



## Five Reasons Why You Will Love Teaching Big History

13.8 billion years of history, mapped to the Australian Curriculum

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Big History fosters a love of learning, a critical mind and courage to meet the future – values that as history teachers we all appreciate, and hope to instil in our students.<sup>1</sup>

Let me make it clear where I am coming from – the *Australian Curriculum: History* provides a rigorous, traditional and truly valid approach to the discipline of history in the secondary school, equipping students with an excellent understanding of the significance of major events and phenomena in both Australian and world history. It also provides students with the ability to critically analyse and evaluate, thus enabling them to comprehend and negotiate the complexity and implications of contemporary global geo-politics. Such knowledge and skills are indispensable for every student, and in my ideal world, everyone would study history through to their senior year of schooling.

Alongside my mainstream curriculum classroom teaching, I've also had the luxury of teaching Big History over the last few years, and this has worked upon my mind in a powerful way. Of fundamental importance

to Big History is the big narrative – it's the history of the universe, a look at the last 13.8 billion years and how we got to where we are today. As you can see, they're not kidding about the 'Big.' That means that Big History covers not only the subject we call 'History' today, but a whole lot more. Please don't find that unsettling; it's actually awesome.

It has this effect on you, this subject. It's a feeling I share with Big History colleagues from around the world I've met through the subject, mostly online. Our love of all history, in all its forms and time periods, is deeper than ever, but the Big History approach has reframed our thinking; specifically, the intensity and the urgency with which we teach it. In this era of challenges to our way of life, with privacy-reducing technology and automation alongside fraying democracy and the seeming normalisation of violence and hate speech, teaching history has an even more important role to play in our students' lives than it has done in the past. There is no room for history as an indulgence, as nostalgia, as an end in itself. Every discipline will play its part, but there

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must be a place for students to discover, interrogate and evaluate past human behaviour in order to help make sense of today and tomorrow, and that place is ours, as history teachers.

This is where the Big History Project comes in. It is an online community as well as a vast treasure trove of beautifully presented resources, all created by teachers for teachers. It is permanently available online and free to every school across the globe.

The Big History course has been heavily influenced by David Christian, an Australian academic at Sydney's Macquarie University, and as the originator, David maintains ongoing contact with the project. The Big History Project was established in perpetuity through financial support from Bill Gates, after Gates fell in love with the course some years earlier.

Big History tackles every aspect of a teaching course you can think of, from comprehensive professional development and forums where you can interact with other Big History teachers, to planned course materials for teachers. You can sign up your students through a school portal to have their own access and account. There are stores of current, well-researched articles, graphics, video clips and quizzes which can be incorporated into lessons and homework, matching any timeframe you have available, from a few weeks to years. There is even a condensed version public course for curious parents to sign up to if they'd like to learn alongside their child.

Whether you teach Big History in addition to mainstream history courses, or simply embrace it and incorporate it into your lexicon and your pedagogy, I suspect that it will profoundly affect you and your history teaching. So here are my five reasons why I believe that Big History will become something you love.

### 1. It Provides a Narrative and Framework for All Student Learning

Big History asks the big bold questions that students want answered. How did we get here? What's the Big Bang theory and what makes it the best scientific origin story we've got? Why did life evolve on Earth and seemingly nowhere else that we know of (yet, anyway)? Why do humans act the way we do? Which ancient and medieval civilisations were the most powerful and why did they fail? Why is the modern world changing so fast?

Big History draws upon astronomy, physics, history, anthropology, geology and yes, just everything, to explore the latest evidence-based answers to questions that we all wonder about. As a result, students get a strong idea of how the academic disciplines fit together to create knowledge as we know it. It's a brilliant fit for Year 9 and 10 students, giving them an overview before they choose the areas they want to delve into more deeply in their senior studies.

### 2. It Breaks through Silo Thinking

Every discipline contributes to the body of knowledge and understanding that makes up the sum of academic scholarship that is the result of centuries of truth-seeking. Big History course activities explain and value every discipline and its contribution, and do not silo areas of knowledge as being out of the domain of our interest. Instead, learning is underpinned by the process of making and testing claims, where students develop a thoughtful, consistent and rigorous approach to testing new ideas and information.

The goal is that students embrace all knowledge rather than narrowing their reasoning to one branch of thought, and are encouraged to think in a rounded, interdisciplinary way that values fact-checking, scholarship and review.

