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CPL Podcast: New History Extension Syllabus

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Margaret Vos

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning, here is your host Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning, I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Editor of the JPL. Today I'm talking with Margaret Vos about teaching History Extension. Margaret, welcome!

Carly Boreland:

You have been a History teacher and a History Extension teacher for some time. Could you give us a little bit of background to your teaching experience and why History Extension is so important to you?

Margaret Vos:

Well, I have been teaching History for over 30 years and that is as far as I will go with my dating. In terms of History Extension, I have been teaching it for as long as the course has existed and it is a course that I think is incredibly valuable. There are two main reasons for that: one is that it is valuable for students; and the other is that it is valuable for the continuation of History as a discipline. Because sometimes History is under threat and I would like to talk about those as two separate things. In terms of the students, it is incredibly important that students who love History have that advantage of being able to do an extension course. And it basically means that, if they have done Ancient or Modern History in Year 11, they can do that extra higher level course. That is the first important thing and the second important thing is that because you get students who love History in your History Extension classes you have great discussions. They love the fact that they are with "like minds" and they do love the challenge of being able to argue their case and their beliefs, in terms of History, so that is really important.

Carly Boreland:

Students really they hang out for History Extension, don't they? Some things that they talk about in the junior years and it is a little bit different to the other extension courses because you can do five units of History but you can't start it until you have completed the Preliminary Course. So there really is a sense of students needing to stick with History, but also demonstrate their capacities, because it is a challenging and wonderful course. So by the time they get there, to be able to study History Extension.



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There is something exciting and a long journey between the students and the teachers building up to this, isn't there?

Margaret Vos:

Indeed, it truly is an extension course because they take the skills that they have learned in Ancient and or Modern History (because often you will get History Extension students who are doing both). They will take the skills that they have learnt in year 11 in ancient or modern, especially in the *Historical Investigation* and they will bring those into History Extension and also that passion for History. They become very passionate and I think it is important that they have that chance. And I think they also appreciate the fact that, when they do History Extension, it is just not *more* History it is about historiography - it is about the History of History. It is about how History has been valued; and how History teaching and how the writing of History has changed over time. They love that aspect of it.

Carly Boreland:

We will talk more about the project and those aspects later, but they actually get to contribute to the work of historians in that project. Some of the projects that students come up with are really pushing forward the way that people are thinking about History.

Margaret Vos:

It says in the Rationale in both the old and the new Syllabus that History Extension is something that can be used as a pre-requisite for a University course (and some of my History Extension students have gone on to say that History Extension was wonderful as an introduction to History at University). But I think more importantly, History Extension is something that allows them to be lifelong learners and allows them to continue on with that love of History and to realise that having half of your brain in the past is not something unusual and that there are "like minds" out there that love it just as much as they do.

Carly Boreland:

Universities love this course and fight hard to keep it because they know it is their breeding ground for their best History students.

Margaret Vos:

I don't know where the mythology comes from (but there is some mythology out there) that if you are going to meet with success you have to do Maths and the Sciences and that somehow the Humanities are second class to those subject. And History Extension is a way of fighting back: it actually allows you to, as you said before, to do five units of History and to actually meet with success in subjects they have the proper skills for. And I think that is why universities value it, as a subject, because it does allow



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them to learn the skills that they then will need to go on to do university subjects and that is why there are great links between History Extension teachers and the actual universities.

Carly Boreland:

If schools don't have History Extension running it is probably a priority for the faculty to build those students up, probably talking about it in Year 7 and encouraging them to try to getting in running one time but then to continue it and that can be a real challenge. It takes some convincing about how to make the time table work as well and it competes with other extension subjects and often those students are in high demand across the subjects that they can study. But it is important that History teachers see that as really important in their school too.

Margaret Vos:

I think one of the things with History Extension is that a lot of teachers think "ah well" they say things like "I am not sure our students are capable of doing that." But my philosophy has always been that you allow the students who want to have a go at it to have go, and they tend to get to the point where they say themselves that they are not sure whether they have the capacity to continue on with this but I loved it whilst I was doing it. So I think that is important first. The second thing is that because it is such a small subject is a lot of schools teachers feel very isolated and feel like I am the only way out here doing this and you know it is important to encourage teachers to push for History Extension as a subject because once you start it, in a school, it just has a life of its own and it builds and builds.

