Middle years students are young people beginning to think more deeply about the world around them. They are learning how to be part of society, and curriculum in the middle years has the power to influence, for better or for worse, the students and society at large.

Mis- and disinformation, social media algorithms, the manosphere, political figures and legacy media have played a role in polarising our nation and impacting the rights of individuals both here and overseas. Middle years teachers and students must become factivists – a term coined by Bono - evoking reason, logic, and evidence to question information regardless of personal preference, values and bias.

The democratic process is underscored by the essential work of critical media literacy education and the ability to analyse, evaluate, create and consume media and digital content.

Evidence based activism (or factivism) demands that we become active users rather than passive consumers, defying liars, truth-twisters and opinion launderers with credible, just and principled information. This is a matter of fact.

The middle years classroom provides scope for educators to create learning experiences that connect to the world beyond the classroom, to innovate with programs that address students' attitudes, beliefs, understandings and values, to tackle cooperative, experiential and interactive learning opportunities and demonstrate their understanding beyond summative assessments. We must inspire action over apathy. There are dangerous consequences when we act without facts.

The truth matters. Democracy matters. Critical thinking matters. Equality matters. Facts matter.

MEMBER PRICES:

Concession	$240
Individual	$260
Organisational	$280
Live stream registration available	LS

A Matter of Fact:
Middle Years Conference

VATE **acmi**

Friday 9 May

@ ACMI, Fed Square

The power of conversation in the Age of Disinformation

If there is one thing humans struggle to do, it's sit with uncertainty. As the world around us becomes increasingly unstable, so do our thought patterns, algorithms and interpersonal relationships. The toxicity of the current media landscape and political climate means that in workplaces, classrooms, and our homes we are seeing a spike in divisive dialogue and inflammatory rhetoric. Our greatest challenges are working out how to navigate uncomfortable conversations, and remaining open to changing our minds while social media feeds fight to cement them. In the Age of Disinformation, exploring taboo subject matter and mastering the art of conversation is the only way back to each other. Conversation is the key to connection; we just need to know where to begin.

Hannah Ferguson is the co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Cheek Media Co. and a Forbes 30 under 30 honouree. She is also the co-host of news and pop culture podcast, Big Small Talk, and the bestselling author of two books, Bite Back (2023) and Taboo (2024). Hannah has a Bachelor of Laws (Honours) and a Master of Writing, Editing and Publishing from The University of Queensland. Her work has appeared in publications including The New York Times, The Guardian, Harper's Bazaar, InStyle, The Sydney Morning Herald, and Crikey.

Program overview

Time	Session			
8.30 – 9.00am	**Registration, tea and coffee**			
9.00 – 9.20am	**Welcome and introduction to ACMI exhibitions** Susan Bye, ACMI			
9.20 – 10.00am	**Exclusive exhibition visit** The Story of the Moving Image and Serwah Attafuah's commissioned work			
10.00 – 11.00am	**Keynote** LS **The power of conversation in the Age of Disinformation** Hannah Ferguson, CEO, Cheek Media Co.			
11.00 – 11.30am	**Morning tea**			
11.35am – 12.35pm	**1A** LS **Choose your own adventure: Interpreting the Victorian Curriculum 2.0** Hayley Harrison, Connect Literacy	**1B** LS **How to support students with literacy learning difficulties in the middle years classroom** Jennifer Sze, The University of Melbourne	**1C** **Was and Will Be** Nicole Smith and Nicholas Waxman, Drama Victoria	**1D** **Don't just run with it! Teaching students to be critical and independent thinkers** Ekaterina Xanthopoulos, St Michael's Grammar School
12.35 – 12.45pm	**Transition to next workshop**			
12.45 – 1.45pm	**2A** LS **In defence of the novel: The importance of sustained reading in an age of distraction** Kate Rees, Plenty Valley Christian College	**2B** LS **Bot or not: The tell-tale signs of AI writing** Andrew Duval, Writelike	**2C** **Ghostbusters: Why 'myths' matter** Helena Brain, Sacred Heart College, Geelong	**2D** **Building bridges: Strengthening Year 7–10 English foundations for success in VCE Crafting Texts** Melanie Aquilina, Catholic Regional College, North Keilor
1.45 – 2.30pm	**Lunch**			
2.30 – 3.30pm	**3A** LS **Critical media literacies for the digital age** Alex Bacalja, The University of Melbourne	**3B** LS **Why so serious? Avoiding despair in creative writing** Emma Jenkins, VATE Education Officer	**3C** **Syntactic success: Building student engagement with syntax in middle years** Dani Cantor and Bianca Prendergast, Balwyn High School	**3D** **Screenwriting for the middle years** Garry Westmore, ACMI

