The literacy of history

Penny Hutton

Catherine Smyth

This PETAA paper will explore the types of literacies that history privileges and the literacy skills, knowledge and understandings required to be successful students of history in the primary years. It will suggest specific teaching strategies that will support students in developing literacy in history. The following extract from the rationale for the Australian Curriculum: History (ACARA 2013) includes:

History is a disciplined process of inquiry into the past that develops students' curiosity and imagination. Awareness of history is an essential characteristic of any society, and historical knowledge is fundamental to understanding ourselves and others. It promotes the understanding of societies, events, movements and developments that have shaped humanity from earliest times. It helps students appreciate how the world and its people have changed, as well as the significant continuities that exist to the present day. History, as a discipline, has its own methods and procedures which make it different from other ways of understanding human experience. The study of history is based on evidence derived from remains of the past. It is interpretative by nature, promotes debate and encourages thinking about human values, including present and future challenges. The process of historical inquiry develops transferable skills, such as the ability to ask relevant questions; critically analyse and interpret sources; consider context; respect and explain different perspectives; develop and substantiate interpretations, and communicate effectively.

ACARA, 2013

In particular, PETAA Paper 198 will describe how the **Four Roles or Resources of the Reader** (Luke & Freebody, 1999) assists students to make sense of the texts they read and view in history.

Literacy, numeracy and disciplinary knowledge are cornerstones of the Australian Curriculum. A key goal of this disciplinary approach to learning is for students to be able to move across disciplines so as to develop expertise in different ways of knowing. From the first year of formal schooling, students are introduced to a range of different disciplines prescribed by the Australian Curriculum as they begin to learn about English, mathematics, science, history and other subjects encountered in the primary timetable. Each discipline offers a distinctive lens through which to view the world. This paper focuses on the discipline of history and the literacy skills inherent in the subject.

As students begin to learn history they also begin to learn about the ways that the discipline of history generates and conveys knowledge. They also learn that this differs from the ways that other disciplines, eg mathematics, science, convey their knowledge. For this reason, teachers need to explicitly teach students how to become competent in generating and conveying knowledge in discrete disciplines, such as history or science.

Literacy in subject areas

An important goal of the Australian Curriculum is for students to develop disciplinary literacy and the ability to read, view, write, create, talk and listen in a way that mirrors experts in the discipline. A disciplinary approach to learning exposes students to the ways knowledge is created, communicated and shared within a community of inquiry. In history the focus shifts from

> generic reading processes or strategies, eg, summarising, questioning, inferencing, to the specialised processes of the discipline, eg, sourcing or justifying a claim (Shanahan, 2012). The underlying assumption is that 'students can develop deep conceptual knowledge in a discipline *only by* using the habits of reading, writing, talking, and thinking which that discipline values and uses' (McConachie, et al., 2006). Students develop literacy in subject areas by learning about the core ideas and concepts of a discipline while learning to investigate, reason, read, view and write in that discipline. The challenge for primary teachers is to help their students make connections to the discipline in a way that is meaningful to them.

The Australian Curriculum: History describes five essential historical skills or elements from Foundation to Year 6 that underpin learning in the discipline. These are:

- *Chronology, terms and concepts, i.e. sequencing historical events and people and the understanding of appropriate terms and concepts*

- *Historical questions and research, i.e. the ability to pose relevant inquiry questions and identify relevant sources of information*

- *Analysis and use of sources, i.e. locating relevant information in sources and comparing information from a range of source*

- *Perspectives and interpretation, i.e. the identification and exploration of a variety of points of view*

- *Explanation and communication, i.e. the ability to develop texts, utilising a range of communication forms, to describe and narrate history, which incorporate source materials.*

ACARA, 2012

These historical skills are realised through specific concepts and content.

From Foundation to Year 2 the curriculum focus is on students developing an awareness of family history and community heritage. In Years 3 to 6 students learn about local and national history and the use of a range of sources. A more detailed overview can be found at < http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanities-and-social-sciences/history/history-across-foundation-to-year-12 > .

Historical literacy involves students knowing:

1 what they are looking for – formulating inquiry questions

2 how to look for it – research skills

3 how to make sense of it – comprehension, interpretation and evaluating skills

4 how to communicate history – narrating, describing, explaining, hypothesising, discussing, persuading.