Carly Boreland:

It is always been there but with the new Syllabuses coming through there is always an emphasis on History as a discipline but also as a job. The students we are teaching in Years 7-12, could go on to be historians: that that is real work that they do. That they understand the methodological approaches to History so that they can go on and undertake that in the same way that someone might go on to become an Engineer or a Doctor or a Scientist.

Margaret Vos:

There has been a move away, in the last decade or so, from the belief that an historian is this person in a university somewhere covered cobwebs looking through old tomes and doing this sort of research to the fact that historians are people who love the past and want to present to the public what exactly History is. That is why there has been a change in one of the questions from *who are the historians?* to *who are historians?* So that it allows people to have that discussion about is someone who has a passion for History, and writes a history but doesn't have a university background, is that person an "Historian?"



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Carly Boreland:

Well let's get stuck into the new Syllabus then, can you take us through how teachers can plan for the new Syllabus right now in their classrooms.

Margaret Vos:

I would like to make three points:

The first thing and it is a really positive thing is that very little has changed and what was great and wonderful about the old Syllabus is still in the new Syllabus. That is the first point.

The second one is that (and this was important because it meant that *BOSTES* or *NESA* listened to teachers) that the content of the course has been reduced. It had always been a "bug bear" of teachers who taught History Extension that the content load in History Extension seemed to be a lot larger than the content load in other extension courses. They have actually reduced in both the *Case Studies* and the *Key Questions*.

The other important thing, and it is nice to be able to say this, is that the new History extension Syllabus document is very user friendly, much more than the old one. The old one is a very good Syllabus document but you have to go trolling through it to try and find anything whereas the new one is much more user friendly, so I will start with that. In terms of teaching History Extension probably the most important thing for teachers to remember is that they are not teaching more History. They are teaching *historiography* and that is really important because the historiographical nature of the course has actually been emphasised even more so in the new Syllabus. They keep talking about changing the interpretations and historical debates so it is about *historiography* and not just about teaching more History.

Carly Boreland:

So when we say it is about historiography is that as simple as saying it is the History of History writing.

Margaret Vos:

And about the *nature* of History! Rather than talking about (and I know you do a little bit of this in the *case study*), rather than talking about a specific era of History, you look at the concept of History and what that has meant to the world and how that has changed over time. There is also this emphasis within the new Syllabus that students have to know the History of History from the ancient times right up to the current times. I would encourage teachers to actually ensure that they, when they are looking at historians, choose a few from each of the eras, don't just concentrate on the modern section etc.

Carly Boreland:

Margaret, something I think is illustrative of the nature of this subject is that we are talking about History but so far we haven't talked about any particular point in History; a person in History. We haven't even been specific at all because it is about the nature of *historiography*.



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Margaret Vos:

What you find is the key question about who are historians? When they [the students] do the History of historians and they look at how Thucydides wrote and what he thought was good History compared to what Von Ranke thought (or some of the more modern thinkers) in terms of History. They suddenly get very passionate about their view of what History is and they suddenly say “Wow! I could write like a *Relativist* or I could write in this particular way.”

In fact, this is something I haven’t said up until now, that one of the important things about History Extension is that students are continually writing. That I would come into a lesson and say the “*Post-Modernist view of History?*” I would write up on board – “History doesn’t exist; History is but fiction”. And then I would turn to the students and say “I want you to write a paragraph on your view of this”. At first they would simply give their opinion. As the time went on through the course, I would come in and say “We are going to write on this again. Now I want you to write it, with your knowledge of what other historians believe is about it” but, it is really important that they are continually writing, even if it is only a paragraph.

Carly Boreland:

And building those writing skills, because the HSC exam is two essays (1 hour each) and we like that and we know students can do it but students need opportunities to build up those skills and confidence beforehand and they have got that *the Project* and that is harder to contain I would imagine. I think with those kind of projects the problem is too many words not too few. But writing under time pressure is a real skill and it is important and valuable and worth demonstrating but if you are only writing a paragraph here and there you are not going to get there.