LS Livestream

The Story of the Moving Image and Serwah Attafuah's commissioned work

Presenting the new work from Serwah Attafuah, recipient of the Mordant Family Moving Image Commission for Young Australian Artists. The Commission supports artists under 35 to create contemporary moving image works that reference social, cultural, or political issues with energy and originality. Attafuah's multi-disciplinary practice includes digital painting, 3D animation, motion capture, digital animations, and virtual reality. Her proposed commission piece is composed of several digital motion artworks presented in custom-made frames and a wider experiential form, providing an Afrofuturistic commentary on the intersection of climate change, e-waste, the legacies of the slave trade, land rights, and the indomitable spirit of the indigenous peoples of West Africa.

KEYNOTE LS

The power of conversation in the Age of Disinformation

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Hannah Ferguson,
CEO, Cheek Media Co.

LS Livestream

1A Choose your own adventure: Interpreting the Victorian Curriculum 2.0
LS

Another year, another curriculum update. After a while it all just starts looking like words on a page. But the Victorian Curriculum is not a simple procedural text we need to follow; it's not even an informative text – it's an academic version of a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure narrative where somehow schools need to uncover not only the literal journey they choose to take their students on, but how they are going to choose to interpret each element along the way. In this workshop we will not only explore the key changes made in 2.0, but we will begin interpreting what some of these elements actually mean and look like in the classroom. We will experiment with different ways to work towards the achievement standards, and consider the way we can make this curriculum allow us to teach what we want and need to teach in the way that we want and need to teach it. (Note: references will be made to scope and sequences from 7-10, but the focus and main examples will be drawn from the Year 7 curriculum).

Hayley Harrison, Connect Literacy

1B How to support students with literacy learning difficulties in the middle years classroom
LS

This workshop will discuss evidence-based strategies for supporting students with learning difficulties in literacy. Firstly, I will emphasise the importance of early identification through assessments at the start of Year 7 to identify literacy challenges. This early intervention is crucial for providing timely support and targeted interventions. Secondly, we will explore the benefits of multisensory instruction, which incorporates visual aids, manipulatives, audio resources, and hands-on activities. This approach enhances comprehension and retention for students with learning difficulties by engaging multiple senses in the learning process. Thirdly, I will discuss explicit and systematic instruction, which involves breaking down literacy skills into smaller, manageable steps and providing explicit guidance. This approach ensures foundational skills are mastered before progressing to more complex ones, helping students with learning difficulties grasp concepts more effectively. I will emphasise the importance of differentiated instruction, which involves adapting teaching methods, materials, assessments to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities.

Jennifer Sze, The University of Melbourne

1C Was and Will Be

This interactive workshop is designed to help middle years English and Literature teachers build confidence in using First Nations texts to enhance student's cultural understanding and capacity across all three language modes. Using Was and Will Be, a collection of short First Nations scripts and vignettes written for young people, participants will explore how to use embodied practices to explore voice, issues and points of view from Victorian First Nations playwrights. Through hands-on activities, participants will learn practical strategies for engaging students with playscripts; understand protocols for embodying and exploring First Nations characters and stories in culturally sensitive ways; develop strategies to generate and develop ideas; explore ways to adapt the content to suit different curriculum aspects, classroom dynamics and student needs; and understand different language modes within Was and Will Be and explore the effect on structure and meaning. By the end of the workshop, teachers will feel equipped with a toolkit of ideas and approaches to embed First Nations content in their teaching in engaging and culturally sensitive ways.

Nicole Smith and Nicholas Waxman, Drama Victoria

1D Don't just run with it! Teaching students to be critical and independent thinkers

The recent shelving of fact-checking in social media such as Meta and X will only exacerbate the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As young people encounter endless information and opinions, it is important that they are continuously and explicitly taught skills on how to be critical readers and viewers, but also how to 'fact-check' independently. Designed for Year 9-10 students, activities include analysing online conversations, comments and podcasts, and concluding with a task where students present various opinions on set topics. A 'fact-check process' for each speaker/writer is also provided.

Ekaterina Xanthopoulos, St Michael's Grammar School

Register online at vate.org.au

VATE acmi

2A In defence of the novel: The importance of sustained reading in an age of distraction

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There is widespread concern about falling literacy rates amongst teenagers with many decrying their belief in the end of reading, blaming young people's addiction to screens. Alongside this, fewer novels are being studied in the English classroom, despite research's finding of the 'fiction effect'; that deep reading of fiction positively correlates with concentration skills, critical thinking and academic success. While noting the role of digital citizenship, this workshop will examine the vital importance of English teachers at the frontline in the war against digital distraction, arming participants with an understanding of recent research on reading and practical solutions for the classroom.