TABLE 1: AN EXAMPLE OF A KWL CHART

What we **know**	**What** we want to find out	What we **learned**

1 Formulating inquiry questions

The study of history is based on inquiry. Students engaged in the study of history investigate primary and secondary source materials for evidence or information supporting their inquiry. The evidence is then reviewed to determine its usefulness in answering the inquiry question

> Teachers determine what they want students to know, understand and be able to do at the end of a unit of study then plan backwards to develop the inquiry question/s and the teaching and learning activities, including the literacy skills to be developed that will ensure they achieve the goal.

Teachers and students should work together to construct appropriate inquiry questions that will scaffold and direct the learning. It is essential that the questions move students forward in both their learning of content and in the skills of inquiry. Using **backward mapping** is one way of developing appropriate inquiry questions.

For example, in an early years primary class to introduce the topic of 'How life was different for children in the past', the

The Information Process (ISP)

- Defining — What do I really want to find out? — *Quality Teaching*
- Locating — Where can I find the information I need? — *Quality Teaching*
- Selecting — What information do I really need to use? — *Quality Teaching*
- Organising — How can I use this information? — *Quality Teaching*
- Presenting — How can I present this information? — *Quality Teaching*
- Assessing — What did I learn from this? — *Quality Teaching*

FIGURE 1 ● *The information process, NSW, DET, 2013*

❯ teacher could conduct a modelled reading of *Papa and the olden days* (Edwards & Tonkin, 2013). The teacher clarifies any new or unusual vocabulary and discusses illustrations as the book is read.

After reading, the teacher and class jointly construct a KWL chart (see Table 1). The chart is displayed and added to or revised throughout the unit. The *What we want to find out* column frames the ensuing inquiry.

The final column is completed at the end the unit of work. The first column is also revisited to clarify or correct any misconceptions.

This process ensures that students are:

- introduced to the new area of study
- aware of where the topic sits within the overall learning
- motivated to learn
- using metacognition by considering what they already know and how they learned this
- involved in the planning of the investigation.

For more information about developing inquiry skills in history go to Thinking History at < http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/index.php > .

2 Developing research skills

This requires students to understand the information process. The teacher needs to model and make the following steps in the information process explicit:

- Defining
- Locating
- Selecting
- Organising
- Presenting
- Assessing

Figure 1 explains the information process graphically.

Each step in the process requires students to efficiently incorporate a variety of information skills. These are explained in detail at NSW, DET, 2013

Select the information skills that are most relevant to your students and the task at hand and demonstrate these. By the end of Year 6 students should be competent in all the information processing skills. Display the process and skills for students to use as they undertake investigations and tasks for themselves.

3 Making sense of historical texts

This involves using comprehension, interpretation and evaluation to read like an historian. Wineburg (2001) argues that historians do not necessarily know more history but rather they hold powerful heuristics that allow them to make sense of historical documents. These are:

- sourcing
- contextualising
- corroborating
- close reading.

In order for students to read like an historian they need to understand how language is used to organise ideas and concepts. This includes becoming familiar with:

- specialised terminology, eg *Terra Nullius, proclamation*

- the ways word meanings have changed over time, eg *transportation, settlement*

- language to denote time in history, eg *long ago, century, era, ancient, in the 1850s*

- language related to description and analysis, eg the language of cause and effect, chronology, historical inquiry.

Teachers can support students to read or view historical texts using a range of strategies. In all teaching sessions the strategies have to be made explicit through modelled and guided experiences. Consider the strategies that will prepare students to read or view a new text; those that will support meaning making during the reading or viewing; and those that ensure students have understood the text and consolidated their new

> learnings. Following is a discussion of some strategies that can be implemented **before, during** and **after** the reading process.

Before reading

It is essential to conduct some field building activities before students read or view a text. This ensures that students are oriented to the topic or concept and are able to link with their prior knowledge. Conduct a KWL to stimulate thinking (Refer to Table 1).

Consider any vocabulary that might be unfamiliar to students. List and discuss the meanings of new vocabulary. History deals with many abstract concepts, eg *transportation, colonisation, federation, suffrage, democracy, federalism, etc.* and these may not be familiar to students. Create and display topic lists of new vocabulary with everyday explanations of new terms as demonstrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2: A GLOSSARY OF NEW TERMS

WORD	MEANING
transportation	sending a person who has committed a crime to a colony which has been set up to take criminals
hulk	an old ship that has been converted to be used as a prison in England in the 1800s because the prisons were overcrowded

Illustrations can be added to aid understanding.

