Shadowers of History
Commonwealth History Project
East Doncaster Secondary College
Wesley, Glen Waverley
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**Background**

The need for consistent reflection is a vital part of any teacher’s professional development. In our busy teaching careers this is something we do regularly, but perhaps without the vigour that it deserves.

The act of ‘shadowing’ another teacher provides valuable insight and reminders for our professional practice. It forces us to reflect on what we do well and what we could indeed improve. It makes us aware of good teaching practice and inspires us with new ideas. The History Shadowers project has given me valuable reflection time when this is a rarity in a hectic teaching schedule.

**About East Doncaster Secondary College**

The study of History in secondary schools as a subject has gone through many cycles in its presentation to the student population. However, in both schools where I have taught (from 2003-2006), I have found that History is addressed as its own discipline.

Students at East Doncaster Secondary College study History as a compulsory subject from Years 7-10. In the Junior levels (Years 7 and 8), it is taught in a semester block with Geography, students receiving four lessons per week.

During Year 9, students study History for the whole year but with a reduced number of lessons per cycle.

In Year 10, all students study History for a semester block of three lessons per week, with the option of completing a History elective as well.

History is then offered as a VCE subject. Interest at the VCE level is not soaring for a variety of reasons. In 2006, 25 students are completing Units 1 and 2, with a promising outlook for 2007.

The school has recently proposed a course change for Units 3 and 4, from Australian History to Revolutions. I believe this change will affect numbers as many students are more excited by the prospect of revolutions.

Given the large school population, History is not a dominant subject. I believe this is due largely to the demographic of the school and a push towards academic achievement. However recent changes and boost to the profile of History within the school will hopefully see a change.

At East Doncaster Secondary College, History is taught by a variety of teachers who openly share and discuss teaching ideas. Courses are never static, and staff meet regularly to improve the curriculum.

**About my personal background**

The study of History is without doubt a fascinating adventure, but I believe it’s the teacher’s navigation through the course that determines the type of journey the students will have.

I developed my love for history as a secondary student through the passion and inspiration of particular teachers. Three teachers stand out in my mind as being able to bring History alive through their re-telling and a narrative approach.
I am passionate about trying to blow away the cobwebs that student associate with History and to open their eyes to the world around them. It is also my aim to show students that the study of History is not fruitless, but beneficial for their future pathways.

Within my own teaching pedagogy, I aim to provide courses that vary in content, skill and application. I endeavour to teach students in a variety of ways and encourage them to become independent and critical thinkers. History to me is about the retelling of all kinds of different stories in many different ways.

**About the host organisation**

As a three campus school offering the IB, the program of History is quite large at Wesley. The number of students undertaking History at the Glen Waverly campus VCE level is substantial and students have the option of choosing from three Unit 3 and 4 options. Students undertaking the IB are expected to take subjects from specific disciplines, including the humanities.

The school is broken into quite distinct Junior, Middle and Senior sections. This means that curriculum is looked after by different departments. As with my own experience, teachers appear to follow a general curriculum outline, however the day-to-day classroom content is left to the discretion of the individual teacher.

The structure of History within the school program also varied. Though changes to the curriculum are imminent, History is taught to the junior levels as part of a SOSE program.

In Year 9, students complete units of integrated work. This works well as students also participate in an off campus program at Clunes.

At Year 10, students complete a semester of History with the option of completing a further elective course.

The students I observed appeared to be thoroughly embracing the subject. I think this was largely helped by the way that History is marketed within the school.

History units taught at the Year 9 and 10 level are given simple but exciting course names such as ‘Great and Powerful Friends’. This seems to be an easy way to naturally attract student attention.

Other great attractions for History within the school include school trips, with a history and cultural tour to Vietnam taking place in September this year.
About the experience

I attended the Wesley, Glen Waverley campus on two separate days of observation and met with Dean Pyrah, following four of his classes. Many aspects to my short visit at Wesley astounded me, from the spectacular grounds to the maturity of students and their participation in self-regulated discussion.

My visit began with a brief tour around the large campus. Certainly a classroom does not differ too much from one school to the next. However, the open learning and shared spaces were very appealing.

I observed mainly senior classes, however I also managed to spend some time wandering around the junior and middle sections of the school observing students at work. During my visit, I saw a variety of classes and teaching styles. From the Vietnam War to the French Revolution, exam revision to visual source analysis. It was a busy stage in the term with school camp and it was interesting to observe the difference between small and large numbers of students.

The structure of the school day is very different at Wesley, with a need to incorporate in various extra-curricular activities to the timetable. The length of periods varies from 50 to 75 minute sessions, at various times of the day. There are no bells and students move easily between classes.

A big difference between the host school and my own were the facilities and access to resources. For example, there was a range of online services offered by the library and programs directing students towards more structured research paths.

As a laptop school, students at Wesley inevitably have a greater access to ICT. Whilst this is not imperative for teaching History well, ICT aids students in being able to explore history and create innovative work. For example, students in Dean’s Year 12 class use Moviemaker software to produce an exhibition of propaganda posters. It is inevitably easier to excite students about History with such tasks.

A mini lecture theatre provides students with the opportunity to view films and presentations on a larger scale. There are televisions in most rooms, which means showing small clips or excerpts is a feasible lesson option. Students also have many open areas where they can meet comfortably and complete work.
New knowledge and practice

Participating in the Shadowers Project was certainly a positive experience, professionally and personally. It has confirmed my passion for History and my determination to pass this on to future students.

Professionally, it has given me valuable insight into potential teaching strategies and approaches. As a beginning teacher, it has also confirmed that I have been doing a ‘good job’, and that I am teaching my students valuable skills.

My major gain from the Shadowers project was a realisation of the need to implement a consistent and constant approach to the teaching of valuable historical skills. Often within the busy school curriculum, we get caught up in getting through the required course content and neglect the skills students need to address such information. It is important to implement these at each year level to gradually build student confidence.

Starting with simple note taking skills, we can scaffold students into analysis tasks and this will eventually become second nature. If these are developed coherently and from the early years of secondary school, then there will be a broader extent of material for exploration.

After observing the reaction of students and their ability to tackle certain tasks, the importance of recapping course content and skills is clear. This is something I endeavour to do, but since participating in the project have applied much more consistently. Students enjoy a feeling of success when they display knowledge they have learnt. Dean’s practise of modelling work reinforced the importance of listening to good examples of writing, particularly in extended responses.

I have already begun implementing some changes within my own teaching pedagogy. In particular, I am trying to consistently incorporate the teaching of skills alongside content.

‘Good’ History teaching is when students and teachers work in an environment that is active, open and interesting. A ‘good’ History classroom should have a mixture of noisy and quiet times. There should be interaction between students and students and between students and teachers.