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The Awards Co-ordinator
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Please find enclosed an entry for category two (communicating research and innovation, teaching and learning) of the higher education media awards.

The article is titled "Big-picture showman puts history lessons up in lights" and was published in The Weekend Australian, 25 June 2011, on page 3 of the Inquirer section.

This was the first mainstream media account of the remarkable Big History project, which took seed at Macquarie University, where historian David Christian grew frustrated with the arbitrary divisions of the disciplines.

I believe the article succeeds in capturing the energising character of Christian and the intellectual sweep and promise of Big History. The article shows how much can change when an academic engages in deep self-reflection about the pursuit and use of knowledge. Christian totally reinvented his approach to teaching and research. And through Big History he and his collaborators are bringing together universities, schools and philanthropy in a project that confronts the common challenges facing humanity.

The article generated plenty of feedback and interest, in my opinion, because it tells an unusual education story, not yet another recitation of crisis and disengagement but an uplifting account of an opportunity for education to serve an emerging global citizenship.

Yours faithfully,



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Big-picture showman puts history lessons up in lights

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David Christian's methods turn the human chronicle into the grandest of narratives

WHEN he was young David Christian wanted to be a scientist or historian, maybe a performer on the stage. Now he is all three rolled into one: the impresario of Big History.

Christian is a history professor with a new way of telling the human story.

It begins 13.7 billion years ago with the big bang and turns into an evolutionary thriller once Homo sapiens gets in on the act.

Big History took shape quietly in Sydney's suburbs at Macquarie University, where Christian teaches, but it's about to go global thanks to the leisure habits of Microsoft's co-founder Bill Gates.

"He loves listening to lectures on his treadmill," Christian explains. One day in 2008, puffing away on the treadmill, Gates met Christian. It was a digital encounter, courtesy of a recorded lecture with the bold title Big History: The Big Bang, Life on Earth and the Rise of Humanity.

On his [thegatesnotes.com](#) blog, Gates turned evangelist. "My favourite course of all time is called Big History, taught by David Christian. Big History literally tells the story of the universe, from the very beginning to the complex societies we have today.

"It shows how everything is connected to everything else.

"It weaves together insights and evidence from so many disciplines into a single, understandable story -- insights from astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, history, economics and more. It made me wish that I could have taken Big History when I was young because it would have given me a way to think about all of the school work and reading that followed."

So Gates made a pilgrimage to see Christian, then at San Diego State University. It was a meeting of like minds, at the end of which Gates declared that Big History really ought to be taught in school.

"I'd thought that for years," Christian says.

"But I despaired of any possibility of doing it. You think of the difficulties: Do I go to the department of education and say, 'I've got this cute course?'"

But Gates, or more precisely his Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, can work around bureaucracy.

So the idea was that the Gates foundation would help Christian create a free Big History syllabus that would take root in enlightened high schools and spread.

There was one possible hitch. The night before he met Gates in a San Diego hotel, Christian had been made another attractive offer.

Macquarie University had asked him to come back as a full professor. Gates wasn't fussed. "In fact," he told Christian, "it's great, because now it's an Australia-America project."

In January, the first trials of the new syllabus will take place and they will include two Australian schools: Narara Valley High School on the NSW central coast, and the Gus Nossal High School in Melbourne.

There are bigger trials to come and many more schools, most in the US, but Christian believes Big History by its nature has a reach beyond the national boundaries that give conventional history its shape.

"My hope is that this syllabus will be the first history syllabus ever produced that is global in the way that modern science is global," he says.

"A Big History syllabus produced in the US, with very minor tweaking, ought to work in Beijing, in Moscow, in Johannesburg.

"If I teach Russian history in the conventional way, as soon as students see the name of my course, the first principle smuggled into their brain is that Russians are different. They see a message of humanity divided into potentially competing groups.

"If you do the Big History course, humans emerge probably about week five or six -- but they emerge as a species, they don't emerge as Australian humans, American humans or Russian humans. So your first encounter with humans is a unifying encounter."

It's no surprise that the idea of global citizenship appeals to Christian.

I meet him one glorious, unseasonably warm day at Balmoral Beach in Sydney. He comes across as one of life's enthusiasts; even the screeching cockatoos of his adopted home delight him. His accent suggests an Englishman in

