

How an old dog taught himself new tricks: One teacher's journey into Extended Investigation

By Alan James

Snapshot

Alan James, experienced, longstanding Extended Investigation teacher, explores the benefit of the teaching the Extended Investigation subject to both the teacher and the student. Alan also shares his insights into establishing and maintaining the subject and how his rewarding journey has unfolded.

I started teaching in 1984. Ergo, I'm old and in some ways, it would be easy to consider me an educational dinosaur. I know that this was the year I first stood in front of a classroom – as an English teacher – because the exam board in the UK had 'wittily' insisted that the set text for "O" Level that year would be a certain novel by George Orwell.

After arriving in Australia in 2004, I continued to teach English in all of its forms. Literature was always my favourite strand and I now wonder if the reason for that was not just my fascination for the compelling way in which certain words resonate whilst others don't but also the way that teaching Literature, provided one had a sufficient knowledge base, permitted a certain freedom, an understanding that there are numerous ways to reach the same end, and allowed a liberty of approach not shared by those colleagues in other disciplines bound by their text books, their pre-prepared summaries, and their meticulous lesson plans. In short, to me at least, it was about putting the student at the heart of the learning or as my first serious teacher-mentor put it in a way that would certainly not be acceptable these days; 'Never prepare a lesson until you see the whites of their eyes.'

I'd held senior positions of responsibility but knew it was in the classroom that my heart belonged. As a teacher, teaching senior Literature seemed as good as it could be. My students were always enthusiastic, their results were, on the whole, pretty good and I think I was prepared for this to be the pattern for the remainder of my teaching career. And then, something at VCAA stirred, a series of discussions began and this, in time, led to my brave new world.

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It is my understanding, based on conversations held back in 2012, that VCE Extended Investigation was conceived as two things – a credible alternative within the VCE to the explicit thinking tasks that were a cornerstone of the IB program, and as a compulsory requirement of study as part of the newly conceived VCE Baccalaureate which, at the time was referred to as the VB. Honestly, how did no one in Melbourne see the potential problem with that?

To me, listening to these discussions I couldn't have cared less about the subject's place in the grand scheme of things, all I heard was opportunity. The more I listened, the more I was hooked – 'allow students to follow their own passions,' 'give them the chance to direct their own learning,' 'equip young people with the strategies for success beyond school,' were phrases that connected with my purpose as a teacher. Suddenly, the nearly 30 year veteran classroom practitioner felt like the "dynamic young thruster" which, according to one former Headmaster, I once was.

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However, as we all know in education, theory and practice do not easily coincide. I began my fight (which continues to this day) to cement a place in the curriculum at my school for EI. I gave lectures, talked (endlessly) to colleagues, preached to parents about the possibilities that this subject offered whilst having nothing more than my enthusiasm and my own dimly remembered research papers as grounds for my positivity.

Miraculously, in 2015, the school gave the green light to EI and the journey began for real. My first class had seven students. Within a month, there were four left. An obvious reality dawned on me very quickly – this subject was so different in its delivery and its direction to anything else that these students were doing within the VCE that it scares off all but the brave, the determined, and – some would say – those thinkers whose brains don't mesh well with conventional curriculum. As one student told me several years later whilst explaining he was dropping the subject despite it being his favourite – 'You don't appreciate the fact that everyone else is telling us to drive on the left whilst you're telling us to drive on the right.' Despite having never consciously referred to motoring in the entirety of my teaching career, this analogy made a lot of sense to me and confirmed some of my fears about traditional education.

You see, the thing is that EI scares people. Despite there being innumerable articles stressing the importance of student agency, academic lectures about the power of a 'flipped classroom,'

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or catch-cries for 21st century skills (whatever they are) there is genuine suspicion about a school-based subject that offers all these things. This suspicion is not unique to my school – far from it. Numbers of students taking EI as part of their VCE program have held steady for the last decade at around 300 – across the entire State! This seems baffling to me, especially considering the response my former students get when they explain to their new friends at university what they studied at VCE. 'Oh, wow, that sounds incredible,' 'I wish I'd had the chance to do that,' or most tellingly of all – 'You know how to do all this research stuff that our lecturers are expecting us to know and most of us don't have a clue about.'

To this day, EI remains the best kept secret in the VCE, even in a school like mine that has supported me in teaching it every year since 2015. The number of times a Year 12 student seeks me out in Term 2 and tells me that they wish they had taken EI but had no knowledge of it honestly breaks my heart. Those students who do know about it labour under all kinds of misconceptions; the two that I hear most and which are often cited as reasons for not doing the subject are that it's 'hard,' and it's "a lot of work.' I despair when I hear this because, yet again, it seems to suggest that many students want easy and effortless success. However, what I think they are actually trying to say is that it is not difficulty that scares them away but the complete unfamiliarity of it.