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Carly Boreland:

I have spent a lot of time doing the *Personal Interest Project for the Society & Culture* PIP. I always find that the development of the question takes a long time. And that is such a process between the teacher and the student: where you have to let them work on that question a bit and come to their own realisation about how that question may need to change and morph over time. Can you take us through some early parts of planning; I know that the Syllabus document, there are some really nice planning, supports and guidelines especially the new Syllabus.



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Margaret Vos:

I would say that from when you start at the beginning of Term 4 in Year 11 to the end of that term, I always set the *Proposal* as being due as a task at the end of year 11 usually roundabout Week 9 so it gives me a bit of time to mark and get it back to them to they then can use and I emphasise “study break” not holiday to actually work on it. So I think it actually takes a whole term to get them ready for that. I think what you do is, if the school has been teaching it beforehand collecting examples of past *Projects* is really important or if you are doing it for the first time if you can talk to other teachers in other schools can I look at some of your projects or ideas. That helps and then you just have a discussion as to what it means, it helps that they have done the *Historical Investigation* in Year 11 in either Ancient or Modern History, because it is a step up from that.

Carly Boreland:

So you keep connecting to those things and when you are doing the Year 11 work, you are saying History Extension and keep making those connections backwards and forwards.

Margaret Vos:

You will often find that some students come in with an idea of what the question is and what they think they would like to do then you just had help them mold it. Because sometimes they choose a question which is far too large to be able to be covered in the 2,500 words that are available to them. So you have to then have discussions. And I find that if you have group discussions where people are discussing their questions, that actually helps. And I think that first term is really important in terms of the teacher guiding their students in what they want to do. Because some of them will take the whole term to finally arrive at what their question is.

Carly Boreland:

And is that okay?

Margaret Vos:

Yes, that is okay.

Carly Boreland:

So the beginning of Term 1 you start to feel a bit of pressure to settle that down.

Margaret Vos:

So the worst thing that a teacher can do is to actually try and push students to narrow down their question too quickly. And, in fact, that is why the *Process Log* is so important. Because in the *Process Log* it has to include the major decisions that the student makes in terms of their *Project*.



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Carly Boreland:

Programming time to sit down with your students in those classes and do a bit of an interview, and a discussion, of where things are up to and you need to keep doing that pretty regularly to check, so it sounds like you have to say “this is what I want to do” and even if you don’t think that is going to completely work you have to allow them a little bit of space to find that out for themselves. And then check in with them again and no let those periods of time drag out too long.

Margaret Vos:

I actually got into the habit of, after teaching it for a while, at the beginning of the course, when I was setting up the project I would say “these are the dates you are going to have to give me your *Process Log*.” I would also say to them “they are the set dates” but there will be other times well I will come in and say ok next week I would like to have a look at how you are going in terms of *Process Log*. They need to know this is not a personal diary; that it is a working document and that their teacher is going to put some input into it.

Carly Boreland:

And taking some time, as I can imagine you don’t want to overwhelm students, so there is probably not a huge value in handing them a Band Six level essay and saying “ok here you go and you come up with a question that is going to be as good as this”. Maybe it is a slower process and maybe looking at a paragraph from a really good one to begin with and looking at what makes this paragraph so much about historiography before just looking at big wads of paper and documents which are a finished project when students are just starting out.

Margaret Vos:

As I said to you before, the History Extension Syllabus is a great document. Because it now on two specific pages sets out the project and it says –“this is what has to be within the *Proposal*. This is what has to be in the *Process Log*. This is what it means by the *annotated sources*. This is what the *Essay* means.” Teachers can actually look at it and say “Oh yes, this is what I have to look at.”

Carly Boreland:

We should remind teachers that these are not Syllabuses handed down to us upon high but they are our Syllabuses that are the product of our work and our contributions, professional judgments about what should be in there. So important for teachers not only to talk in the staffrooms about the importance of *extended response writing* and *essays* and those *sustained arguments* but also to remember to jump online and tell to *NESA* about it as well.



