

Milestones on the road to history

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FOR the media, history horror stories are a good fallback on a slow news day. It's a simple enough set-up. Send a reporter down to the local mall and ask innocent passers by some history questions. Result guaranteed. Answers that range from the bizarre to the wildly inaccurate. Editorial fulmination. Collapse of civilisation as we know it.

However, there is one genuine Australian history horror story. Not so much about the trivia of Australian history but about its teaching. Australian history in many schools has simply gone missing. And that is what Anna Clark and I found when we prepared a paper for the Australian Government's August 17 summit on the very topic, "What has happened to Australian history in schools?"

As a migrant to Australia it has always struck me as strange that the teaching of Australian history is not at the centre of the school curriculum. I am not alone in this view. When, in 1999-2000, with the help of Monash colleagues, I conducted the national inquiry into school history, it became clear to me that history in schools was a hot political potato. Unfortunately, much public discourse about the teaching and learning of history at that time was largely evidence-free. It's still frequently evidence-free, which is a great irony. If I had a dollar for every comment on school history that began with one of the following three remarks, I would be so rich I wouldn't have to conduct inquiries any more:

* "When I was at school...", which is nice, but was probably in 1958 when beer was a penny a pot.

* "My daughter came home from school yesterday and said ...", which is lovely, but one child in a student population of more than three million doesn't make a statistical spike.

"I like to think ..." usually comes from writers who haven't stepped into a school since they left at age 18.

What is it that they like to think? The vocal Right thinks there is a postmodernist plot to undermine political and social certainties by indoctrinating students. That'll be the day, in a firmly democratic society where

students are far from being empty vessels and teachers are far from being left-wing stooges.

As it happens, and writing as someone who has visited and spent time in approximately 350 schools in the past 20 years, I have detected no plots of any kind. Just lots of good teaching and some not-so good teaching. And I do wish the Right was capable of differentiating between socially critical thinking in education (mainly 1980s) and postmodern thinking (mainly '90s). Of the latter, there is very little of it in whatever history syllabuses exist in Australia.

Meanwhile the vocal Left thinks everything is a Tory plot. Again, this presupposes that there is no such thing as the federal system, that schools are instruments of reaction and that teachers, as one lecturer reportedly (and egregiously) remarked to his education students, are the Taliban. Have I seen any evidence of that? No. Has anybody else got any evidence? Not as far as I know. Do the education students take these flaky remarks seriously? No. Why not? Because there's no evidence and because they've got more sense.

So, when the Australian Government commissioned us to check out what was happening in the states and territories, Anna and I were intrigued. The report we produced (a lengthy 42 with 200 pages of appendices) has been widely quoted since it was released. For those of you who have been living in a cave since the beginning of August, the conclusions were clear and unequivocal.

Most school students in Australia are taught in a way that makes it hard for them to develop a coherent and sequential understanding of Australian history. Why is this so? Partly because the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

In most states and territories, Australian history is subsumed within a generic social studies curriculum framework (SOSE or S&E) which, on the face of it, has an explicit relevance to student experience and therefore should be a good thing. And, indeed, there are many teachers who teach SOSE brilliantly.

But SOSE is a framework that, because of its comprehensiveness and its combination of disciplinary perspectives, requires, in my view, absolutely the most accomplished teaching. Yet in school systems, SOSE is frequently regarded as a poor cousin to core subjects such as English and mathematics. Teachers are allocated to SOSE classes to fill up their timetables. In many of the SOSE strands, accomplished teaching goes begging. Moreover, Australian history is hard to detect as a discrete area of study. Knowing that at school level, history comprises a complex specialised set of attributes, its absence represents a genuine horror story.

Did the summit then deal with this problem? Yes, but not quite yet. The 23 luminaries who gathered in Canberra represented quite a broad range of opinion. Yes, they were mainly academic historians and yes, they were predominantly male. But the teacher representatives, although few in number, were vocal, articulate and persuasive, as were the female luminaries.

In the morning session, I put in a strong plug for teachability (students and teachers must enjoy and engage with the subject), do-ability (must be found a proper place in the curriculum, probably at years 9 and 10) and sustainability (must have proper initial teacher education and good professional development). This rule-of-three mantra has now become common currency in the debate.

During the discussion that followed, the academic historians were, in the main, realistic, pragmatic and supportive of this school-level view. The only serious point of difference arose over the character of Greg Melleuish's personal view of an Australian narrative. It was decided by a large majority that although his paper was a worthy and serious contribution, his proposed framework was too lengthy and far too abstract in character to form the basis for a school syllabus.

Then, late in the afternoon, John Hirst, seizing on a remark by attendee Geoffrey Partington, saved the day with a brilliant piece of improvisation. Why not establish milestones in Australian history within framing questions? And the first of his questions was, "Who is an Australian?" to be answered at several key stages in Australian history.

Time was pressing. More Hirst-style questions were canvassed. The pace of the debate grew almost frenzied. Hirst was offering up suggestions and collating responses. Lisa Paul (Department of Education, Science and Training's chief public servant) was overseeing the drafting. And Bob Carr was chairing with an iron will. And with a few minutes to go, an agreed communique had been drafted that dealt with the importance of Australian history, the need for sequenced teaching throughout schools and the proposed middle school syllabus. Sighs of relief all around.

But there was one more task. Hirst's framing questions still needed nailing down into a teachable, do-able and sustainable syllabus. A follow-up working party has been suggested. That story is to be continued.

Good outcome? I think so. So far, anyway. If the group of six can construct a course for Year 9 and Year 10 students that is both enjoyable and memorable, and which allows them to leave school with a reasonable understanding of Australian history, we'll have made a huge educational and social gain. And after the next design stage is finished it's up to the states and territories to decide whether or not they want their students to reach that happy position.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20217608-12332,00.html>