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The truth: what our students really learn about Anzac Day

By Alison Bedford and Naomi Barnes

Students taught “hatred” of the nation ([even the PM thinks so](#)). Teachers are [duds](#). That’s the backdrop for the [recent announcement](#) of the final version of the Australian Curriculum and it shows exactly how contested is the teaching of our nation’s history.

But let’s look at what actually happens in our history classrooms. As we approach this ANZAC Day, what will students be learning in history classrooms?

1. The April 1 [Ministerial press release](#), claimed that in Years 9 and 10 Australian history content had previously been optional



In the [version of the Australian Curriculum \(8.4\)](#) currently taught in Australian history classrooms, Australian involvement in World War I and World War II and the First Nations Civil Rights Movement are 'compulsory', in that there are no alternative topics for teachers to choose from. The minister's comments do suggest that the 1750-1918 Australia will become a requirement as well. [This is reiterated in ACARA's press release](#), which stated Version 9 would focus on "the impact on First Nations Australians on the arrival of British settlers as well as their contribution to the building of modern Australia [and] strengthening and making explicit teaching about the origins and heritage of Australia's democracy and the diversity of Australian communities". However, these changes have not been widely welcomed, with Victoria and NSW insisting on an exemption citing the provision that states and territories to "[adopt and adapt the curriculum, "casting doubt on how compulsory the changes are"](#)". Perhaps this presents [an opportunity to teach the Frontier Wars](#) to all students, as the Wars are currently only covered in the Year 11 and 12 Modern History curriculum in some states.

2. It is already compulsory for Australian students to learn "the places where Australians fought and the nature of warfare during World War I, including the Gallipoli campaign"

[Version 8.4 suggests](#) students should learn the events of conflicts Australian soldiers were involved in during World War I. They should also study why ANZAC Day is commemorated in the primary years, with the secondary years considering the "nature and significance of the Anzac legend". This idea that seemed to so distress Minister Tudge and his colleagues, is core to teaching all national days of significance. When building a nation, deliberation over the term "significance" is a key part of being a citizen in a democracy. ANZAC Day is the perfect example for teaching this skill because it is well documented as a fact that its popularity has waxed and waned over the last century. Students can engage with a century of historical records to investigate why ANZAC Day has come to signify much more than a failed assault on a Turkish beach. The contested nature of commemoration and its role in schools has been present [since the first ANZAC Day in 1916](#). The debate over ANZAC Day's significance can open up Australian history for students to learn about other significant chapters in the building of Australia before and after World War 1.

3. ANZAC Day commemorations are well-entrenched in schools.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic lock-downs and limitations on large gatherings, [schools 'pivoted' to ensure that ANZAC Day commemorations](#) were still able to go ahead. ANZAC day is a significant day in the school calendar where students and teachers gather with members of their school community and returned service people to commemorate the ongoing sacrifice Australian soldiers have made since 1915. [But appreciation is not un-critical](#) – we can both appreciate the sacrifice of ANZAC service people, recognise how the ANZAC spirit has contributed to national identity, and still critique how First Nations soldiers were treated or discuss the bid to include the Frontier Wars in the [National War Memorial](#). Such debates are a part of Australian history just as much as the landing at dawn on April 25th. Australian students, by the end of Year 10, are taught to: "refer to key events, the actions of individuals and groups, and beliefs and values to explain patterns of change and continuity over time". They also "analyse the causes and effects of events and developments and explain their relative importance" [Version 8.4 Year 10 History Achievement Standard](#) .It is important here to be clear

that the 'interpretations' that students both engage with and develop are historical – that is, based on the analysis and evaluation of sources of evidence, including the works of historians. They are not encouraged to engage in emotive, uncritical responses such as characterising history teachers as promoting hatred. This is the real benefit of learning a national, rather than nationalist, history.

4. Learning to be critical in times of war is preparing students to defend their nation.

Not many people recognise the value history education has for present day issues of conflict. The skills of deep investigation, critical analysis of sources including placing the sources in their historical context, are the perfect skills for developing a radar for mis and disinformation. The ability to look at a social media post and determine whether it is a Russian deep fake or a legitimate image of war, is a skill taught in secondary history, just using past examples of propaganda. The current federal Government has dedicated \$9 billion to cyber security in the recent budget. The skills taught in history that investigate how events are globally linked, are preparing students to have dispositions useful for cybersecurity, including tracking and analysing big data. Our first author uses the skills she developed as a student of history, a history teacher for 13 years, and a history and English teacher educator for 10 years, to investigate patterns in big data. Many of her faculty colleagues also use their humanities and social science skills as well as STEM skills to address information disorder.

So this ANZAC Day, as our young people lay wreaths and recite the ode, parents and governments can rest assured that "we will remember them". Those same students will then return to (understaffed) classrooms where they will "ask relevant questions; critically analyse and interpret sources; consider context; respect and explain different perspectives; develop and substantiate interpretations, and communicate effectively" (History Rationale), the skills needed of any good citizen of our nation, so they can be an informed participant in our democracy.



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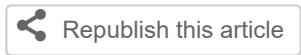


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