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Margaret Vos:

One of the things that I did find whilst I was teaching History Extension was that (and I know that teachers are often time poor) but if they get on the website and actually look at the *scope and sequences* of the new Syllabuses and the new suggestions about *assessment tasks*. Also, in terms of resources, I have said this before, but one of your most important resources is other teachers. And you need to be talking to teachers in your own faculty, because they too have strengths. Professional Associations like the *History Teachers Association (HTA)* are really important. In fact, in terms of resources, there is a book written by one of the *HTA* people, Ken Webb, which is called "*Extension History: The Historians*" which I find is a really good book pitched at the right level for students in terms of the History of History. There is another one and I think this is probably more a book for teachers, rather than students, by John Warren, which is called *History and the Historians*. I think it was written with the History Extension course in mind.

Carly Boreland:

I am a member of the *HTA* personally, but when you are in a school, schools can join on your behalf and you can have a faculty membership. So teachers shouldn't think that they have to be collecting memberships individually of all of these different things. But as a faculty you can choose at the beginning of the year which of these are we going to join. You were also mentioning there that teachers should talk in their faculties, but we often and you and me we have been lucky to have big faculties that we are part of then we can sometimes take for granted that we have got colleagues that we can sit around and talk with about all these things. For teachers who are in more isolated situations who are maybe implementing the suite of new Syllabuses including having just done Year 9 and Year 10, 7 & 8 and possibly Geography as well. There are some other ideas for them if they are more isolated, more ways that they can connect with colleagues.

Margaret Vos:

Probably one of the nicest things that I suppose about modern teaching is that the fact that we have the internet and you know if you type in *historical debates* you can come up with a whole lot of different debates. It is a challenge for somebody who is new to the subject and is isolated. I think that my suggestion is to take up every professional development opportunity that you have available and just push through. What you can do is just basically utilize the PDF, and the PDP process, and actually say one of my goals this year is to learn to teach History Extension. So once they have set it up as one of their goals then they go to their head teacher, or they can go to their supervisor, and actually say "this is one of my goals and there are these courses that are available and can I go to one of these courses?" That I think is really helpful.



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Carly Boreland:

Teachers that are in very isolated areas, to get in touch with other schools like them and that are different to them and to not be afraid to pick up the phone and make a phone call and subsequently with emails and things like that, but to share resources through those kinds of ways. I can imagine there would be some good opportunities in smaller schools where the sheer number makes it hard to get subjects like History Extension running to look at ways at looking at internet technology and combining and things like that so that we can get these great subjects that we love (and students in our big schools benefit from) to get them up and running, much smaller and regional and rural locations as well.

Margaret Vos:

You mentioned before the *HTA* and the importance of it and I think if I was in an isolated setting and I was teaching it for the first time. I would be saying to my Head Teacher “the school has to join *HTA* we need to have those sources.” Because not only are they a resource in terms of the documents you get from *HTA* they are always saying this lecture is on and this study day is available and I think that is really important that you have that professional development and professional support.

Carly Boreland:

Fantastic, it would be remiss of me not to point out also that Margaret has written an article for the Journal of Professional Learning which you can find on our website and that is about implementing the new Stage Six Syllabuses <https://cpl.asn.au/journal/semester-1-2017/a-guide-to-the-new-stage-6-history-syllabuses> so lots of resources for you to try online for you to try and Margaret it has been fabulous talking to you and feeling and hearing you passion for History Extension.

Margaret Vos:

Thank you very much.

Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Editor of the JPL. I've been speaking with Margaret Vos about teaching History Extension and if you'd like to find out more about our podcasts or to listen to further podcast, you can go to our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:

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Margaret Vos has 39 years' experience as a high school History teacher in NSW Public Schools. In that time, she has regularly taught Ancient History, Modern History and History Extension. Margaret co-wrote *Ancient Quest* (a junior History textbook) and has been involved in the professional development of teachers (including helping teachers introduce History Extension as a subject in their schools).