

The History Teacher, the School Librarian and the Zone of Mutual Benefit

By Dr Deb Hull and Dr Susan La Marca

History teachers and school librarians sit naturally in a zone of mutual benefit, and this creates opportunities for truly useful collaboration. Everyone is supposed to be collaborating these days, partly because of research that shows it can produce better outcomes and partly because it's associated with virtues like niceness and inclusion. Yet we've all known situations where collaborating just takes twice as long to achieve the same result. It is only when two people sit naturally in a 'zone of mutual benefit' that collaboration does live up to the hype. It helps both to achieve their aims far better than they could alone, and it's more fun along the way.

What is a zone of mutual benefit?

It's just a cutesy way of saying that both parties either want the same thing or have aims that are naturally advanced by the work of the other. This makes the collaboration feel almost effortless. Just by doing the kind of things you normally do anyway but doing it in ways or contexts that intentionally help the other person, you end up getting more of what YOU want. Sometimes a zone of mutual benefit is subtle and sometimes it's glaringly obvious. The important thing is that each partner understands what's in it for them and what's in it for the other person, and then works hard to achieve both.

This clear understanding of the limits of their 'zone of mutual benefit' also means the partners can choose when it's good to collaborate and when they are better off working on their own or with other partners. Your interests will only intersect in *some* areas of your work.

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History teachers and school librarians have a large, natural zone of mutual benefit. This isn't news. You might be rolling your eyes at this point because you've worked closely together in this zone for years. This article is just an attempt to list some of the collaborative opportunities that sit within this zone in case you are not making the most of them yet.



What's in it for the History teacher?

The History curriculum rewards students with good research skills. Extra reading, viewing and listening, beyond the resources provided in class, will result in deeper and more sophisticated historical understanding. Good research skills also allow advanced students to extend themselves, and all students to achieve greater success when they move onto the independent learning environment at university. But not all History teachers would say that research is one of their strengths. So, invite the school's expert on research, the one who has spent years training in those exact skills, to teach your students how to find reliable and accurate information in the most efficient way. Your school librarian is also likely to know about the software that makes capturing research information easier and referencing a breeze.

Speaking of which, while your librarian is teaching your students research skills they could also share their deep expertise in referencing. Brief the librarian clearly on the kind of footnotes or references you expect from your students and invite them to talk to the class about why referencing matters and how to do it consistently. For a good example of collaboration between a history teacher and a teacher-librarian to teach these skills see this [AITSL video](#).

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Librarians know how to extend the range of accessible knowledge beyond the library's books and the things thrown up by an (often poorly worded) internet search, and into databases, journal articles, archives and collections. That's why it's great to have them helping students with inquiry projects or IB essays. Once again, the better your pre-briefing about the task, the more help the librarian can be. Do you want the students using mostly primary sources? Do you want them to get into the historical debates? Are you asking them to take an object-based-learning approach? If you've taken the time to explain the historical thinking skills you are trying to develop, the librarian can lead students in the right direction.

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The librarian's capacity to find information – reliable, accurate, stimulating information – is also why you should invite them into your teaching team's planning sessions. If they know the content you are about to cover, they can source or even purchase the resources to support it. That takes time, so the early heads-up is good for them and good for you. Their knowledge of what's readily available might also influence the direction of your lesson plans.

Which leads us to that wonderful invention – the Reading Guide. Curating information is what librarians do. Over time your library can build up a collection of reading/viewing/listening guides on a range of popular topics and give your students a running head start. And (let's be really honest here) when you get the heart-sinking news that instead of teaching Year 8s about Vikings next year you will – for the first time – be teaching Year 9s about the Industrial Revolution in Britain, go and beg the school librarian to help you find the fastest way into the new topics. A personalised Reading Guide to help you access the content knowledge *you'll* need to teach it well. From someone who really knows what they're doing. We might just pause here for a grateful sigh.



Kerri Jones (Library Technician), Alexis Watson (History Teacher) and Kate Atkinson (Resource Centre Librarian) in front of their display promoting the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize at Norwood Secondary College.

If you are passionate about History then you'll want allies in your quest to get students excited about it. The school librarian has something you probably don't – the space to mount visually beautiful and intriguing displays on any topic, promoting resources that students can pick up and take with them. Collaborating on topics and 'marketing strategies' that remind students why they *really* love History offers a potential boost to both your student engagement and enrolment numbers. The library can also be the perfect place to host dedicated History spaces, History club meetings, events, debates and re-enactments. And why not ask your librarian to help you make a big impression during **History Week – October 7th to 14th?**

Many school libraries also have their own website, and this can be a place to promote History competitions, showcase student work and curate links and resources for a range of topics.

