

Creating a museum

How students can change ideas about the past

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This paper describes an innovative approach to teaching history to year 10 Australian students – one that aimed to challenge and transform students' ideas about the past, and the relative value of different world cultures.

Principles important to transformative teaching were consciously applied. These include: engaging students in exercises that might challenge taken for granted assumptions about the past, such as Eurocentrism; building critical thinking skills that would help students raise questions and look below the surface of practices; and motivating students so that they moved beyond theoretical understanding towards action.

The class was engaged in producing a museum exhibition that illustrated various elements of a range of past cultures. This was achieved through students acquiring or creating artefacts, labelling the artefact with relevant information and then displaying the work in a temporary exhibition at the local museum.

The success of the unit in engaging students with the past and in challenging their own notions of other cultures through a real life task has lessons for the ways the teaching of history can be used to transform ideas that are unjust, dominating and antithetical to multicultural, humanising values.

Key words: history teaching

Introduction

One of the dark paradoxes of globalization is that while on the one hand there are more opportunities for cultures to communicate and learn about each other, the competitiveness that characterises the way globalism is being enacted is cultivating self-interest and individualism (Jeong 2004; Saul 2005). While history teaching is of course not responsible for this development, it has played an indirect part because it has traditionally been a means of transmitting a single narrative of national progress and cohesion. Such a narrative has by its nature marginalised the voices of other cultures; and emphasised the roles of dominant forces.

However, history teaching can also be part of a more liberating alternative. History in schools has often been, and indeed originated as a way to transmit a particular view of the past. This approach reinforced a particular set of values and celebrated the merits of a particular nation, racial or religious group.

This at least, was the role first given to school history in the 19th century, when the modern nation state was coming into existence. For many people, this transmissive role of history, the mere passing on of historical ‘facts’ such as lists of kings and queens, is what history is still about, or needs to be about (Macintyre 2003). Politicians, especially those on the right such as Margaret Thatcher, John Howard and George Bush have lamented the loss of the teaching of a unitary national narrative in history classes. And many former students recall with displeasure the history they studied at school for the same reasons.

Since the purpose of this history has always been to celebrate the superiority of one group over all others, its result is to prevent students from exploring the full diversity of human experiences in the past. It therefore fails to help students develop an acceptance of difference, shared humanity and respect. Instead, it reinforces fear of and contempt for the other.

There has always been, though, another voice for the role of history in education as a means of transformation. In the early years of the 20th century, textbook writers in the US were being *criticised* for teaching students to think critically about the past. Today in the state of Queensland, Australia, history syllabuses specifically require the development of critical thinking skills in students, and present content arranged around themes rather than narratives. These syllabuses encourage the development in students of the idea that there is more than one single unifying history; that all cultures have their own histories and their own interpretations of what has happened in the past.

It is now possible to explore with students concepts of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘multiple pasts’ and to ask questions such as ‘whose history’ (Bruno-Jofre & Schiralli 2002).

As Dwayne Donald (2004, p.25) suggests,

We must contest the official versions of history and society through a process of active and critical re-reading as a way to re-present what has been left out.

In the present global climate of fear amidst the so-called ‘War on Terror’ and ‘Clash of Civilisations’ (Huntington 1998) it is more important than ever to cultivate in students an understanding of the common humanity of people in all parts of the globe, and the contributions that a wide range of civilisations have made to the human experience.

A transformative shift

In a transformative way of thinking, the practice of history teaching moves from a technical act for conveying knowledge to a cultural act that teaches students about the nature of understanding, about their own role in making historical knowledge and can inspire people to work for social change in the present (Giroux 2000).

In this worldview it is possible, indeed desirable, for students to come to recognise and value cultural diversity, to learn skills to rethink traditions and routines, and to deconstruct and rebuild old epistemologies. Students then move from being able to recite a singular view to wondering about the nature of understanding. In this view the role of the teacher is to engage in less repetition and less reinforcement of conventional ways of knowing, to engaging in a process of interruption to create the space for a restoration of the past (Tupper 2005). The vision is for students to move from a passive and powerless stance to appreciating their own role in making historical knowledge. Thus, the aim is to inspire people to work for social change in the present (Mezirow 2000).

