Shadowers of History

Commonwealth History Project

Strathfieldsaye Primary School Swan Hill
Pioneer Settlement

Authors: Lea Downing and Denise Manzie
Background

As experienced primary teachers, we have 59 years of generalist teaching between us. For both of us, history teaching has been an integral part of our teaching lives.

We welcomed the opportunity to visit a working historical museum and to examine the relevance it would have to the exemplary learning programs that we implement at our school.

We believe that for children to understand where they are now and what is currently happening in their world, they need to be able to look back with understanding about what has gone before.

History is therefore an ongoing process that builds understanding through stepping stones. But history education is about more than understanding, it is also about using history to build the future.

History creates a sense of wonder in children and a fascination for how things once were and provides a context for children to understand their heritage.

Within the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), History is a domain. At our school, History plays a strong role in some of our integrated units of study. In some units of study, History is the major focus whereas in others it plays a minor role.

An example of a major focus would be a unit on Early Settlers. Other learning areas would be used as tools for investigating the topic.

An example of a minor focus would be support for learning in a range of areas and studies, such as the investigation of money, clocks and communication.
About the host organisation

Organisational structure

The host organisation was the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement, with a strong link to history.

The Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement Museum was founded to portray the development of inland Australia between 1830 and 1930. The preservation of important elements of our history is a vital educational resource suitable for students of all ages.

The Museum is open seven days a week to school groups and the general public. It has a well-designed and popular Education Department staffed by teachers from Strategic Partnerships at the Victorian Department of Education.

At the Museum, there are a range of offerings such as:
- study tours
- pioneer activity program
- pioneer home life day
- Aboriginal culture
- maths and science trails
- river cruise
- sound and light show
- pottery
- horse-drawn vehicles
- vintage car rides.

The program centred around workshops that encouraged hands-on participation and investigation. Thinking skills, simulations, analysis and evaluation of past and present lifestyles were all used.

Educators can link other local district attractions into school visits upon request.

Learning environment

Located on the Little Murray River, The Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement contains 50 historic buildings, many of which carry on the business of 90 years ago. These include the Blacksmith, Printer, General Store, Draper, Potter, Steam Workshop, Vintage Transport and Paddle Steamer, alongside with other traditional activities that bring history alive.

To maximise learning opportunities, Swan Hill Pioneer settlement offers a full camping program for school groups, accommodating up to 125 students.
Day trips would also be beneficial, as the host organisation provides workshops with history tutors, making history a first hand experience.

**Assessment and accountability**

Education Officers at the Museum were in the process of aligning the educational program content to VELS.

Our observation was that the content is primarily located within the humanities discipline. It provides the opportunity for children from Prep to Year 10 to be involved in the study of human societies, people and their cultures in the past and present. We felt that, for our school, there was most relevance for the 3,4,5, and 6 year levels.

As teachers, however, we can see opportunities to integrate the learning experiences across the 3 VELS strands in areas such as:

- Physical, Personal and Social Learning
- Discipline-based Learning
- Interdisciplinary Learning.

From our direct observation, the children were encouraged to watch and then do. The tutors were adept at engaging students and assessment of their understanding was implicit in their productivity.

From a practising teacher’s point of view, it would be easy to link the workshops back to a reporting and assessment program within a school.

Testimonials from visiting schools were glowing in their praise of the educational worth the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement.
About the experience

We were welcome by Joe and Dennis and given the opportunity to familiarise ourselves with facilities at the site.

Initially, time was spent discussing the organisational structures and educational programs on offer.

Joe and Dennis provided us with literature and curriculum support materials that were very relevant and helpful in providing a framework for the development of our own integrated units of study in this field.

We were then introduced to more of the friendly people that make up the staff of the Pioneer Settlement. There are a range of paid and volunteer enthusiasts who share their passion for history with the visitors.

We looked through facilities at the camp catering for school groups. There are two separate dining areas and bathrooms and dormitory sleeping facilities for up to 125 people. Although there was no formal playground, there was an open area and the school group could use the other facilities of the Settlement itself.

We followed visiting school groups and witnessed the enthusiasm of the staff as they delighted children with authentic learning experiences.

A one hour river cruise on the P.S.Pyap was provided and this gave children an understanding of the historical importance of the riverboat trade.
New knowledge and practice

The opportunity to visit the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement provided us with a rich resource to use in future planning. The authentic learning workshops provided a great basis for developing curriculum using the Victorian Learning Standards.

We took away a sense of excitement as we reaffirmed our enthusiasm for history teaching and its importance in children’s lifelong learning. We feel the model of immersing children in their learning is best practice history teaching.

In action, this can be as simple as making damper at the back of the school or a colonial day where children dress accordingly and role play times past. Or it could be the wonderful experiences that the children would have if they stepped back in time to be actively involved in a ‘hands on’ scenario.

From a personal point of view, we enjoyed the professional interaction with committed educators who were passionate about what they had to offer. They were warm, friendly and accommodating.

All this, on a balmy spring day with butterflies fluttering and bees buzzing around the blossom in the trees and beautiful surround. We wondered at our good fortune!

At our school, we work in teams to develop continuous curriculum or ‘spiral’ that continues throughout the time a child spends in primary school. This entails laying foundations in learning that are revisited as students pass through the classes.

We feel that this focus on history works well within the humanities domain. It is a model of delivery that also provides huge benefits for children in the domains of Interpersonal Development, Civics and Citizenship and Thinking.

Now that we have met them, we feel that we could use Joe and Dennis as resource people when planning around our spiralling curriculum. We are considering the site for a school camp and have reported back to our learning team as to the wonderful potential of the settlement for a camp or a major excursion.