

Bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the classroom: Why and how

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ABSTRACT

This article offers strategies for including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island perspectives in the classroom. It begins by discussing why this is important and how it might be achieved. It concludes with identifying useful resources and some strategies to begin.

Why are we being asked to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the classroom?

We've all seen and heard the statistics about how far behind Indigenous Australians are in literacy and numeracy, school attendance, and participation. You may have taught students from Indigenous backgrounds who you've found difficult to engage with and relate to. Providing teacher cross-cultural training and embedding Indigenous perspectives in the classroom has been shown to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' attendance, engagement, participation and pathways into further education and work (Cahill & Collard, 2003).

Literacy targets for Aboriginal students in the Western Australian *Deadly ways to learn* project were exceeded by 50% through a program of teacher cross-cultural awareness training and the valuing of Aboriginal cultures and languages in the school (Cahill & Collard, 2003).

It makes a difference to Aboriginal students when they see themselves, their cultures, their histories and communities reflected on the walls and in the hallways of their school. Students learn best when they feel comfortable: 'learning only happens when student stress levels are low and when affect is positive' (Mullin & Oliver, 2010, p. 159).

Improving relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can only be achieved through reconciliation via education, and exposure to each others' perspectives. In most cases, everything we see around us in our classrooms and curriculum is the mainstream Anglo-Australian perspective. Indigenous students are negotiating that every day and are either finding ways to fit into that or are not fitting and are disengaging. There is a need to redress that imbalance and bring something of Indigenous cultures into our schools, which will enrich all students' understanding of Australia and our history.

How do we bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the classroom?

Some basics in cross-cultural understanding

Australian Aboriginal communities are extremely diverse. Current statistics hold that the population of 400,000 Aboriginal people (2% of Australia's population) is dispersed around urban cities (30%), regional towns with populations of less than 10,000 (42%) and remote areas (28%) (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 198). The impacts of dispossession from land and various Government policies vary among these populations. Aboriginal people in more

remote areas of the country practise cultural knowledge and language that more closely resembles pre-colonisation culture than those in areas that were heavily colonised, who practise a distinct urban identity which should be acknowledged as part of a culture in its own right (Taylor, 2003). Kriol and Pidgin language forms are more common in areas where Aboriginal people of many different language groups have been thrown together during displacement and dispossession of land (Sharifian, 2006).

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have quite a different historical experience of colonisation and dispossession from mainlanders (Taylor, 2003). Urban and regional Aboriginal people tend to use Aboriginal English more than traditional languages (which are often all but lost in heavily colonised areas). Aboriginal English is different in different regions because some words are always drawn from the traditional language of the region (Bevan & Shillinglaw, 2010). Aboriginal cultures, languages and world views are also diversified by the location of the community, whether desert, inland plains, rivers, lakes, mountains or coastal.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity has nothing to do with appearance. One is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander if he/she meets the following three criteria:

- descended from Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander people;
- voluntarily identify as being Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander;
- accepted as such by the local Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander community of residence (and/or the communities their family are from).

For example, my father is an Aboriginal man from Dubbo and our family is from the Wiradjuri nation. I identify as Aboriginal and I am accepted by the Aboriginal community in both Canberra (where I live and work) and Dubbo where most of my family still reside.

In urban contexts it is important that teachers do not shy away from including Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom just because they think that there are no ‘real Aboriginal’ students in their classes. Sharifian, Rochecouste and Malcolm (2004) assert that communication difficulties between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal teachers occur just as frequently in metropolitan contexts where the Aboriginal students appear to be using Standard Australian English and operating in a ‘mainstream Australian’ culture. ‘Cultural schemas’ – worldviews influencing the way experiences are conceptualised – are also at play (Sharifian et al., 2004, p. 203). The ‘schemas’ of many Aboriginal students (regardless of ‘how much’ they are Aboriginal, how ‘traditional’ they are, or what they look like) are often different from many other Australians’. It is therefore important to acknowledge this and to allow space for students to express their identity, whether it be urbanised or traditional.

In the ACT context, we have Aboriginal people from all over the country. People are therefore from different language groups; some are from remote communities where some traditional language and culture are still practised and taught; some are from regional communities where a modern, more urbanised Aboriginal culture and use of Aboriginal English are prevalent (e.g., living on ‘missions’ or Aboriginal Housing Commission Homes grouped in areas that are usually segregated from the Anglo population and reminiscent of the missions on which Aboriginal people were placed in the early years of colonisation). Some are from other cities and have an urban, contemporary identity. Most Aboriginal people will identify themselves by where they’re from and where their family is from; however, many of our students don’t really have this understanding yet – it’s something they learn more about as they grow up and spend time with Indigenous family members and elders.

