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HSC AUSTRALIAN HISTORY: AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE



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Since 1980 the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education has implemented a new style of program for the Higher School Certificate course. Australian history is a Group 1 subject within this re-structured program.

Australian history, according to most literature, is only two hundred years old. In teaching Australian history some teachers have 'done' the Aborigines by studying a traditional precontact history. Teachers may have even allocated a whole week to such a program, relying mainly on resource material available on northern or desert peoples. There has been virtually no work done on Victorian Aborigines and very little done on both contemporary and contact history in relation to the traditional history. There is now an option open to teachers to teach Aboriginal history as the HSC core subject, "Aboriginal society before European settlement" and "European settlement and the effects on Aboriginal society", or as the option subject, "Aborigines in the twentieth century". This has placed an increased demand on the services offered by Aboriginal Education Services. A number of teachers are electing to teach either all three units or a combination of the units. The problem then arises that teachers themselves often have information which is limited, inaccurate and irrelevant.

The archetypal image of an Aborigine standing on one leg on the edge of a precipice, peering out across the horizon, holding a spear and wearing a red 'nappy', is often the only picture that the schooling system has presented of an Aboriginal. It is no wonder then that electing to teach even one of the units offered suggests a dramatic redirection of thought. Not only does traditional resource material require revision, but an Aboriginal perspective is essential. This perspective will then validate Australian history.

It is this type of perspective that the Victorian Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group (VAECG) and AES are trying to present

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to students of Australian history. It is hoped that this will create a positive and real understanding of Aboriginal people in Victoria, both of today and of the past, and that it will take account of their diversity across the nation, both in traditional and contemporary times.

In May 1982 AES held an inservice program for twenty-two teachers of HSC Australian history. The response to the proposed program was very encouraging. It was very unfortunate that we did not have the necessary funds to accommodate another twenty-five applicants in a second program. The aims of the inservice program were:

- to sensitise teachers of HSC Australian history, involved in teaching any of the Aboriginal cores or the option, to an Aboriginal perspective, given the framework imposed by VISE;
- to introduce teachers to resources and possible teaching strategies that would be of use in the teaching of Aboriginal history;
- To make teachers critically aware of resources currently being used in schools, from an Aboriginal perspective;
- to give an overview of a Victorian Aboriginal history; and
- to introduce teachers to the importance and relevance of oral history to Aboriginal people.

The inservice was a two-day program. It involved a variety of activities and exposed teachers to a number of different Aboriginal speakers. The opening session aimed at introducing teachers to:

- the notion of the cultural relevance of learning: and
- the structure that relates to Aboriginal education in Victoria;

providing the teachers with a knowledge of the correct channels of communication and possible resource outlets.

The second session outlined the importance and academic validity of oral history in the teaching of Aboriginal Australian history. The aims of this session were:

- to promote the idea of oral history as a classroom teaching strategy;
- to introduce teachers to the complexity and time-consuming nature of an oral approach; and

- to introduce teachers to the only really valid Aboriginal record of Australian history.

The third session of the day introduced teachers to Victorian Aboriginal history. It gave teachers a base to work from and to research, themselves, at a later date. Both the second and third sessions highlighted the need for teachers to teach Aboriginal history with an Aboriginal perspective, with Aboriginal resources - literature, audio and oral - and to account for local geographical variation among Aboriginal people. This approach endeavors to make Aboriginal history more relevant and tangible to HSC students today. For too long Aboriginal people have been treated as exotic creatures of the past. Stereotyping to this degree is the result of current literature and textbooks.

The fourth session aimed at making teachers critically aware of the resources and literature that they had been accustomed to using. A workshop session found teachers on their hands and knees detecting both negative and positive images of Aborigines in books available in the AES library. These were brought to the attention of all participants in the larger group.

The final session for the day investigated material evidence available through the Victorian Archaeological Survey and the Museum. Both these organisations are well utilised by teachers. The aim of presenting a scientific perspective was again to make teachers become more selective and critical of the services offered to them - not just to grab at straws, so to speak.