During reading

Support students to draw on all four roles or resources of the reader (Luke and Freebody, 1999) in order to gain meaning from the text. While these are described separately students need to integrate all four roles as they read or view.

These are:

1 Code breaker – Focus on:

- building field knowledge about the topic, including the vocabulary

- developing knowledge about specific language features, eg time phrases in first position in texts that chronicle or recount events

- knowledge about the role of visual aspects of texts, e.g. the relationship between the timeline and the information in the verbal text, how the timeline should be read.

2 Text participant – Focus on:

- developing literal and inferential meanings

- making connections to prior knowledge

- using visual aspects of the text to add to the meanings

- drawing on students' experiences with other texts to aid comprehension of the new text, e.g. having read *Nanberry: Black Brother White* (French, 2013) students read selected extracts from Surgeon-General John White's *Journal to new South Wales.*

3 **Text user** – Focus on:

- demonstrating that texts are structured differently and incorporate different language features in order to achieve different purposes. For example: Students are asked to write an historical explanation about why Botany Bay was rejected as the site for settlement. Teacher (a) models how to write a hypothesis or claim which is then supported by relevant evidence; (b) shows students how each piece of evidence constitutes a separate paragraph which is elaborated upon; (c) makes explicit the use of language features including the names of people involved andthe dates of specific events.

4 **Text analyst** – Focus on:

- investigating with students the context in which the text was produced, eg Who is the author/creator of this text? When, where and why was it created? What is its significance within the body of knowledge being explored?

- analysing the text to determine point of view and bias

- discussing the ways different social or cultural groups or individuals are represented in the text, including those not represented

- analysing how the structure of the text and specific language or visual features work to present a point of view, eg the use of the word 'savage' in early documents

- discussing what an alternative representation of the events or characters might be.

While all reader roles are practised when students read and view texts, the text analyst role is critical in the discipline of history. From the earliest years students can begin to be text analysts.

Reading as a text analyst in the classroom

For example, when investigating the Eureka rebellion, support students to consider how different points of view are represented in, or excluded from historical texts. Students should read primary source materials , eg writings of Peter Lalor, Sir Charles Hotham, Henry Seekamp and various newspaper reports, posters and letters of the time.

In order to make sense of history as an historian, students need to develop skills in testing out ideas, considering other possibilities

and interpretations, asking questions, and challenging interpretations. Through critically examining texts students develop these skills.

Students might also consider how different points of view are represented in historical texts. For example, when investigating the Eureka rebellion, students should read primary source materials written by, eg Peter Lalor, Sir Charles Hotham and various newspaper reports at the time.

In order to make sense of history as an historian, students need to develop skills in testing out ideas, considering other possibilities and interpretations, asking questions, and challenging interpretations. Through critically examining texts students develop these skills.

Comparing texts on same topic

The following is a suggestion of how texts on the same topic can be compared. After reading *Papa in the olden days* (a secondary source), revisit a particular aspect such as shopping at the general store. Students then view a newspaper from the same era (a primary source) and look at some of the advertisements for groceries, clothing, medicines, household and farm equipment A useful reference website for this activity is: http://trove.nla.gov.au/. Using a Venn diagram, students list and compare the products in Papa's store and those found in the advertisements to demonstrate similarities and differences. Discuss with students the language used in the advertisements to attract the reader's attention and persuade them to buy the products. They might comment on how some words have shifted meaning over the years, eg 'disorder' once meant an illness.

Other reading strategies to support meaning-making with history texts

One reading and viewing strategy valued in history is **SOAPS**.

Speaker
Occasion
Audience
Purpose
Subject

This strategy refers to questions readers should ask and answer before and as they read and view a text. For a full description of this

strategy go to: < http://www.apcentral/collegeboard.com/apc/public/preap/teachers_corner/45200.html > .

The **SQ3R** strategy is another that can be implemented before, during and after students read a text.

Survey
Question
Read
Recall/Recite
Review

This strategy supports students to survey and scan a text to prepare for reading, to read purposefully by formulating questions to be answered before, then checking their understandings. For a full description of this strategy go to Robinson, 1970.

After reading and viewing – organising information

A useful strategy to be used after a text has been read or viewed is **think, pair, share**. Students are placed in groups of four and given the same text to read or view independently. After reading or viewing, students **think** about what they have read or viewed, they form a **pair** and discuss and clarify their understandings before joining another pair to **share** their understandings and determine the most important information or concepts from the text.

