

Presentation to the 16th International Symposium on School Life and School History: Museums and Collections. Sovereign Hill, Ballarat. March 2015

ELTHAM College began 41 years ago, the brainchild of Les Clarke; a local architect who wanted to create a different schooling experience for his own children. From its inception, this K-12 Co-Educational school has provided a creative, innovative approach to teaching and learning; an approach that engages students to: learn by doing; to work wholistically; to take risks; explore; learn from their mistakes and to develop strong, warm, mutually respectful relationships with their teachers. From this nurturing environment grew the unique section of the Junior Years known as The HIStory Centre, where students in Years 3 and 4 learn by means of a drama based program.

I've been lucky enough to work at ELTHAM for more than 20 years, the past six of which I have spent in the HIStory Centre, where this program with the 8-10 year old students has won awards, including the Drama Victoria Award for Innovative Curriculum for Drama (2000) and Best Innovative Curriculum for Drama/Theatre (2010). The HIStory Centre itself was launched in 2002 by gifted educators Dr Tiina Moore and Geraldine Peters. It has proven to be an endlessly evolving program; one where every staff member who comes into the team brings her or his own ideas, skills and understandings to teaching and learning. Given we work with Years 3 *and* 4, we run a two year program of rotating units of work and there's a real sense of anticipation amongst the students as they look forward to the adventures of each unit. These historic and story based units give students the opportunity to experience history by living it. The in-role, at times confronting experience of being: a convict; an indigenous Australian; a poor villager; a King; a soldier; a Chinese miner; an Egyptian High Priest; a sailor on board the Endeavour and so on, challenges students to learn firsthand what it was like to live in circumstances very different from their own. Taking on the Mantle of The Expert, each student researches his or her role and, with support from the background information provided by the research, staff input, combined with his or her own sense of what is required, embodies this character at each HIStory Centre session.

There is a powerful element of play, for both students and staff, and of stepping outside of one's own views and perceptions. Great depth of understanding arises from experiences that are visceral, provocative and engaging.

So how do we do it? There are three main elements we deem to be essential: Space, Staffing and Story.

The interior of the school building was remodelled to accommodate the spaces needed for the HIStory Centre. One classroom was transformed into a small theatrette. All rooms were reduced in size in order to be able to create a central space for the "set" which varies greatly from unit to unit. I cannot stress enough how important space is to teaching and learning in a drama based curriculum. It must be the central space of the learning environment. It doesn't work for it to be in a hall somewhere off in the distance. Students need room to move around, to work in groups, to find a quiet space, to sit, or talk, to enact a scene or work amongst the props and the structures that set the scene.

So what do these sets look like? For the Unit on Captain James Cook and the Voyage of The *Endeavour*, the set is a replica of the ship itself. For The First Fleet, simple wooden pallets represent

the 11 ships that set sail for the new colony of NSW. For Mahtle, a derelict town is constructed in that central space. For Egypt, it's a Pharaoh's tomb. For the fiction based *The King's Fountain* and *The Sea People*, a beautiful mural, a throne and a red carpet form the simple set.

Next, there must be sympathetic timetabling. This program couldn't work unless all staff and students are present together. The students of the 3/4 neighbourhood and their teachers are timetabled on together every Wednesday afternoon and Friday morning for HIStory Centre. Although there are clear, planned structures for each unit of work, it is an organic process, whereby what happens at any HIStory Centre session is based upon what took place the lesson before. Every time it's different. So there is an enormous amount of planning that goes into each session. For this planning to occur, all staff must be student free at the same time. So the students go to specialist classes (PE, Music etc) at the same time, allowing their class teachers to be free to plan together.

Finally, for each unit, either historic or story based, there is a hook to capture the students' imagination and engage them in investing in the experience.

The hook might be: a short film clip of the time; a mysterious parcel arriving in the post; a message in a bottle that has travelled across time; a lucky dip of roles; an invitation to a town meeting; or the first page of a story. From that moment, they are no longer students of ELTHAM but crew on board the Endeavour, tomb labourers in Ancient Egypt, disgruntled investors caught by a real estate scam, poor villagers oppressed by a greedy King, simple folk on a tiny island, wretched convicts transported in chains or power hungry militia determined to vent their frustration on those more miserable than they.

