History in a digital world

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Gen Y

These days we hear a lot about *Gen Y, Digital Natives* and *Digital Immigrants*. Some of the students visiting our museums and cultural institutions are portrayed almost as a different species with completely new communication patterns and learning preferences. There is talk in some educational circles of 'visual literacy', 'screen literacy' and even 'multi-modal literacy'[1], referring to Gen Y's use of computers, movies, interactive games and television.

The experience of Sovereign Hill Education is that the developing generation is not terribly different from we older digital immigrants. They simply make good use of the wonderful array of new information technologies. While they are tremendously familiar with these technologies in a social arena, they are often not encouraged to use them in the classroom.

Schools

The learning agenda of schools has not changed radically in recent years. The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and the push for History to be included in a National Curriculum have documented what has been best practice in good classrooms for years. What good History teachers are after is a way to engage students in the art of historical literacy: they want students to be able to argue a point of view using historical evidence to back their opinions; they want to equip students with the ability to critically analyse sources of information for reliability, bias and relevance; they wish to promote deep understandings of historical questions and they want students to enjoy the experience[2]. But the VELS also promotes interdisciplinary skills like thinking, communication and ICT as well as social and personal skills and understandings.[3]

Museums and student-centred learning

Recently, many museums have been pursuing a personalised learning agenda for students. Often called *student-centred learning* [4], the approach seeks to promote student ownership of their learning on a museum visit by allowing choice. Many museum educators recognise that learning is very personal and look for ways to connect their subject matter to the personal experience of students. Some museums, like Sovereign Hill, are experimenting with ways to encourage students to use their collection to develop their own interpretations of history. This involves higher order skills, in Blooms Revised Taxonomy[5], the skills of analysing, evaluating and creating.

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[1] Evely, C

[2] VELS see particularly *Historical reasoning and understanding* standards at levels 4, 5 and 6

[3] VELS are divided into three strands: Physical, Personal and Social Learning, Discipline Based Learning and Interdisciplinary Learning

[4] Griffin, J. (1996)

[5] Anderson, L. (1999)

Picture This

Sovereign Hill Education has been trialing a program called *Picture This* with a number of Secondary schools, particularly with Year 9 students. The program seeks to combine the above three agendas – the communication skills and practices of Gen Y, the historical literacy desires of teachers and the personalised learning agenda of our museum.

How the Program works

Students choose a contention to research while at Sovereign Hill.

Contentions

1. There was no time for fun on the goldfields.
2. Today's women have an easier life than those of the 19th century.
3. 1850s fashion had more style than today's.
4. The past might be a good place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there.
5. The best technology is simple technology.
6. Horses were essential to 19th century business and economy.
7. Mining was not the only way to make a quid on the goldfields.
8. The goldfields were not really a multicultural society.
9. Sovereign Hill is not an accurate representation of a nineteenth century goldrush town.

The contentions are designed to be provocative and to encourage critical thinking. The choice encourages ownership and creativity. The students' task is to find as much evidence as possible to support or refute their contentions within one hour at Sovereign Hill. They use digital cameras to record their evidence.

Before the visit they can use the interactive map on Sovereign Hill's website to make decisions as to where they might find some evidence about their contentions.

Technology

Many students elect to use their own mobile phones in this project. They are familiar with the technology and often very comfortable with it. We once over-heard the following dialogue between a teacher and her student;

Teacher: Have you got a camera?
Student: Yeah, in my phone.
Teacher: Can you download the photos at home and get them to school?
Student: No, but I can send them to my friend who can do that for me."

Students are often more au fait with ICT than teachers.

Historical (Critical) literacy

Back at school, students develop a *PowerPoint, PhotoStory* or static presentation evaluating their contention. More recently many teachers and students have preferred to make movies. This mirrors the communication vehicles of a many social websites such as *Youtube. S*ome students are already adept movie-makers. Many of them are also used to sharing photos through social websites like *MySpace* and *FaceBook*.

In their presentations students need to explain how each photo (their evidence) is relevant to the topic and whether the evidence supports the contention or not. They discuss whether they feel each piece of evidence is reliable. They reach a conclusion about their contention based on Sovereign Hill as a source of information.

Structuring an Argument

Teachers have sometimes taken this as an opportunity to model argumentative essay writing in a visual format. They suggest the age-old argumentative essay structure of;

Define the topic,
For/Against, For/ Against etc
Conclusion "Therefore, I believe….".

The task involves students initially sorting their photographs into three piles, folders or categories – *For, Against* and *Irrelevant.* The last category is particularly important, as it requires students to make decisions about the usefulness of evidence. Once sorted, they group 'similar' photos together and try to give each group a title to explain the similarity. Each group then becomes a visual 'paragraph', for or against the contention.

Using photographs is often more engaging for visual learners and takes away from the literacy demands that can drive students away from History as a study. This activity provides a wonderful launching pad to model essay writing in a visual way.