Kate Rees, Plenty Valley Christian College

2B Bot or not: The tell-tale signs of AI writing

LS

Recently, a popular filmmaking website challenged its readers to tell which of two scripts was written by a human, and which was written by an AI. Surprisingly (?), most of the audience got it wrong. In this workshop, we'll take the Bot or Not challenge and examine some of the language features (such as verbs, metaphors, and concrete details) that give AI its distinctive voice. We'll not only learn to identify them, but we'll explore how these features emerge from underlying data, algorithms, and training. You'll leave more confident in your ability to identify AI text (at least in some situations), although perhaps a little less confident in what it means to be human.

Andrew Duval, Writelike

2C Ghostbusters: Why 'myths' matter

Why do we love a good ghost story? Why are we so intrigued by the mysterious and the unsolved? This workshop is an introduction to the appeal of ghost stories and our psychological tendency to hone in on incomplete puzzles in an effort to have them solved – the 'zeigarnik effect'. This unit supports authentic engagement from students and grapples with the importance of myths and society's tendency to dismiss the superstitious due to our obsession with evidence. This workshop will take teachers into the layers of storytelling genres that rely on mystery, suspense and tension to engage their audience, and explore how these genres reflect the belief systems and values of the cultures from which they are born.

Helena Brain, Sacred Heart College, Geelong

LS Livestream

2D Building bridges: Strengthening Year 7–10 English foundations for success in VCE Crafting Texts

This workshop explores effective strategies to bridge the gap between Year 7-10 English and VCE pathways, with a focus on preparing students for the Crafting texts unit introduced in the current VCE English Study Design. By strengthening foundational skills in analysis, writing, and self-expression, students can better transition to the demands of Unit 3 where they craft original pieces. Emphasis will be placed on scaffolding creative and analytical tasks from Year 7, developing critical thinking and narrative skills essential for VCE. Additionally, practical examples and assessment strategies will be discussed, showcasing how teachers can build continuity in students' writing abilities, empowering them to enter senior studies with confidence and skill. This approach not only aligns curriculum objectives but also supports students in cultivating a deep, personal engagement with the art of writing.

Melanie Aquilina, Catholic Regional College, North Keilor

3A Critical media literacies for the digital age

LS

How do algorithms impact social media use? Are digital news media platforms biased? What role does advertising play in videogame streaming sites? There is growing community concern about how young people engage with digital media accessed via the internet, often in uncritical ways that leave them vulnerable to misinformation, harmful stereotypes, and corporate manipulation. Critical media literacy education provides frameworks for analysing media messages, exploring representation/ideology, and creating counter-narratives. Its benefits include nurturing critical thinking, cultural understanding, and civic engagement. This hands-on workshop will engage closely with three existing critical media literacy frameworks (the Technoscepticism Iceberg, the Critical Media Literacy framework, the Online Safety Education model). Each framework will be matched with a popular form of youth digital media practice (social media, digital news platforms, and videogame streaming sites). The aim is to develop knowledge and strategies that will form the basis for supporting middle years students to critically analyse digital media, platforms, and technologies and to produce digital texts that interrogate issues of power, representation, and access.

Alex Bacalja, The University of Melbourne

3B Why so serious? Avoiding despair in creative writing

LS

Over the last three years, I have read almost 1000 short stories for VATE's annual A Story in Miniature writing competition, and I have just one thing to ask: why is everyone so serious? In this workshop, I'll share some observations about the kinds of writing that students are submitting for A Story in Miniature and pull apart the key themes and general despair they're writing about. We'll debunk the conflation of 'literary merit' and 'dark themes' and the idea that heavy subject material is synonymous with greater value. We'll consider how we got here, what we can do about it, and talk about why its harder to write about joy and fun and maintain a sense of humour in creative writing when the world feels a bit uncertain..

Emma Jenkins, VATE Education Officer

3C Syntactic success: Building student engagement with syntax in middle years

How can we build student understanding of syntactic metalanguage and their ability to use it as a tool to develop and improve their written expression? How can we help middle years students see this learning as engaging? This workshop will explore exactly where in the Victorian Curriculum (Years 7 – 9) this is outlined as well as a range of learning activities that empower student learning and engagement.

Dani Cantor and Bianca Prendergast, Balwyn High School

3D Screenwriting for the middle years

Screenwriting is a rich storytelling medium. Screenplays don't just have their own particular formatting, they offer opportunities to play with rhythm and pace, perspective and tension, and more. This workshop shares approaches to using screenwriting in the middle years classroom to support creative writing, textual analysis and interpretative strategies.

Garry Westmore, ACMI