Shadowers of History
Commonwealth History Project
St. Martin of Tours Primary School
Koorie Heritage Trust Cultural Centre

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Background

Last year, St. Martin of Tours participated in a review process. Part of the review involved auditing practices within all key learning areas of the curriculum.

In particular, recommendations were made about Inquiry Learning. Staff felt that many units of work didn’t lend themselves to the inquiry approach and that a more “hands on” and “lived” approach was needed to engage the students.

In 2006, St. Martin of Tours was fortunate to be invited to be part of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQPT), Developing Inquiring Minds, Learning for the 21st Century. We are in the process of reviewing our inquiry learning approach.

In my role as Curriculum Coordinator, I was looking for inspiration to make some aspects of the curriculum come alive. I wanted to make history more appealing to both staff and children.

A good starting point was to begin to work on including more indigenous perspective in our history units. To motivate staff, I needed to improve my own knowledge and experience in this area.

About the host organisation
I was given the opportunity to shadow Dean Stewart from the Koorie Heritage Trust Cultural Centre.

The Centre not only provides education, but is also involved in:
- recording oral history of Indigenous culture
- assisting upcoming Indigenous artists of all ages
- exhibiting a vibrant display of various Indigenous artworks, including some more modern pieces.

Known as the “Koorie Keeping Place” in Victoria, the Centre houses many precious pieces, including some of the first collected artefacts.

I visited their extensive research library, which includes substantial material on South Eastern Indigenous Australians. For a small fee, you can access resources such as videos, journals, books, reports and archived records. I was told that sometimes the elders visit the library to help with enquiries about the various Indigenous communities in Victoria.

About the experience
I was inspired by Dean’s conviction and passion for his Indigenous culture and the value he places on involving others in this cross-cultural experience. It is also an opportunity for him to share his rich oral history and dispel stereotypes surrounding Aboriginal Australia.
During the day, I experienced one of the programs offered by the cultural centre: “Walking Kulin Country” in the Flagstaff Gardens. The program is unique because children can actually experience some connection to the spirit of the land before they visit the Koorie Trust Cultural Centre.

In this activity, we walked as Dean unfolded some of the history of early Melbourne and the cultural significance of the site for the Indigenous people. The purpose of this visit was for us to experience what a typical school group would do. It was very hands-on and challenged the imagination by tuning us in to the symbols and sounds of the land.

“Walkin Birrarung” is another program offered by Dean. Groups walk for an hour along the Yarra and important Aboriginal Kulin sites are highlighted.

At the Education Centre, Dean described the history and culture of Indigenous communities in Victoria. He presented and explained maps of the various communities and their traditions.

Dean gave a multicultural perspective of all the Aboriginal communities in the nation of Australia and the laws which govern these communities. Various artefacts and objects such as possum coats and implements were also on display.

All education groups have an opportunity to visit the Education Centre after their “Walkin Kulin Country” experience. Dean is currently working on making links with other educational organisations such as the Museum, to enrich the experience of children for the day.

New knowledge and practice
As a result of my experience at the Koorie Heritage Trust, I will endeavour to put the following plans into action:
within the next year, involve staff in a cross-cultural experience at the Koorie Heritage Trust to give them a better understanding of Victorian Indigenous culture and involve them in a “hands-on” or “lived” experience
plan and implement a unit of study on Victoria in 2007 with particular links to the history and contributions of Indigenous communities.
involve children in an experience at the Koorie Heritage Trust to broaden their understandings and dispel stereotypes they may have of Indigenous Australians.