Use of Primary Sources

Because Sovereign Hill is a recreated township, the evidence to be found there must be considered as secondary sources. Students have often been challenged to find other sources of evidence (paintings, quotes etc) to prove or disprove their contention. Some good teachers have even specified that students must find perhaps two or three primary sources for their presentation. Good websites where students can safely access primary sources include: SBS Gold[6], Sovereign Hill Research Notes[7], eGold[8] and Picture Australia[9]. Sovereign Hill also provides a number of primary source quotes in an *Audio Library[10]* that might be added to presentations as sound files.

This use of other sources fits perfectly into the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) for History that require students to

"identify, comprehend and evaluate a range of primary and secondary sources …. Critically evaluate sources of evidence for context, information, reliability, completeness, objectivity and bias" [11]

The final Product

We have been privy to a number of artistic, intelligent and articulate responses from Year 9 students in this program. One project juxtaposed pictures of historical accuracy with modern intrusions while exploring whether *Sovereign Hill is Fake.*

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[6] www.sbs.com.au/gold

[7] http://sheducationcom.ascetinteractive.biz/?id=researchnotes

[8] http://www.egold.net.au/

[9] www.pictureaustralia.org

[10] http://sheducationcom.ascetinteractive.biz/?id=audiolibrary

[11] VELS, Discipline Based Learning, History, Historical reasoning and understanding Level 6

Another imposed audio of primary source quotes over the scenery of Sovereign Hill in exploring the idea that *The Past Might be a good Place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there.* Some students have vehemently defended their own generation's sense of style when exploring fashion.

Feedback
(While permissions have been given to publish the following quotes, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants)

In seeking feedback about the effectiveness of *Picture This*, interviews were conducted with students and teachers from a Melbourne eastern suburbs secondary college. The History coordinator from this state school had attended the national History summer school held in Canberra. She described her college as being academically successful, catering for students from 40 different nationalities with a high percentage (40%) of students from Asian backgrounds. Their whole Year 9 cohort had undertaken the *Picture This* program and students were completing their movies at the time of the interviews. Annabel Astbury from the HTAV had conducted an in-school professional learning session on *Photostory* so the teachers were familiar with the program.

About Gen Y's use of Technology
Two groups of Year 9 students were interviewed about their project. A group of girls was asked about their use of technology outside the classroom.

Interviewer - Do you use computers a lot?
Girls – Yeah
Int.. - Okay, How many of you have a MySpace page?
Girls – I think everyone does (…)
Int. – What about your mobile phones, could you live without them?
Girls – No, Twenty four seven
Int. – When you took your photos did you use cameras or mobile phones?
Girls – We used both
Int. – Do you take a lot of photos socially, at home, or do you only really do it at school?
Girls –We take them at home.
Int. – And do you often share photos and send them to each other?
Girls – Yeah, with friends
Int. – Okay, how do you do that? What programs do you use?
Girls – I put it on my blog or MySpace …or we use MSN
Int. – Do you think your teachers are aware that you have a blog?
Girls - No.
Int. – It's got nothing to do with school has it? It's all social. Now I'm interested to know, the project you've done, was the topic the thing that interested you or was it because you could use the technology?
Girls – The topic. Yeah we liked using cameras and stuff especially during school hours with our friends and all.
Int. – Did that feel like it was school work?
Girls - No

Socially, every girl was used to taking and sharing photographs. They all have *MySpace* pages and even their own blogs. But while cameras were used in subjects like Media and Photography, this technology had little to do with school. It was simply the way these girls communicated with their friends. The girls did not see this project as a technological challenge, nor did they feel they were learning anything about the

technology, but they did seem pleased to be using ICT in the classroom and did not see the project as "work".

A group of boys mentioned that they had no difficulty with the technology. When asked whether their teachers had been helpful regarding downloading photos, they almost scoffed at the idea. These boys felt they possessed a superior knowledge of technology. (Teachers later responded that they actually understood the technology but allowing their students to feel superior lead to greater engagement.)

Like the girls, the boys had used both cameras and their mobile phones.

Int. – And you could easily download that at school?
Boys – Yeah
Int. – Did your teachers know how to do that or did you know how to do it?
Boys – We knew how to do it
Int. – And your teachers have got no idea?
Boys – Not a clue mate…
Int. – Did you enjoy the topic or the technology?
Boys – Probably the topic - It was interesting. Yeah, 'cause we come across the technology every day, so …

The fact that both the boys and the girls enjoyed the topic more than the technology was a real insight. Like the girls, the boys were used to ICT – they use it socially - and its use in the classroom is not inherently engaging. The boys did express that they were very pleased with the final product – the technology had given them the tools to communicate their understandings in a professional presentation. Incidentally, this was one of the few pieces of work one of these boys had completed all year.

John was interesting. A confessed "Techo Head", he found the *PhotoStory* program limiting.

John - Well, I find it a little bit simple… I don't like the step –by-step thing. I like it when you can do it in your own order.
Int. – One of the reasons we like PhotoStory is that it makes kids concentrate on the History rather than the technology. Would you say that by limiting the options that you can use in a program it does that?
John – Yeah, definitely. In PowerPoint you can easily get distracted by all the special effects and that. In Photostory it's really easy to stay focussed.
Int. – Were you happy with your final product?
John – Yeah, yeah, I was.

