were impressed with how keen Museum staff were for feedback and criticism about all of their exhibits, spaces and programs.

A good example was the issue of the Stolen Generation, which has caused much controversy. Museum staff regard raising the profile of history as part of their job, so that important issues become part of public debate.

The next session gave us time to walk around and check out the various exhibits at the Museum and to look at how our school might make use of them.

This day was also the first day of the ‘Uncovering The Past’ program at the Museum, where schools have lessons presented by the resident teachers. Year 7 students from Belmont High School were put through their paces. They worked in small groups and moved through a number of stations.

Activities were hands on, for example examining a replica of the Rosetta Stone, sorting through artefact from the ‘Little Lon site’ and dressing up. The session moved quickly, the writing activities were simple but effective and the students seem to enjoy the experience.

The presenters were very keen for the group of teachers to analyse and review how the first day went.

The afternoon sessions included:
- a discussion with one of the history curators, Moya Mcfadzean, on collecting materials
- an overview of historiography and the programs they run at the Museum.

Making contact with other history teachers and discussing how things are going at various schools, especially in relation to the VCE, was also of great interest to us.
New knowledge and practice

Without a doubt, spending a day reflecting on the experience of the Museum, our own teaching practices and how we might utilise the resources of the museum was a worthwhile activity, professionally and personally.

Opportunities for these types of days are rare for teachers. We are usually too preoccupied with surviving the classroom from day to day!

We both realised that our school, being so close to Melbourne, needs to make better use of the resources and programs at the Museum.

Given the many changes currently happening to the curriculum throughout Victoria and more specifically the huge changes at Gisborne SC with Years 7 -10, the services of the Museum offer us an opportunity to incorporate the ideas of the school, the Museum and VELS with the enthusiasm of our teachers.

Gisborne has introduced new learning neighbourhoods where small teams of teachers work with only 100 -125 students in a open classroom situation, utilising ITC and negotiating different ways of learning. This naturally lends itself to the ideas and philosophy behind the Melbourne Museum.

The school could benefit from the experience by:

- using some money from the Shadowers of History Project to subsidise visits to the Museum, as organising school excursions and collecting money is a large and increasingly difficult task
- purchasing replica artefacts and other primary source materials, for example World War 1 and World War 2 poster packs from the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance.

There also needs to be a review of how to best package professional development (PD) for history teachers, particularly in country areas. PD is often too expensive and venues are difficult to get to. However, the Shadowers of History Project is a good innovation.