Back in 2015, it was all unfamiliar- to student and teacher alike. I remember that first class so clearly. This was everything I thought it would be. It was a shared journey, a time of collaboration, of mutual discovery and, dare I say it, transformation. I witnessed four young people growing as learners in front of me. Their evolution from the start of the course to the end of it was nothing short of breathtaking – and their experience was reflected in me. I honestly felt that I had garnered more knowledge about instruction, about patience, and understanding in those nine months than I had in the previous nine years.

And this experience has been reflected each and every year from then on. Every year begins afresh with new minds, new topics and new possibilities. I think I have now learned when to detach from explicit teaching and become more of a learning mentor. It's never easy and each class is different, and the needs of each student within that class are different too. Much to the chagrin of my employers, I have grown accustomed to answering an email, at 10.30pm on a weeknight, at 3pm on a Sunday afternoon or during my holidays, asking for clarification of an idea, a question, or a concept with which a student is currently wrestling. My experience tells me that if I was to wait until 9am on Monday to send that response, the initial idea would have become stale and the impetus for enquiry would have stalled.

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Because the truth is, EI is different and as an EI teacher, you must be different too. You have to learn a set of skills and competencies that are not commonplace, but they are far from impossible to acquire. I think the one that remains challenging – and exhausting - to me is in carrying every student's journey with me at all times during the course. This means that when any of them ask a question, you are well-prepared to engage with it and, most importantly, in your response, you are able to demonstrate that their inquiry is of great importance to you. You always have to make time for the question and must never appear disinterested or disappointed. This is genuinely difficult at times – as is learning to advise students that their idea is flawed, their research plan inconsequential or their proposed method flimsy. Giving feedback which is critical whilst not appearing to be critical of the person is a real challenge in education today. Yet, once you have obtained the trust of the class, this becomes much easier, and students begin to want to work collaboratively to find solutions to problems. Isn't this what real 21st century skills are after all?

In short, teaching EI is exhausting but hugely rewarding. Every year is different, every class is different, and every student is different. It is a privilege to be able to work closely with so many young developing minds and to see them rapidly evolve. Students come to realise that they can accomplish far more than they ever realised, and, after the course, they are ready to face a great deal of the challenges that later life has in store for them. I think, if we go all the way back to 2012 and those initial subject discussions EI was visioned as a kind of super subject for the academic elite and sure, if you are fortunate enough to teach a student that falls into that category then EI allows them to fly to places far beyond the accepted boundaries of school, yet my experience tells me that the subject offers even more to the student that has more modest academic ambitions. In the year that one of my students achieved a study score of 50, I was equally proud of the student in the same class who scored 29. Both had excelled and had taken their learning as far as each of them could – and that, I would have thought, is the goal of any teacher – to allow each student to reach the highest levels available to them at that time.

Despite all this, the subject is still not widely accepted within Victorian schools. I dread being asked what subject I teach because it always leads to an elongated conversation. Many Senior School teachers across the State, even now, have never heard of EI and I have to explain it to them. Even many colleagues within my own school have no idea what goes on within the subject and look at it (and by implication, me) with suspicion. And yet, I persevere, lucky that many of the key personnel at my school share my belief in what EI can offer to young adult minds and actively support its delivery.

This has been key to its survival. Any teacher contemplating introducing EI at their own school has to garner support somehow. A relatively easy way to do this is by involving potentially interested parties as members of an Ethics Committee who pass judgement on the manageability

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of suggested research topics or as Oral panel members. After all, the rubric for the EI Oral Presentation – at both Units 3 and 4 - asks students to talk to an 'educated non-specialist audience, 'so there should be no shortage of potential high quality panel members around every school. Experience here also suggests that once these observers see exactly what students can achieve, they will do all in their power to support the course in the future. Another red-hot tip I would give any teacher wanting to immerse themselves into EI fully is to introduce an elective Year 10 course. I worked very closely some years ago with my then Head of Department to devise a one semester course for Year 10 that is effectively the Unit 1 & 2 course that doesn't exist within the

VCE curriculum. The upshot of this has been to allow students to acquire key skills that they may want to continue in EI – either in Year 11 or 12 in the future.

All of this being said, I must say that the biggest effect is, selfishly, the effect the subject has had on me. I feel at times a little like Coleridge's dreamer haunted by his vision of Kubla Khan. And whilst I may no longer have his 'flashing eyes (or)his flowing hair,' I remain committed

to spreading the word of EI across the teaching fraternity. Perhaps one day all schools will embed thinking about thinking or developing habits of mind into their foundational years (and I sincerely commend those that already have). Until such time where practising what the theorists preach is an uncommon occurrence, I proffer EI to any teacher who wants to achieve the very best for each and every student regardless of subject discipline. I have been fortunate enough to see ordinary students do extraordinary things. It has changed my teaching life – I wonder what it could do for you?

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