

Historical Inquiry in the Middle Years

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Australia has a new suite of National Curriculum documents and in 2013 the Australian Curriculum: History is scheduled for full implementation in Queensland schools. Under the curriculum guidelines for history there is added pressure for teachers to implement historical inquiry as the pedagogical approach for learning for Prep to Year 10 classrooms. This article will consider definitions of historical inquiry; the benefits of historical inquiry for teachers; and unpack the pragmatic implementation of historical inquiry for Middle Years of Schooling classrooms.

Historical inquiry is defined within the Australian Curriculum: History, as the “process of investigation undertaken in order to understand the past. Steps in the inquiry process include posing questions, locating and analysing sources and using evidence from sources to develop an informed explanation about the past” (ACARA, 2012). Interestingly, the process of historical inquiry requires teachers to reconsider how history has been viewed in previous teaching practice and redirect their energies from teaching history as facts and figures to a pedagogy that facilitates student investigation of the multiple perspectives of an historical event.

This will require teachers to develop their ability to question and engage students in dialogue around the points of view in history and assist them to consider alternate explanations. One method of doing this is to select a source such as a photo, video, YouTube clip or other text, which stimulates and focuses their discussions around an event in history. Teachers can begin by asking questions and developing students’ understanding of where this point in time is positioned in history and question where their understanding of events was established.

Initial questions are generated by the teacher with a gradual move to students asking questions to engage each other and develop more varied and open understanding of differing views of history. Knowledge develops from this engagement and by building on each other’s ideas, rather than as recipients of passive knowledge. This active component, historical inquiry, is what engages students and develops not only knowledge and understanding of history, but the skills of critical and creative thinking.

This new way of thinking about the teaching of History requires teachers to undertake a facilitator role in the classroom learning process. This is not to say that teachers do not plan, but is to say, teachers need to reconsider *how* they plan! Planning will focus upon the sources for generating inquiry and the teacher developing questions rather than the previous history focus of teacher determined content and student generated notes.

When providing professional development for practising teachers and pre-service teachers, queries regarding *resources* are foregrounded. The new History teacher does not rely so much on resources but *sources*. This same History teacher emphasises student skill development not predetermined content. This historical inquiry method is highlighted in a curriculum which prescribes understandings not predetermined content. This is evidenced in the Elaborations (ACARA, 2012) which describe history as a point of debate not ready acceptance and this explicitly requires students to construct their own understanding and perspective of events.

The idea of thinking historically is neither new or well used, but is becoming the pedagogical focus for middle schooling as students move to considering themselves as part of a larger community and as autonomous learners (DETE, 2012). Using an historical inquiry approach allows teachers to consolidate middle years student learning in both literacy and numeracy and will continue to engage the natural curiosity of these learners.

The changing attitudes of students during this developmental stage (Ferreira, Azevedo & Menezes, 2012; Rani, 2006) are readily accommodated in an historical inquiry approach. This approach caters for greater diversity in learning and maintains student interest and motivation, allowing students to work at an appropriate stage of development. Skills and understandings developed through the use of historical inquiry are essential to preparing students for the senior phases of learning. The strategies of historical inquiry allow students to engage in purposeful learning which challenges their thinking about their own learning. The key message of the History Curriculum is: that students need to be critical users of the information that is available to them. The historical curriculum promotes historical inquiry and this approach to teaching is enabling educators of the middle years to create their own pedagogical history. We urge you to dive in and give it a try!

References

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