

General capabilities: A teacher-librarian perspective

By *Diana Kelly*

Snapshot

Diana Kelly, teacher-librarian at Balwyn High School, considers the relationship between the capabilities and the teacher-librarian and details the opportunities the capabilities offer for the teaching of skills in line with the key interests of school libraries.

Librarians are research experts, and teachers are learning experts. As a result, a teacher-librarian's knowledge and skills makes them an invaluable resource in the teaching and assessment of research and other learning skills within the school. When teaching students to research, teacher-librarians are also teaching essential life-skills and due to the nature of their work as teachers of research, understand inherently how research is more than just looking up information on the Internet. The research process is a continual process with skills that are transferable across subject areas. The acquisition of these skills is lifelong, and requires explicit teaching and differentiation, as research involves so much more than just looking for information online.

The Victorian Curriculum does not have a dedicated 'research' curriculum that develops the different skills required at the different stages of the research process. However, the Capabilities curriculum provides an opportunity for these life-skills to be taught and assessed. The skills of the Capabilities are essentially the skills of learning, and transfer across subjects and year levels. These capabilities place value on the process of learning that occurs whilst students work towards the final summative assessment.

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Depending on the nature of the task, rigorous and authentic research assignments are likely to require any number of the following skills:

- critical and creative thinking,
- teamwork,
- negotiation and leadership skills,
- presentation skills,
- understanding of ethical implications of research,
- and the ability to ask questions and find solutions to contemporary global problems.

These are all skills taught within the library context, they traverse all learning areas and year levels, and are the skills championed by the Capabilities curriculum. The teacher-librarian, whose job it is to resource the teaching and learning of the entire school community while supporting

the teaching of these soft-skills in the library setting, becomes an ideal candidate for leading the teaching and assessing of the capabilities across the school.

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The capabilities taught in this curriculum allow for the deep intellectual risk-taking we value in learning. Often students are given a task that requires research and teachers hope that the task will inspire the student to initiate a rigorous extended inquiry, grappling with the question on a deep, critical level. Instead, it is not uncommon to find that some students will do a few searches

online to gather the information necessary, and the submissions may range from paraphrasing information with varying levels of quality and analysis to the directly copy-and-pasted. Often, content knowledge comprises much of the teaching and assessment of the subject, and so research tasks assess a student's understanding and interpretation of this content, often at the expense of the process. While the majority of teaching and learning throughout the unit may come from a text book, the summative research task may require students to conduct research to find their own information. Teachers may want their students to engage in intellectual risk-taking, researching from a variety of sources, critically analysing the quality of their sources, and asking high quality questions of the information they find: all tasks that extend and enrich the overall learning experience. But students' goals are often performance-based, work-avoidant, or a combination of both: do the least amount of work required to achieve the highest result possible. Whether they are work-avoidant or performance-driven, they are still unlikely to utilise and develop the skills that teachers value of their own volition. Getting a good result is often the priority, and when a summative assessment rubric is largely content-based, a good description of the content being assessed is really all that is necessary for a strong result.

The capabilities curriculum provides an opportunity for students' performance-based goals to align with their teachers' desire for students to value learning for its own sake. By directly assessing personal and social skills, intercultural skills, critical and creative thinking and ethics, the Capabilities curriculum requires teachers to teach and spend time developing these skills in their students. However, teachers are not necessarily experts at research and the skills of critical and creative thinking and ethics. They are often focused on getting through the mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum content. Teachers may also not feel confident to teach and assess these skills, and so the teacher-librarian is strategically placed to support and oversee the instruction of this aspect of the curriculum. As research-experts, teacher-librarians can see how the skills are transferable across subjects, and can provide the necessary resources and scaffolding for differentiation. They are specialists in the soft-skills required for high-quality research, and are one of the few key figures in the school that has a unique birds-eye-view

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of the teaching and learning that occurs throughout. They can use their whole-school understanding of what is going on to ensure consistency across subjects, learning areas and year levels in the implementation of the curriculum.

By writing assessment that addresses the capabilities we are encouraging our students to focus their attention on developing the skills we value as teachers. The old saying 'we measure what we treasure' applies in this situation. If we want our students to take the deep intellectual risks afforded to us by the Capabilities curriculum, we need to reward their efforts by assessing them. If we expect our students to show a strong understanding of the content, for example, to 'explain different historical interpretations and contested debates about the past' (Level 7-8 History), then that is the Victorian Curriculum content descriptor that needs to be used to inform the writing of our rubrics. If, however, we want the focus of our students' attention to not be on explaining information, but the extent to which they 'synthesise information from multiple sources and use lateral thinking techniques to draw parallels between known and new ideas' (Level 7-8 Critical and Creative Thinking), then that needs to be explicitly addressed in the rubric. The first statement can be paraphrased from an Internet search, the second requires more sophisticated thinking.

In order to assess these skills fairly, we need to teach them, and by using a backwards planning approach, the course of instruction should involve the direct and explicit teaching of these skills. By writing the rubric at the start of the unit, it becomes much more straightforward to prioritise the teaching of the skills in the lessons leading up to the assessment. For each

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capability this requires a slightly different approach in the subject area it is being taught within. While it can be tempting to just provide a judgement on the Capabilities because they may align to a particular task, if the summative assessment task is measuring the extent to which students can demonstrate a particular skill, then lessons in the unit need to focus on practicing this skill. It would be unreasonable to judge a students' ability to 'factorise algebraic expressions by identifying numerical factors' (Year 8 Maths) without first teaching students how to do this in the lessons leading up to the test. We cannot reasonably assess a students' ability to work in a team or 'develop specific skills and a variety of strategies to prevent or resolve conflict' (Level 9-10 Personal and Social capability) if we have not provided students with strategies in how to prevent or resolve conflict in a group setting first. Developing conflict resolution skills in a team may take the form of discussion protocols or role-plays, but students need the chance to practice these skills before a summative judgement is made on their ability. Similarly, if we want to assess a student's capacity to 'critically examine their own and others' thinking processes and discuss factors that influence thinking, including cognitive biases' (Level 9-10 Critical and Creative Thinking), then teachers need to be supporting students with the appropriate tools to allow this

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specific type of thinking to emerge. This may be through the use of an appropriate graphic organiser, carefully considered thinking routine, or incisive sentence starters that encourage the critical thought to surface from the student. Like learning in any other learning area, students need to be given the tools and knowledge to be able to demonstrate the skill when assessed. Providing routine

practice for this type of thinking and removing the differentiated scaffolds as necessary supports students to become independent in the skills of the Capability in question, thereby leading to a fair and reasonable judgement of the performance of these skills.

The skills assessed in the Capabilities curriculum fit naturally within the realm of the library. The types of learning that organically occurs within the space will invariably see students collaborating and using the space to support their personal and social development. The resources available to students in the library provide intercultural and transcultural perspectives, and support students' understanding of the contemporary

global issues that require critical, creative, and ethical thought. The library is the centre of learning in the school, and by its very nature, encourages lifelong learning; the focus on the journey or process rather than the outcome, as do the Capabilities. This positions the library as the ideal space, and the teacher-librarian as a natural leader in the meaningful implementation of the Capabilities.

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Diana Kelly is Head of Library at Balwyn High School and serves on the SLAV committee of management as Treasurer, Diana is also a co-convenor of the Metro East Branch of SLAV and a member of the Professional Learning committee of the association.