Students can also record and synthesise what they have learned from their reading and viewing using a variety of graphic organisers, such as concept maps, fishbone diagrams, main idea and supporting details charts, flowcharts and T charts. A great variety of graphic organisers can be found at < https://www.pinterest.com/jenanawak/graphic-organisers/ > .

The concept map in Figure 2 is based on a study of the First Fleet. In shared reading sessions, students had been exposed to a range of primary and secondary sources. To help develop an understanding of what life was like at the time, students constructed a concept map around key questions that prompted them to look more deeply at the both place and time.

4 Communicating history

Discourse in history can be oral, written, visual and multimodal. The discourses of history require students to compose and create texts for a variety of purposes (eg to narrate, describe, explain, hypothesise, discuss, persuade) in a variety of forms (eg historical fiction, dramatisation, cartoon, diary entry, interview, debate, etc).

Historical explanations require students to form an hypothesis or claim then justify that position with evidence. Historical accounts document a series of events which are supported by evidence, eg writing a letter or diary from the perspective of an officer or convict as shown in work samples 1 & 2 (p. 7).

Students should be given opportunities to compose texts for a variety of audiences, eg for students in younger or older classes, their peers, their parents and the wider community.
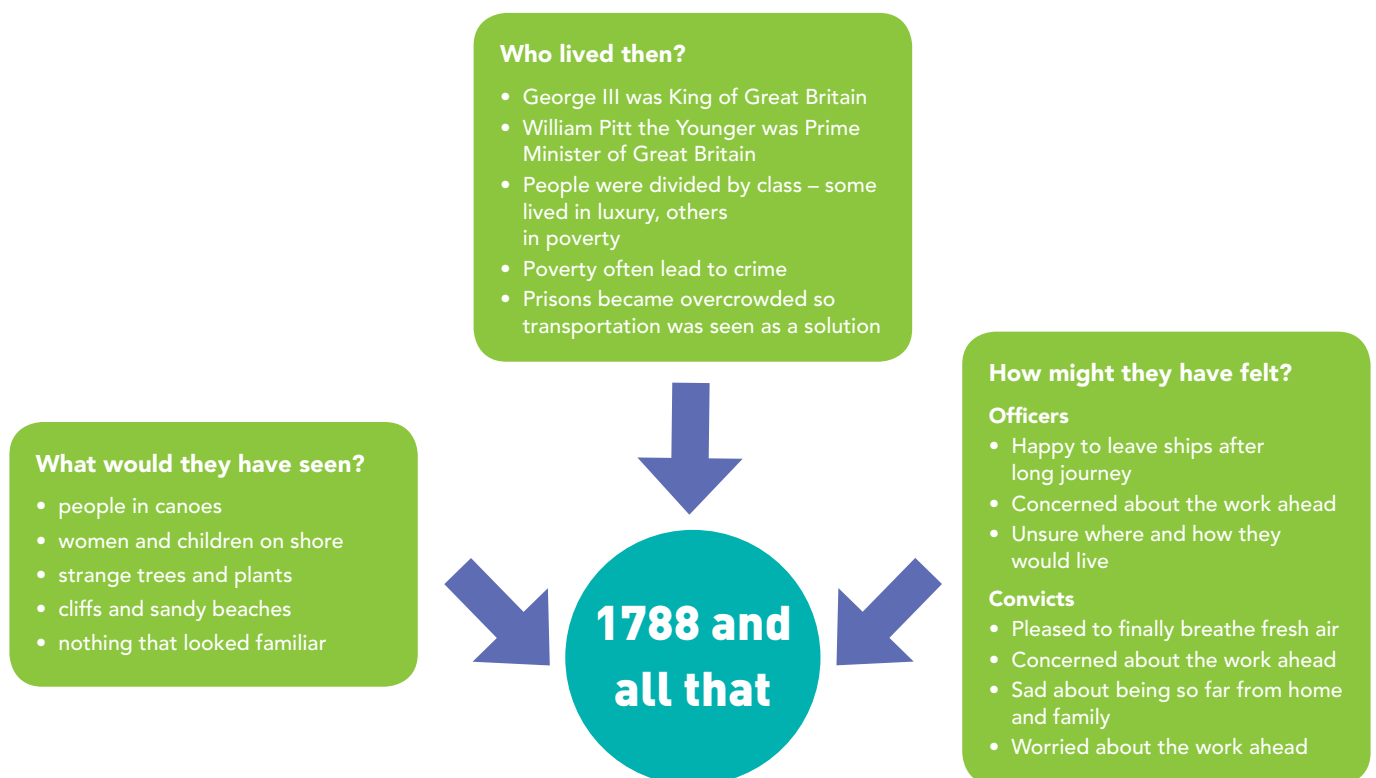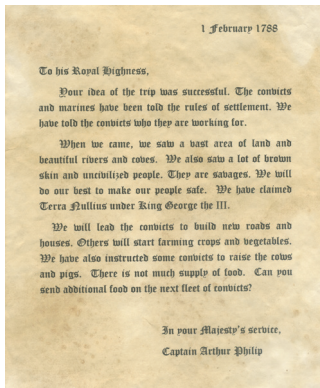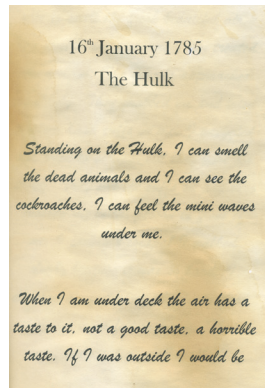
Who lived then?
- George III was King of Great Britain
- William Pitt the Younger was Prime Minister of Great Britain
- People were divided by class – some lived in luxury, others in poverty
- Poverty often lead to crime
- Prisons became overcrowded so transportation was seen as a solution