The museum activity

Nambour High School is a semi-rural public high school in Queensland, Australia with 1400 students mainly from a white Anglo-Saxon, working or middle class background. There are a small number of students who come from a NESB.

History in this school is not a highly valued subject in terms of the administration of the school, and generally students don't see any real value in studying it. Indeed one student wanted to swap out of history into early childhood studies because she felt that history had 'no part in her future'! A number of students have expressed their dissatisfaction with what they are sometimes expected to learn about in history. An example is the approach often taken to the teaching of World War One as a tale of the building of the Australian myth of mateship and heroism. Students, I think, are wanting to explore history from a global perspective and also wanting to explore the contributions of people from all walks of life to the human story, not just people who happen to be white, powerful men.

Having developed this awareness of what students wanted to learn about (I actually asked students to write down what they would like to learn about, after I had realised how dissatisfied they were with the unit on World War One we had completed). I set out to develop a unit of work that would allow students to learn about the contributions of a range of civilisations from about 1000 years ago.

Students had shown interest in Aztecs, Incas, Japan, China, Islam, and Medieval Europe as things to study and so I decided to create a unit focussing on the question 'how did people live 1000 years ago'. I thought this would provide the ideal way for students to develop an understanding of the diverse contributions of many different civilisations. My thinking was that this would challenge students' ideas about the relative importance and value of contemporary cultures. I further decided to develop the unit in the context of a museum exhibition. In this way, students would act as the exhibition curators and have the chance to transform the ideas of other people about the past. This was made possible through the local museum offering us exhibition space to display student work. The aims of the unit were for students to recognize cultural diversity; notice

different points of view about the past; think critically about the past; and generate knowledge that might inspire others in the present.

The unit began with students providing ideas on what they already knew or thought they knew about the world of 1000 years ago. This approach allowed the students to move from the known to unknown but, more importantly, revealed for the teacher ideas that needed to be challenged; particularly the anachronistic, Eurocentric ideas of European superiority that a number of students held.

The next stage of the unit invited students to interrupt (Tupper 2005) and challenge these ideas by presenting them with evidence that the past might not be as they imagined it. From here we examined where people do get their ideas of the past and particularly the role that museums play in this. We examined the ways that museums can either reinforce or transform traditional ideas of the past. By triggering their interest in museums and their relevance students learned about the role museums play in constructing and revising historic knowledge. Students examined particular examples of museums trying to develop transformative exhibits, and the controversy this can sometimes cause. For example, the controversies over the National Museum of Australia and its exhibits on indigenous Australians and at the Smithsonian, where an event to commemorate the anniversary of the A bomb being used on Japan talked about its negative effects on the Japanese people. Ex-servicemen and politicians complained and the exhibition was changed.

Moving students on

Once students had an idea of the role that museums can play, they embarked on the process of developing their own exhibition. This was a three-stage process. Firstly, students acquired an understanding of what, in general, the world of 1000 years ago was like, and at the same time developed critical thinking skills that would allow them to think about the world in new ways and communicate this thinking to others. To achieve these things students completed an on-line course developed by the teacher that led the students through an exploration of the world of 1000 years ago and some of the sources of our knowledge of that world. The learning activities that students had to complete required them to challenge commonly held ideas about the past and the relative roles of different people in it.

In one of these activities, students were given mini-biographies of a number of diverse personalities from the period 1000 to 500 years ago. These included people such as El-Cid, Manco Capac, Joan of Arc and a number of lesser-known figures (at least in Australia). The students completed the following two activities:

1. Make a judgment about how important these people were, in your opinion, by putting them in a list from most to least important, justifying your decision.
2. Would people in other parts of the world agree with your decisions? Explain your opinion, using an example.