#### *Casey Lever*

Casey Lever is a passionate history teacher and Head of Humanities, with over thirty years' experience in the Queensland school system.

### 3. It Teaches Students How to Think

Clear, logical thought and argument are foundational values in Big History. Teaching materials treat religion and belief as valid forms of interpreting the world, but draw distinctions with rigorous scientific and historical scholarship around the concept of ‘claim testing.’ This is a key term in Big History that embodies a whole set of processes that are very familiar to history teachers.

A series of investigations such as ‘How and why do individuals change their minds?’ ask students to contend with concepts of evidence and truth, and significant human understandings of the world around us, such as the shift from a geocentric to heliocentric model of the solar system. Students are asked to write essays proving claims using supporting evidence from the stimulus provided, and to respond to a counter-claim in a valid way.

### 4. Big History Project Coursework Promotes Significant Gains in Student Writing

The Big History Project course is text-based and involves regular reading and writing opportunities across a range of genres. One helpful feature is that the texts are available at three lexile measures (different levels of reading difficulty) and students can self-select their preferred level.

In data gathered from a large student group (2000+ samples) in 2017–2018, strong growth was apparent across all four elements measured: reasoning, use of evidence, use of disciplinary concepts, and writing mechanics.<sup>2</sup> This growth was evident in both public school and independent school systems. Students can also choose to sign up for BHP Score, which offers machine-generated, instant feedback as they tackle specific essay questions with sources provided.

#### The Universe

Threshold 1: The Big Bang  
*Beginning at the beginning. As far as we know.*

Threshold 2: Stars Light Up  
*How stars are born.*

Threshold 3: New Chemical Elements  
*How stars forge matter in the Universe.*

#### Our Solar System and Earth

Threshold 4: Earth and the Solar System  
*How tasty morsels of gas and rock created our home.*

#### Life

Threshold 5: Life on Earth  
*How life evolves, adapts, and thrives.*

#### Humans

Threshold 6: Collective Learning  
*How humans are different.*

Threshold 7: Agriculture  
*How farming sows the seeds of civilization.*

#### The Future

Threshold 8: The Modern Revolution  
*Why change accelerates faster and faster.*

Source: Big History Project  
[bighistoryproject.com/home](http://bighistoryproject.com/home)

### 5. It Is Future-Orientated and Promotes Cooperation

The Big History Project is structured around thresholds: moments of climactic change where new conditions gave rise to new eventualities, an event that creates something completely new.<sup>3</sup>

Each threshold is examined in terms of what conditions occurred to produce it, its implications for us as a species, and how we navigated our way through it. One thing I particularly appreciate about this course is that it barely mentions war. Big History is ultimately a survival story based on optimism and human cooperation, which also makes it a good vehicle for tackling the vital but tricky subject of the future.

- 1 An earlier version of this article was originally published in the Big History Project Teacher Blog, 7 January 2019, [blog.bighistoryproject.com/2019/01/07/five-reasons-to-teach-big-history/](http://blog.bighistoryproject.com/2019/01/07/five-reasons-to-teach-big-history/).
- 2 Big History Project, ‘Summary of Big History Project Research, 2017/18 School Year’ (Big History Project, 2018), [school.bighistoryproject.com/bhplive](http://school.bighistoryproject.com/bhplive).
- 3 Big History Project, ‘Chapter 1: The Universe’ (Big History Project, 2018), [bighistoryproject.com/chapters/1#](http://bighistoryproject.com/chapters/1#)

### Big History and the Australian Curriculum

If those five reasons aren't enough to convince you, the Big History Project team has also done the hard-yards for Australian History teachers. They've mapped the Big History course against the *Australian Curriculum: History* and the Teacher Course against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). All these resources are available on the Big History website for Australian History teachers.

### Take the Plunge!

Don't take my word for it. Dive in to the Big History Project today – or just dip your toe in curiosity. Whether you incorporate it into your classroom teaching or simply further your own lifelong learning, you're sure to find something in the Big History project that will expand your horizons.

Sign up for the Big History Project at [school.bighistoryproject.com/pages/teaching-big-history](http://school.bighistoryproject.com/pages/teaching-big-history). You will need to use a verifiable school email address to be given a full account. 'Lifelong learner' access is available for those not affiliated with a school.

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