Local Indigenous culture should be tapped into where appropriate (it’s important for all of us to understand the local knowledge about the place we live in), but we must acknowledge that it may not be representative of the Aboriginal students in the school, whose families

may have moved from other places. It is therefore also conceivable to include material in your lessons about Aboriginal people from parts of the country other than where you are teaching. It is best practice to identify where your material is coming from (e.g., 'This is a creation story told by the Yolngu people of East Arnhem Land.'). Having the Tindale map of Aboriginal language groups (see <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/map.html>) introduces a great resource to the classroom, as you can point to the area of Australia and the Aboriginal nation to which you are referring.

Tokenism

I encourage teachers to get rid of the word *tokenism* from their vocabulary. At its best, it dismisses an act or gesture before one even has a chance to analyse its value (or lack thereof). At its worst, the word allows many thousands of teachers to continue to teach the Anglo-Australian content with which they are most comfortable and continue to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives: 'Oh, I'd like to incorporate Indigenous perspectives but I'm scared of doing it in a *tokenistic* way [so I just don't do it].'

Is the painted boomerang tokenism? Well, that depends. Did the students engage with Aboriginal people while painting the boomerang? Did they learn about the boomerang, its uses, and the many different kinds of boomerangs traditionally used? Did they learn that the returning boomerang, an Australian icon, was traditionally actually a child's toy, and differently-shaped boomerangs were created as hunting tools? Did they learn how boomerangs are made, incorporating an appreciation of early use of 'physics', and what some of the various Aboriginal names for the objects are?

In short, was the learning experience a rich one that advanced the students' intercultural knowledge/understanding in some way? More importantly, did the experience allow the students (and teachers) an opportunity to meet and talk with Aboriginal people? And finally, is the boomerang-painting activity just one of many aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures explored across the key learning areas throughout the school in each year level? If the answer to these questions is 'yes,' then I would venture to suggest the painted boomerang is not necessarily 'tokenism.' As with so many aspects of the curriculum, teaching Indigenous perspectives is not so much about 'what' you teach as about the 'how' and the 'when' you teach; it's about the cumulative knowledge and experiences an education system builds up for its students over their educational lives.

Alignment with quality teaching

Two teachers at Broome Secondary School describe a learning sequence about narrative that begins by asking Aboriginal students what 'story' means to them. The students came up with answers like 'family,' 'law,' 'truth,' 'country,' 'painting, sculpture,' 'elders,' 'links to other stories,' and 'told orally' (Bevan & Shillinglaw, 2010, p. 12). They then looked at the non-Aboriginal understanding of story: 'fiction,' 'for entertainment,' 'written in books,' 'lots of details, descriptions,' and 'anybody can create' (p. 12). In Bevan and Shillinglaw's teaching, the Aboriginal students are valued for what they bring to the classroom but they are also made aware of the difference between Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE) and learn about which 'cultural schema' should be used in which context (Bevan & Shillinglaw 2010, p. 14). The students learn the art of 'code-switching,' being able to operate in two cultures and dialects.

Bevan and Shillinglaw's (2010) approach incorporates many aspects of quality teaching. Table 1 shows how the approach fits with the Quality Teaching Model used in New South Wales (see NSW Department of Education and Training, 2006):

Table 1. Characteristics of Bevan & Shillinglaw's (2010) approach aligned with the NSW Quality Teaching Model

Problematic Knowledge	Meta-language	Social support	Background knowledge and cultural knowledge	Inclusivity	Narrative
Questioning the notion of what a story is: there's no one fixed view	Features of texts e.g., dialogue tags in SAE stories	Valuing all by encouraging expression of own culture (Indigenous, Anglo, other ...)	Valuing the Indigenous ways of storytelling as highly as the Anglo ways	Showing that Indigenous cultures belong in the classroom	Bringing in examples of storytelling from different cultures

But how could a strategy like this be applied in an urban context? Given the diversity of Aboriginal populations and the fact that in a metropolitan setting the Aboriginal students are in the minority and are often somewhat removed from traditional culture, Bevan and Shillinglaw's (2010) ideas may need some adaptation. For example, Table 2 could be presented as a topic for discussion, and perhaps students from other non-Anglo backgrounds could add details about how a narrative is understood in their culture. An approach like this would create a more inclusive cultural space in the classroom and allow students to see 'Australian mainstream' culture as just one culture among the many that operate in Australia.

