Shadowers of History
Commonwealth History Project
Taylor’s Lakes Primary School
Eureka Centre, Ballarat
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Background

Our school is situated in Melbourne’s west and has about 630 students. They are organized into 25 straight years. History is really only taught from Year 3 up.

Year 3 (which I teach) does a unit called “Australians: Who are We?” which covers the history of migration and the development of a multicultural society. We take them on a wonderful extended day excursion to Sovereign Hill in Ballarat where they have a lesson, do a mine tour, pan for gold and see the various activities.

Year 4 study the settlement of the local area and the community. Year 5 learn about the exploration of Australia.

Year 6 cover Federation and the structure of government in Australia. They go for a week long trip to Canberra. However this trip will be reviewed this year due to the increasing cost, the staff commitment and the numbers of children not attending.

These are still basically units of work which we developed using CSF II. We are moving towards introducing more VELS orientated units next year.

About my personal background

I studied Modern European History in Year 11 and Australian History in Year 12. I have always been a reader and I think reading a book called The Ship that Flew about a Viking long boat in Year 3 was my introduction to a lifetime of reading about history.

I like reading history and historical fiction about any time period and any country. It means I can make connections and comparisons with what I already know of the history of an era. Reading helps me to put a face on history, to learn about the everyday lives of famous people and the background to important events.

For me, the most important thing about teaching history is to make it interesting and enjoyable. Kids love hearing stories. I’m often asked if I’m making something up and they are astonished when I tell them it’s true.

I also teach through:

- songs
- poetry
- pictures of the clothing, housing and transport of the time we are studying
- interesting items for the children to examine.

I try to help the children imagine what their lives would have been like at a particular time in history. They are usually horrified at the tasks children were expected to do.
Having a good understanding of general historical facts is essential to ensure the information you are giving to the children is accurate. You also have to be prepared to flesh these facts out with details from your own reading.

I also believe that new documents or scientific or anthropological evidence may sometimes throw a new light on history. For example, if new sources of information are found or government documents are released.

We have to ensure that children know that history is not a dead, static list of boring dates and events. It is our job to bring history to life.

**About the host organisation**

The history and commemoration of the Eureka Stockade are the primary reasons for the existence of the Eureka Centre. The Centre is owned and operated by the City of Ballarat and was opened in 1998.

On the day we visited, there were two presenters working with the schools which visited the Centre. Bob Allan is the Centre’s Education Officer and works four days a week. Ross Adams worked at the Centre in the morning and lectures in SOSE at the University. Ross is also an artist and has painted the scenery for displays at the Centre, including the beautiful mural of the characters involved in the mock trial and a painting on display.

The education programs are supported by a grant from the Department of Education and Training and Bob’s position is partly funded by the City of Ballarat.

Bob is required to submit a report every six months with details of the number of students who have visited the Centre, their year level and the region of their school.

He also sends an evaluation sheet to the schools after their visit. This asks for feedback on items such as:

- what teachers found valuable during the visit
- areas which could be improved
- the booking process and pre-visit information
- relevance of the education programs
- the playground
- presentation of information in the galleries.
About the experience

The introductory sessions for the schools had to be taken in the foyer of the Centre, as there is not a specific room available for schools or other groups. Some of the children had to sit on the stairs so they could all see Bob's presentation.

During the first session with Robe Primary School, from South Australia, Bob had to compete with a rather loud salesman displaying his stuffed koalas to the shop manager. It was quite distracting and highlighted the need for a separate area for schools.

The children were divided into three groups:
- the diggers
- the soldiers/troopers or government representatives
- the “well to do” citizens.

Some of the children put on hats, shawls or waistcoats. There was a red military coat for Commissioner Rede. This instantly put them into character. It was very interesting to note that even the children (even the boys) kept these costumes on throughout their visit.

They then moved through the Centre’s exhibition area, where they could:
- look at static displays of mining equipment, costumes and weapons
- see the statue of the Pikeman’s dog
- go through a building of Bentley’s Hotel where various audio visual displays told the story of the Eureka uprising.

There was also a dummy of the murdered miner Scobie visible under the floor, which aroused many comments. There are numerous posters and artworks and a room where they can reflect on the significance of Eureka. Bob and Ross were able to provide a commentary and answer any of the children’s questions.