The second day looked more specifically at the VISE structure and choice of cores and option. The first session of the day investigated the significance of the Batman Treaty and its relationship to the issue of land rights in Victoria and Australia. Land rights was seen as a very complex issue which is covered all too frequently and inadequately as a political gimmick, or as a trendy or contemporary issue concerning which there is an amount of information readily available, often in the form of newspaper articles.

Teachers then divided into smaller groups according to the core or option that they had chosen to teach, to discuss the types of resources being utilised currently, the types of teaching strategies employed and how they related both of these to the objectives stated by VISE. The problems faced and discussed were similar across the three chosen areas.

Discussion highlighted the need to teach Aboriginal culture and history as a whole. The staff involved in organising the inservice were disappointed to find teachers teaching the option with no introduction to it from the other core topics. It was discovered that most teachers avoided core topic 1 because it was perceived as being difficult, yet the subject matter of this topic is really the base or core for an understanding of Aboriginal culture and history.

Teachers were asked to evaluate the inservice. Comments below reflect attitudes of those involved:

I found the two days to be very worthwhile - all the information was relevant and I came away feeling stimulated as well as a little less easy about what I was attempting.

Overall, (I found) the conference exhausting, because I felt we were being 'grilled' to a certain extent. It was very high powered but I thought it was one of the most interesting and valuable conferences I have ever been to. It gave me a new perspective on Aboriginal people today and helped me to get rid of some lingering traces of a stereotypical view of Aborigines which I thought I had got rid of, but found I hadn't.

I sometimes felt that you didn't really appreciate the time pressure teachers are under and that we don't really have time to view three films before choosing one to use.

Teachers are not known for taking initiatives. Quite a number would subscribe to the theory that the organisers are the experts and so look to them to 'run the show'. A little more 'guided democracy' would probably make this session even more profitable.

From the point of view of Aboriginal Education Services staff the seminar provided an invaluable opportunity:

- to discover exactly what teachers were feeling about the teaching of Aboriginal history;
- to discover how the prescribed units were being tackled; and

- to keep in touch with the reality of classroom teaching, particularly its limitations. This is especially important for the current development of Aboriginal studies by the Curriculum Services Unit and local Aboriginal education committees for schools.

The teaching of Aboriginal culture and history at the senior level of secondary education has opened the doors to allow this type of teaching to infiltrate down the year levels. It is apparent that teachers do require inservice training on a regular basis by Aboriginal Education Services. One participant made the suggestion that inservicing be continued on a regional basis. Ideally, this is the only way to conduct such training. Regional or local Aboriginal education groups may in the future wish to conduct such training. It is these people who have the knowledge and should be seen as the 'experts' in Aboriginal culture and history - when they are ready to share or teach this information.

AES staff and VAECG would recommend that teachers teach all three units rather than selecting one or two. Aboriginal history cannot be segmented into either time segments or subject categories such as art or music. Students cannot hope to understand twentieth century Aboriginal issues without having an understanding of either the traditional cultural elements or the contact period between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Similarly, a presentation of the topic of Aborigines before European settlement would leave students with the idea that Aboriginal people are an exotic people of a 'primitive' past. The information needs to be updated. People need to be aware that Aboriginal people do exist in present day society.

Many teachers are teaching the second core "European settlement and the effects on Aboriginal society" without the first core as a base or the option as a follow-up. Students will not understand the Aboriginal reaction to European settlement without an understanding of traditional society. In particular, "the Dreaming" - the Aboriginal relationship to the land, and the complexity of kinship and social relationships will be misunderstood. The effects of this period on Aboriginal society develop further in the twentieth century. They give a grounding in the understanding of the most 'deprived' group of people in Australian society today.

It is recommended that any teacher teaching the units on Aboriginal culture and history be involved in at least one inservice a year. There is plenty of scope for the development of such inservice programs. This was the first program of its kind attempted by AES. It was not without its problems or inadequacies.

It is hoped that this type of program can reach further than the 'already converted', touching as many as possible of those teachers at all levels below HSC and across subject categories.

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