Here are two student responses. They indicate the way in which students were able to think about the past in ways that went beyond the traditional masculinist ideas of the past. A common feature of student responses was the choice of personalities who were either women, from non-western cultures, from lower levels of society or a combination of these. Students, I believe, were realising that there are important examples in history of people who have been significant – for example women, including those from non-Western societies – whose contributions deserve to be

noted along with those of the privileged and powerful Western males who dominate most history as we know it, including the history found in most textbooks.

Joan of Arc: I think Joan of Arc is the most important person in the list. She was just a ploughman's daughter and yet she managed to do so much. She is a woman... at that time women weren't really considered equal, so for her to be able to lead the French armies to victory and help with the liberation of France is pretty amazing.

Murasaki Shikibu: I think that it was special that Murasaki wrote the first novel: and in a time of war, and male dominance she wrote a book of love and sensitivity. She didn't concentrate on all the bad stuff that was happening around her.

Developing materials for an exhibition.

The second stage of the exhibition project was the development of a research journal in which students recorded their research findings on a particular aspect of their chosen civilisation; for example social classes, technology, the arts and so on. During this stage students worked individually on developing ideas about why this aspect of civilisation was important for people to know about. They also needed to think about what sort of artefact would be appropriate to illustrate these ideas. Students needed to locate images of a real artefact and then reproduce this for the exhibition. Students reported back to the rest of their team on what they had discovered and what sort of artefact they would create and why. From this, each group then reported back to the whole class. This idea of communicating progress was important for instilling in students the idea that this was a co-operative and 'real life' task.

Setting up an exhibition

Once students had completed their research and created their artefact they were ready to move to the final stage of the project. This was to set up their exhibition at the local museum. Before this could happen though, they needed to be aware of the nature of a themed historical exhibition such as theirs. In order for students to gain this awareness, they completed two excursions. The first was to the local museum. Here they were able to see the ways an amateur museum society is able to display its artefacts, and the content of the signage they use. On this excursion students were also able to get a feel for where their exhibition would be set up.

The second excursion was virtual, in that the students completed a web quest that required them to visit a range of different museum web sites that had on-line exhibitions.

By completing these excursions, students were able to develop their ideas about what sort of textual material they would include in their exhibit. They were required to produce two 'labels'. One needed to describe the artefact and what it revealed about the particular aspect of the civilisation they had researched. The other had to set this within the wider context of the civilisation, and make comparisons and contrasts with contemporary Australia. It also needed to make clear why this civilisation was important to know about.

Once this material had been produced, students set up their exhibition. The exhibition was displayed for two months.

Conclusion

In evaluating the outcomes of the unit a range of measurements of success was utilised. Students completed a unit evaluation sheet and the level of engagement with this unit was compared to the levels of engagement with the previous, more traditional unit on Australia's involvement in World War One. Overwhelmingly, students found this project a far more engaging and relevant unit than the previous one. An examination of student assessment results for the two units also found a significant improvement in results.

During the exhibition, a visitors' book was available for comments. An inspection of these revealed a high level of visitor interest and satisfaction with the exhibition. A selection of the comments is reproduced below.

Mr A.B: Congratulations! Very enjoyable and interesting display. Keep on with your interest in history.

Ms P.S: What a wonderful display! You are all deserving of hearty congratulations – you have obviously become very interested in your subject and spent many hours researching and putting your display together.

Mr D.S: Very interesting. I wish I had learnt this history in my school years.

Finally, the museum society itself was highly impressed with the students' work, sending a letter of commendation to the school principal and suggesting that the exhibition become an annual event.

The unit's success would suggest that it would be worthwhile for teachers to pursue similar projects in the future. A related development has been developed with a new cohort of year ten history students, involving them in creating a web site relating to Australian history

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About the author

Jamie Hay teaches at Nambour State High School, and has been a teacher of Ancient and Modern History for 23 years. He has a commitment to teaching history in a transformative way, encouraging students to become agents of positive change in their communities. Jamie has an interest in rummaging around in old ruins wherever some might be.

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