The children then moved into the Hall of Debate, where they had to sit on long wooden benches like church pews. On each seat was the name of a character associated in some way with Eureka. Bob put on a black judge’s robe and proceeded to hold a mock trial.

As Bob called each character’s name, the child had to stand, press a button which lit them up by a small spotlight. The effect was quite dramatic. Bob then asked each child’s questions about their character’s involvement and feelings about the events of Eureka.

All the children were able to answer in character and got into the role play with varying degrees of confidence. Some showed an excellent understanding of their character’s part in the uprising and the events afterwards. Bob’s questioning was brilliant, as he was able to put all the children at ease and get a response from them.
At the end of the session, Bob asked for the verdict from the two children who had been sitting as the jury. Both were vehement in their denunciation of the government of the day, and the girl demanded voting rights for women. A budding suffragette!

The children moved into the theatre for a short film and then walked through the remaining display areas, which included some models of the stockade by local school children.

After lunch, Bob showed us some old books and documents, then took us out to the park to see the playground, the Eureka memorial (complete with cannons) and a circular structure which is a new addition to the park.

Next, was a visit to the old cemetery to see memorials to the diggers and the soldiers. We also saw the grave of six members of my mother’s family.

After that, we went to the Ballarat Fine Arts Gallery to look at the original Eureka flag which has been painstakingly restored and is on display in subdued lighting so as not to fade or damage the fabric. It is a large flag and is a very impressive sight. It is amazing to see where people have cut sections from the flag, not only around the edges, but in the middle.
New knowledge and practice

The children from Robe had questions in a camp booklet to complete as they moved through the exhibition. This could be used as a prompt to the children’s memory when they returned to school or as part of a teacher assessment.

Teachers would also be able to assess what children visiting the Centre had gained from the experience by discussing and questioning their understanding of the issues involved in the Eureka uprising.

Written assessment could also take the form of children:

- writing about their visit and their observations
- writing from the viewpoint of one of the characters involved
- participating in a debate about whether the Government was justified in its actions (debates are an excellent form of assessment, especially when a child has to defend a point of view which is opposite to their own)
- making a timeline of events to compare with movements overseas (for example, the 1848 revolutions in Europe or the American Civil War culminating in the abolition of slavery)
- examining an aspect of the uprising and presenting it as a conversation between two characters (they could research actual quotations and incorporate them in their conversations).

It was gratifying for me to receive the grant as I have never applied for anything like this before. The major professional outcome for me was spending the day with like-minded people who were passionate about history and making it interesting for kids.

It inspired me to write a story for my Year 3 class about the dedication of the Pikeman’s dog, who would not leave its dead master’s body at the battle at the Stockade.

On the personal side, it has rekindled my interest in my family history and I am going to try and find where my great-great grandparents lived and had their business in the 1850’s in Ballarat and see what’s there today. I would also like to have the headstone on the family grave restored or replaced as it has been broken in half and the writing is becoming illegible.

I think good history teaching is like any good teaching. It should bring the subject to life for the children and get them involved. It should help them make connections and comparisons with their own lives so they can see the relevance. I think Bob’s use of simple costumes and props, with artefacts that the children could handle, was an excellent way to involve them in the experience.

I am considering asking if I can change from being Science Coordinator to Humanities Coordinator next year in my role as an Expert Teacher. This might enable me to buy resources and promote the teaching of history.
Although our library has lots of books about Australia and Australian history, I would like to buy costumes, interesting articles, posters and other items to help bring history alive throughout the school.

I have also planned a session for a staff meeting which will include:
- an Australian history quiz, including questions about sport, music and art
- singing “Botany Bay”
- reciting the well known verse of “My Country” by Dorothea Mackellar
- a timeline
- staff completing their own family tree
- Australian food
- information about the Eureka Centre.

I will also have some interesting things for the teachers to look at and discuss, such as my great-grandmother’s pewter tea set, old blue castor oil bottles, black gin bottles, Chinese coins, old books and family photos. I took many photos while I was at the Centre and in Ballarat, so I will mount these to form a display.

I hope to encourage a greater interest in the teaching of history, to assist other staff members and to work with our students to develop positive attitudes towards history generally and Australian history in particular.