What would they have seen?
- people in canoes
- women and children on shore
- strange trees and plants
- cliffs and sandy beaches
- nothing that looked familiar

1788 and all that

How might they have felt?
Officers
- Happy to leave ships after long journey
- Concerned about the work ahead
- Unsure where and how they would live

Convicts
- Pleased to finally breathe fresh air
- Concerned about the work ahead
- Sad about being so far from home and family
- Worried about the work ahead

FIGURE 2 • *Concept map based on the study of the First Fleet*

WORK SAMPLE 1 - *Letter*

WORK SAMPLE 2 - *The Hulk (extract)*

This will allow the teacher to make explicit how the structural, language and visual features of a text are influenced by

- what the text is about (field)
- the purpose of the text
- the audience for the text (tenor)
- how the text will be presented (mode)

Implications for teaching

In order for students to compose and create appropriate and effective texts in history teachers should ensure they:

- *build field knowledge* – through a variety of learning experiences students gain knowledge about the historical concepts and topic

- *model the expectations* – making explicit the particular structural and grammatical features of the target text, including specific vocabulary and visual aspects – primary and secondary source materials can be used to model all aspects of a text. Some examples can be found in the Year 4 and 6 units of work which incorporate the teaching of English and history at: http://e4ac.edu.au/primary/

- *provide opportunities for students to practise the expectations* with guidance and scaffolding, including *joint constructio*n of the text.

   To find out more about the explicit teaching of composing and creating texts, see Rossbridge & Rushton, 2014.

- *negotiate the criteria* that will be used to assess their final product with students. The criteria should relate to:

   o the accuracy and relevance of the information,

   o the effectiveness of the text in engaging the audience,

   o how the structure of the text works to achieve its purpose

   o the effectiveness of the particular language and grammatical features, eg if the narration used time connectives or a particular view of an event or person used persuasive devices such as modality effectively

   o the relevance and effectiveness of visual aspects of the text

   o other aspects of the task which should be present, eg 'The newspaper article should use time-appropriate language'.

The study of history provides many opportunities to capitalise on students' natural curiosity about the world and their place in it. As a highly text-based discipline it also provides many opportunities to develop students' literacy skills so they are able to think and express themselves imaginatively and creatively. It is, therefore, imperative that the literacy skills required for students to be successful learners of history are explicitly taught within authentic contexts of primary and secondary source materials. This paper has described some strategies and resources to support students in this.

REFERENCES

ACARA 2013, viewed 21 January 2015 < http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanities-and-social-sciences/history/rationale > .

ACARA 2012, viewed 21 January 2015, < http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanities-and-social-sciences/history/content-structure > .

ACARA 2012a, viewed 21 January 2015, < http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanities-and-social-sciences/history/history-across-foundation-to-year-12 > .