What's in it for the school librarian?

You are trying to embed the **Research Skill Development Framework** across the whole-school curriculum but to do that systematically you need to get in front of classrooms or you need teachers to bring their students to you. Who is most likely to see the benefit of doing that? The teachers of the discipline which – at every year level – requires students to demonstrate historical thinking skills including 'using historical sources as evidence'. History teachers are trying to teach young people to become critical consumers of information. To say that your aims are aligned is something of an understatement.

Just FYI, the Victorian Curriculum: History says

...students are required to ask analytical and evaluative questions of the sources so they can be used as evidence when creating historical explanations and constructing historical arguments. Students identify the origin, content features, and purpose of sources. They learn to explain the context of sources, corroborate (compare and contrast) them with other sources and make judgments about their accuracy, usefulness and reliability. Historical questions about sources could include: What type of source is this? Who wrote or created it? Why did they write or create it? What was happening

at the time the source was created? Who was the intended audience? How does it compare with other sources about the same person or event? How accurate is this source? (VCAA, Learning in History)

A young person with those skills will be a better reader, a better student and a better citizen. Sound like a project a librarian might like to help with?

Because these skills are core to the study of History, it's likely that you are already spending a bit of time with History students who are doing individual inquiry projects. Yes, they've come to the right place to learn about research and how to be discerning in what they use and believe. But it is also quite likely that when they first arrive they want to 'find stuff on ancient Egypt' or other impossibly vast topics. You want to save them time, and you certainly don't want to waste your own. By collaborating with the History teacher you can gauge the kind of topics that will develop the exact skills students need at this year level, and then guide them gently in that direction.

As we all know, History is a special discipline because it appeals to both the non-fiction 'just-the-facts-thanks' cohort and the creative 'what-a-thrilling-story' gang. This makes it a natural go-to when you want to create a library display with wide appeal, and History teachers can help you with ideas and resources. Obviously, choosing something connected to the History curriculum is a huge win for the zone of mutual benefit, but it's not the only possibility. What about something on the history of science, medicine or engineering? Or the history of political ideas? Or a playful look at the real history behind the fictional world of a film or TV show? By delving into the fascinating history that sits behind any subject or discipline, you enrich the learning of all visitors to the library and the History teacher gets more students feeling excited about History.



The History Room in the Genazzano FCJ College Library.

The wide appeal of History also helps with the unspoken projects of school librarians – to challenge gifted and talented students who are bored by school, and to engage lonely or socially isolated students in something that lights them up. History lends itself to self-directed learning. Enlist the help of a History teacher to develop a research and reading plan that follows the deep vein of each student's personal interests. ABC Radio National broadcaster Phillip Adams says that, when home and school were intellectually unsatisfying, his local librarians fed his thirst for knowledge. He went on to become a leading public intellectual and today he takes great joy in owning Australia's largest private collection of ancient artefacts. Autodidacts are often attracted to History, and school librarians are the great enablers of autodidacts.

On the matter of extending students, there are a wide range of national and state-wide **History competitions** that any student can enter. They cater to students with different interests and different strengths. Some are essay competitions,

others accept entries in a range of modes including audio, video, digital, musical and artistic. There's even an historical fiction competition. If your school or your History teachers are members of the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV), they'll be receiving information about these competitions all the time. You can check them out here. We know of several school libraries which collaborate with History teachers to put up displays that promote the competitions and/or showcase the entries of their students.

If your school is an Institutional Member of HTAV, you're welcome to ask your school's 'primary contact' to add you to the list of teachers who are covered by that membership. You'll receive the emailed Member Bulletin which includes information on curriculum-aligned publications in History, state and national History competitions, and free resources on a range of historical topics to watch, read or listen to.

A perfect pairing

The History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) and the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) also share several goals. We both want to keep improving the quality of school education and the joy of students engaged in it. We want all students to develop the research skills that will enable them to be lifelong learners and informed citizens. We want to make sure History teachers have access to the best information and resources, and school librarians are given what they need to offer discipline-specific help. And we both want to make our members' busy and demanding roles a little easier.

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We can make progress against all of those aims if History teachers and school librarians continue to work together and keep testing the boundaries of their zone of mutual benefit.

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