The in-role experiences enable students to: step outside their comfort zone; to speak up; to take a risk; and to attempt that most difficult of human endeavours—to see the world through another's eyes. The result of these experiences is that every single student is actively involved. Visiting staff, parents and others from both within and outside of the school have expressed amazement that no student stands back or is "too shy" to speak. Every student feels supported to participate, at whatever level s/he is capable.

Each unit culminates in an experience or action: The crew of *The Endeavour* must prepare their report to the Royal Geographical Society; the High Priests, Scribes, Artists and Builders of Ancient Egypt must bury their beloved Pharaoh; the convicts earn their tickets of leave; Indigenous Australians teach the Europeans much about culture and story; the King is persuaded to treat his people with compassion; and the townsfolk of Mahtle set up a real life Town Fair to raise money to re-build.

Staff are there (in role) to: lay the bread-crumbs of story for students to follow; provide background information to set the scene; direction to keep the experience moving; relevant work (across the curriculum) that adds to the depth of student knowledge of the era; but in the end, the direction taken by each character is —while within a reasonable context of the story or historical era— entirely the students' own. With a simple beat of a drum, a ring of a bell, a sound effect or a song, staff can support students in knowing when to move on or to try something different.

Without doubt, the most powerful experience in the two year program occurs within the context of a unit called simply, "The Goldfields".

For two months, students embody the role of a miner from Britain or Europe who has come to the 1850s goldfields of Ballarat to seek his fortune. As students complete Journal tasks (such as research work on the era, writing tasks connected with the unit, mathematical calculations about —for example—the distance and cost of the journey by sea) they earn the right to stake a claim (in a sand tray), create their own little tent, and when enough journal work has been done, to mine for gold (which staff have distributed throughout each tray) using a tiny spoon. Any gold they find is taken to the Commissioners (staff) for assay and they are paid a little or a lot, depending upon the price of gold that day, determined by a roll of a die. However, they must — from their earnings — pay for the miners right and all tools and equipment. Some days they earn no gold and must go hungry. Some miners steal from others. Still others attempt to bribe the commissioners! (Sometimes successfully!) The motivation for students to work hard across the daily curriculum in order to earn the right to mine for gold is impressive.

The culmination of this unit, however, involves the students in role not as European miners but as Chinese, who in the 1850s, flocked to the Victorian goldfields. They called Ballarat “New Gold Mountain” and arrived in their thousands. They did not meet a warm welcome. In order to avoid the unfair tax levied on them in Melbourne, they disembarked in Robe, South Australia and walked to Ballarat, a journey of many hundreds of miles.

It is this experience that the students of ELTHAM re-enact here at Sovereign Hill every two years. With the assistance of the fabulous staff and their generosity in opening this unique venue to us an hour before the general public, the students of ELTHAM have an unparalleled experience of oppression and discrimination. They are dressed as Chinese miners. They arrive at the back gates of the property and are met by actors who take on the role of the men whose job it was to protect the newly arrived Chinese on the long walk from Robe to Ballarat. The good people of Ballarat are not pleased to see them. The townspeople shout at them, throw rubbish at them, even fire warning shots over their heads. The Chinese protector lectures them. The missionaries try to convert them.

No-one wants them.

Over the course of the day they must visit the Chinese Head Man who loans them money to purchase a miners right. They pan for gold, hoping to find enough to survive the day. Everything is so foreign, except for the Temple; a small sanctuary of sanity and normalcy. There they can drink green tea in peace.

At the conclusion of this momentous day there is a simple ceremony in a small room, where each student solemnly removes hat and calico clothing and dons the uniform of a student of ELTHAM College. In so doing s/he travels back in time to present day and returns to ELTHAM College richer for the experience.

Of course the learning doesn't end there. Subsequent HIStory Centre lessons focus upon de-briefing the experience and unpacking the learning that has arisen from it. Without doubt the most powerful comments and writing any student does for the year stems from the recount (in role) of that day at Sovereign Hill. It is a day they never forget.

None of us does.

In truth, the final experience of *every* HIStory Centre unit of work empowers the students in their developing sense of agency in the world. They haven't just learned; they have acted upon their learning. They have stepped into the maelstrom of history and allowed themselves to be changed by the experience. In so doing, they learn as much about themselves as they do about those gone before them.

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