Anawak, J 2015, Graphic Organisers, viewed 4 February 2015, < https://www.pinterest.com/ jenanawak/graphic-organisers/.

Commonwealth of Australia 2012, 'Global Education Templates', viewed 4 February 2015, < http://www.globaleducation.edu.au/resources-gallery/resource-gallery-templates.html > .

REFERENCES *cont.*

Dawson, I 2004, 'Why is Historical Enquiry important?' viewed 4 February 2015, < http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/ EnquiryImportance.html > .

Education Services Australia. 2013, 'Australian Curriculum mapping Primary English for the Australian curriculum Resources for English and llteracy education' viewed 21 February 2015, < http://e4ac.edu.au/primary/ > .

Edwards, I & Tonkin, R 2013, *Papa in the olden days,* Walker Books, Newtown, Sydney.

Freebody, P & Luke, A 1999, viewed 21 January 2015 < http://www.newliteracies.com.au/what-are-new-literacies?/116/ > .

Freebody, P & Luke, A1990, 'Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context', *Prospect, 5*, 7–16.

Gilbert, R & Hoepper, B 2014, *Teaching Humanities and Social Studies, History, Geography, Economics & Citizenship in the Australian Curriculum* (5th edn) Cengage Learning, Melbourne.

Hirst, P 1973, 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge', in RS Peter (ed),*The philosophy of education*, Oxford University Press, London.

History Teachers Association Australia 2014, 'How to teach history,' viewed 9 February 2015, < http://achistoryunits.edu.au/teaching-history/how-to-teach-history/teachhist-history-pedagogy.html > .

Holliday, M 2008 *Strategies for Reading Success*, PETAA, Sydney.

Husbands, C 1996, *What is History teaching? Language, ideas and meaning in learning about the past*, Open University Press, Berkshire.

McConachie, S, Hall, M, Resnick, L, Ravi, A, Bill, V, Bintz, J & Taylor, J 2006, 'Task, text, and talk: literacy for all subjects, *Educational Leadership, 64*(2), 8–14.

Morse, O 2015 'SOAPSTone: A Strategy for Reading and Writing', viewed 12 March, 2015, < http://www.apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/ public/preap/teachers_corner/45200.html >

NSW Department of Education and Communities, Curriculum Support, Information Process Skills, viewed 9 February 2013, < http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/schoollibraries/teachingideas/isp/ > .

Robinson, F 1970, 'Study guides and strategies', viewed 21 January, 2015, < http://www.studygs.net/texred2.htm > .

Rossbridge, J & Rushton, K 2014, 'The critical conversation about text: Joint construction', *PETAA Paper, 196.*

Shanahan, T & Shanahan, C 2012, 'What is disciplinary literacy and why does it matter?' *Top Lang Disorders, 32*(1), 7–18.

Taylor, T, Fahey, C, Kriewaldt, J & Boon, D 2012, *Place and time – Exploration in teaching geography and history,* Pearson, Frenchs Forest, NSW

Wineburg, S 2001, *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past,* Temple University Press, USA.

Wineburg, S 2008, 'Why historical thinking matters', viewed 15 January 2015, < http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why/ > .

USEFUL WEBSITES

http://www.achistoryunits.edu.au/teaching-history/how-to-teach-history/teachhist-history-pedagogy.html

http://e4ac.edu.au/primary/

http://www.petaa.edu.au.teaching-resources 'Lest we Forget'

http://trove.nla.gov.au/

http://www.achistoryunits.edu.au/

http://www.scoop.it/u/catherine-smyth

http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why.html

http://teachinghistory.org/digital-classroom/beyond-the-chalkboard/25640

http://voicethread.com/about/library/5th_Grade__Ellis_Is_Narratives_from_Barbara_De_Santis/

http://www.apcentral/collegeboard.com/apc/public/preap/teachers_corner/45200.htm

http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/index.php

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Penny Hutton teaches English and literacies to B.Ed students in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney. She has been a classroom and ESL teacher and has held a number of consultant, policy and management positions in the education field. She has a particular interest in the literacy demands of subject areas.

Catherine Smyth is a Lecturer in HSIE K–6 at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney. She is currently completing a PhD and is interested in how ICTs foster epistemic fluency. Catherine curates a number of Scoop.it sites http://www.scoop.it/u/catherine-smyth and participates in a professional community through Twitter @SmythCatherine.

ABOUT PETAA