John was in danger of allowing the technology to take over the task relegating the historical literacy to a back seat. In the end, he was happy with his final product.

About historical literacy and student centred learning.
The trial school has passionate History teachers who recognise the value of Historical literacy. They understand that the learning is embedded in the process of historical discovery.

Heather (Head of History) – One of the reasons why I love History is the process of learning rather than the content. You can apply all of the learning they have done over the last few weeks to anything in life.

These teachers are keen to engage their students.

Int. – What was it that attracted you to the PhotoStory option at Sovereign Hill?
Heather – I hate text book teaching, so I wanted the students to do something that would actually engage them. We're not allowed to use mobile phones at the school; we're not allowed to use digital cameras so the kids thought it was pretty awesome they were breaking school rules on school time.

The school also recognised the value of the student-centred approach inherent in this project

Jeff (Principal) – I think very often in a classroom situation they (the students) are learning at the rate of the teacher and they are learning under the constraints of what the teacher is asking of them or demanding of them, rather than something that they get a sense of ownership for. I think learning is more meaningful when you've got ownership of it …

Heather – It's that maturation process for them, that they are actually allowed to be independent, they're actually taking their own photos, they're working things out on their own without a teacher saying do this, do that or what ever. They are actually taking control of their own learning.

About using ICT in the classroom
When asked why ICT should be used in History, the teachers recognised the need to keep pace with their students.

Linda - I think that we actually need to move with the kids …I've found that they use it (IT) in their everyday life and if we can tap into that, then we are going to have a resource that is absolutely amazing …
Int.: Do you think ICT by itself is engaging for kids or do they just see it as a tool that they can use … to explain their understanding?
Lucy: I think it can be used as both …

Heather: Well the History Department want to be 'with it', but there are other reasons and one of them is that the student surveys have indicated that the students in year 9 and 10 aren't really engaged in the current methodology and pedagogy of teaching in this school, and hopefully by using ICT and being more relevant we're going to engage the students, and I believe we are being successful.
Int.: So do you think the ICT actually engages the kids or is it the topic?
Heather: I think it's the teachers that actually engage the students and we're just using a range of tools to help us on our journey

About Learning and Thinking
The teachers interviewed realise that learning is not just subject based. They are looking for ways to develop the whole student involving interdisciplinary and social skill development.

Heather - I want them to learn about the goldrush and I want them to learn about particular aspects of the goldrush, come back and share that knowledge with other students as well as involving ICT as well as their personal growth. - interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and domains that really aren't covered well in schools are certainly covered in this project.

Staff at this school recognised that modern students are visual learners but they also recognised the need to involve traditional written literacy in the curriculum.

Linda – They definitely are visually literate and also aural, they like to listen to things and watch things. They like to have visual representations of things … When it come to written, obviously we have to do those kind of things …

But the teachers were also aware of their students' different learning styles and felt that *Picture This* catered for a range of student types. When asked what sort of students this project suited Heather ticked off different types on her fingers.

Heather - Ones that like to communicate; you've got what you call the 'techno heads'; the ones that actually like a bit of a challenge; the ones that are inquiry based that like to go off and take research into different area. So you're really looking at a whole range. The book wormy student does the research, and the arty student does the cover and everything. So the talents of the students in the group are all being utilised – it's not just one talent …
Int – Is there a certain type of student this project doesn't appeal to?
Heather – I think they've all enjoyed it …

Constructivist learning suggests that any new concepts are understood in the context of what we already know and understand. It is therefore essential that learning relate strongly to our own personal experiences. Perhaps it is appropriate to leave the last comment about learning to a group of year 9 girls of Asian background.

Int.: What do you reckon you learned doing this project?
Girl 1: Well we did further research on the internet and we found out that like today, there was racism, really strong racism back then so that's quite interesting. …
Int.: Do you think doing this made you think at all – this project - or was it just a bit easy?
Girl 2: It made us think a lot.
Girl 3: Yeah
Int. Well what did it make you think about?
Girl 1: About how society hasn't really changed that much.

Conclusions

As an outdoor museum Sovereign Hill is a visual feast. Our interpretation is our buildings, our mining structures, the costumes, horses and, of course, the gold. Students come here to have a good time and anything that looks like traditional school-work is anathema to them. This project is fun, it is short, sharp and deep. And the end product is often outstanding.

Postscript

Since this trial, Sovereign Hill Education has published two movies to help teachers present this project to their students. They are available from the TeacherTube website.

Vodcasting at Sovereign Hill describes the project to Teacher and students
http://www.teachertube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=d67a6ceb83a4542afb34

History is a great place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there models the sort of movie that might be made using *Photostory* in arguing a contention. It gives students a concrete example of a finished product.
http://www.teachertube.com/view_video.php?viewkey=077ea065ec1c8564d201

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Websites

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