Table 2. Considerations for discussion, based on Bevan and Shillingham's (2010) work

Aboriginal students' notion of a story (from Broome)	'Standard Australian' notion of a story (as tested in NAPLAN and presented in the national curriculum)	Other cultures (design with your class), e.g., Maori
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family • law • truth • country • painting • sculpture • elders • links to other stories • told orally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fiction • for entertainment • written in books • lots of details, descriptions • dialogue tags • anybody can create 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be fiction or truth • doesn't always have a resolution and coda • relies on context to indicate who's speaking (rather than dialogue tags)

Places to find resources

This list should provide useful places to find resources to assist with bringing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the classroom:

- I place lesson plans and reviews of texts on my blog (see Shipp, 2013). In particular, there is a substantial list of texts for the English classroom in my article 'Aboriginal perspectives in the English classroom: Finding texts to teach,' posted on 8 October 2012.
- AustLit (n.d.) has a section on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and provides catalogued lists of authors and titles from different states. Any member of the National Library of Australia (and many universities and educational institutions) can subscribe to this resource. It also includes a timeline of important events in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, as these are often the subject of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature.

- Anita Heiss, a Wiradjuri woman from central New South Wales, has co-edited several important anthologies of Aboriginal literature (Heiss & Minter, 2008a; see also *Macquarie pen anthology of Aboriginal literature*, Heiss & Minter, 2008b).
- In addition, there are several large publishers of Indigenous works:
 - ~ Magabala books: www.magabala.com
 - ~ Fremantle Press: www.fremantlepress.com
 - ~ IAD Press: www.iadpress.com
 - ~ Indij Readers: www.indijreaders.com.au
 - ~ Black Ink Press: www.blackinkpress.com.au
 - ~ Aboriginal Studies Press: www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/welcome.html
- Another publisher, Laguna Bay Publishing, has teamed up with Oxford University Press to publish the very popular *Yarning Strong* series. It includes 12 novels and four graphic novels, four poetry/play/art anthologies as well as teaching notes/CD-Rom. All texts are by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander writers who explore contemporary Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity and experiences. The series is suitable for upper primary/lower secondary students.
- Useful websites include:
 - ~ Dare to Lead: <http://www.daretolead.edu.au/>, particularly http://www.daretolead.edu.au/DTL08_Resources_Main
 - ~ Laguna Bay Publishing: www.lagunabaypublishing.com
 - ~ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS): <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/>, including online exhibitions (<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/exhibitions.html>) and *The little red yellow black* website (<http://lryb.aiatsis.gov.au>).

Final words of advice

- Stop making excuses such as ‘*I can’t teach Aboriginal perspectives because I don’t understand anything about Aboriginal culture. I’ve never met an Aboriginal person.*’ We’re teachers; we’re lifelong learners and active citizens, and we know how to conduct research.
 - ~ Go out there and learn about your country, its history and its peoples;
 - ~ Engage with Aboriginal people, organisations and websites;
 - ~ Attend Indigenous cultural events (film screenings, theatre plays, dance performances, poetry readings, band performances, art exhibitions);
 - ~ Read the *Koori Mail* or the *National Indigenous Times*.
- If you went to live and work in Japan, would you sit at home all weekend because you were scared that you didn’t know any Japanese people and you knew nothing about their history or culture? Or would you take a deep breath and go out into the community and get to know people, thereby gradually learning the culture? Yes, it can be confronting, but it also gets easier the more immersed you become. True reconciliation will never happen until we break down that invisible barrier between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Australians.
- Talk to your school’s Aboriginal liaison officer or any other Aboriginal staff members around, to the parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to the local Aboriginal Land Council, to the local university’s Aboriginal student support centre. These can be ways in to contacts in your local community. But remember that you will have to be persistent. Sometimes several phone calls and emails are necessary before you get a response, but the best way to get a response

is through face to face interaction, which is why you do need to engage with the community and attend Indigenous cultural events. That's where you'll meet Aboriginal people who can come in to the school and help, talk to teachers, run workshops with students, or be an artist-in-residence or writer-in-residence.

- The fear of giving students misinformation could apply to any topic we teach. Be wary of the sources you use and speak to local Aboriginal people/organisations if you are unsure. Make sure you state where you got information from when you provide it to students in class (i.e., reference your sources).
- The risk of unwittingly uncovering some secret or sacred content is minimal. Aboriginal cultures have had systems in place to keep certain content secret for over 60,000 years; it's highly unlikely you'll get anywhere near such information.

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