

Approaching Indigenous histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum

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English might be the most widely spoken language in New South Wales today, but the state has connections to at least 110 Aboriginal languages according to the Australian Indigenous Languages Database. This is just one of many reasons that make contemplating teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives daunting for many educators, particularly in a primary school setting. While most teachers act with positive intent, socio-political requirements, a lack of personal knowledge, difficulty finding reliable information and an already crowded curriculum often get in the way of confident teaching about Australia's Indigenous peoples. However, the prominent presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum means that confident or not, all schools must find effective ways to ensure that students understand the significance of ATSI peoples to our past, present and future.

As with many challenging tasks, one of the greatest difficulties when approaching ATSI perspectives is where to start. The fact that the Australian Curriculum has termed the cross-curriculum priority "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures" in the plural is no accident. The Commonwealth Government's Australian Indigenous cultural heritage website notes that when Europeans arrived, there were around 600 different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clans. We have certainly moved on from the erroneous belief that the original inhabitants were a homogeneous group that could be characterised – or more accurately, stereotyped – by particular practices and traditions, on which pre-white settlement history lessons were customarily based. How, then, do we know what to include in our teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

At a recent Catholic Education Office professional development course exploring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures it was suggested that schools start locally and this seems like sound advice. Many of the pitfalls of generalisation can be avoided

by investigating the links between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and your local area, with the added advantage of making it far more relevant and meaningful to students. Websites such as Yarra Healing, which provides comprehensive information about Aboriginal connections with Melbourne and its surrounds, provide a good launch pad from which resources and contacts can be garnered.

Of course, many older resources such as textbooks give a very limited and one-sided view of ATSI histories. *A Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies* (Curriculum Corporation, 1995) states "When developing school-based resources or selecting texts or materials, teachers should carefully evaluate their educational value for embedding Indigenous perspectives. In particular, it is essential that the materials selected are sensitive and adequate in their treatment of Aboriginal aspects and Torres Strait Islander aspects of the subject matter." The Guide identifies five key criteria for evaluating resources: authenticity; balanced nature of the presentation; Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation; accuracy and support, and exclusion of content of a secret or sacred nature. It also gives specific examples of what to be alert for such as whether acknowledgements include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders amongst the names of those involved in creating the resource and whether there are over-generalised statements such as, "Aborigines were nomadic", that do not apply to all clans.

Walking the tightrope between political correctness and sound judgement can be particularly intimidating. Consulting authoritative sources of information is worthwhile if there is any doubt about how to present information. For example, NSW Health has put out a guide to help negotiate the, sometimes problematic, area of terminology (and yes, the document's references do make mention of Indigenous organisations such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission). It lays out in plain English the accepted usage of words such as "clan", "elder"

and "mob" as well as explaining potential linguistic hazards. While it is a useful handbook, it is almost disappointing to see the inclusion of admonitions such as, "Never abbreviate the term 'Aboriginal' as this is offensive," advice which one might have reasonably assumed would be unnecessary in the presence of common sense.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the cross-curriculum priorities as a whole for teachers is how to incorporate them in a way that is not tacked on or tokenistic. The Australian Curriculum is an obvious first stop for guidance on achieving this. Using the filter function on the website, it is relatively simple to identify appropriate links between the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and the discipline-based curriculum. The three broad organising ideas into which the priority is divided – Country/





place, Culture and People – provide a framework from which pedagogy and content can be developed. Let’s look at these in more detail.

“Country/place” acknowledges the connection of Indigenous peoples to the land and takes in concepts including belief systems and stewardship of the earth. It is an idea that can easily be incorporated in history-based inquiry learning, especially for younger students, as it links with constructs of home and family that are the building blocks of historical understanding and knowledge in the curriculum. It also ties in with the science syllabus, which focuses at various points on caring for living things and understanding impact on the environment.

“Culture” encompasses exploring different perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ long history in Australia, as well as the Language Groups and lifestyles. Most primary

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schools have a strong emphasis on social skills including appreciation of differences and respect which provides an appropriate context to investigate organising ideas such as, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ ways of life are uniquely expressed through ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.” Culture is also explicitly connected to the subject area of English through, for example, Foundation Year requirements of an understanding of English as one of many languages, and an emphasis on recognising the influence of other languages on English in Year 4.

The organising idea of “People” fosters an appreciation of the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to Australia and the world, recognising the role of families and kinship in the diverse clans and groups. It is most evident in the learning area of history but is also embedded in subject areas such as English through examining features and forms of literature, and in mathematics as students learn how “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies have sophisticated applications of mathematical concepts.”

The Australian Curriculum cross-curriculum priorities are intended to be dynamic, changing with the evolving needs of our students in a national context.

It would be nice to think that in the future, we will not need to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders histories and cultures as an



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explicit priority because it is embedded in our teaching and inherent in our students' understanding of Australia's past and present.

Accomplishing this depends largely upon the ability of educators to put aside politics and find genuine opportunities to meaningfully engage students in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

Further reading

Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority *The Australian Curriculum* Retrieved 22nd September 2012 from: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-histories-and-cultures>

Australian Government Australian Indigenous cultural heritage website Accessed 22nd September from: <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-cultural-heritage>

Australian Indigenous Languages Database website Accessed 21st September 2012 from: <http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/disclaimer.php>

NSW Health (2004) *Communicating positively: A guide to appropriate Aboriginal terminology* Retrieved 22nd September 2012 from: http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2004/pdf/aboriginal_terms.pdf

Yarra Healing *Towards Reconciliation with Indigenous Australians* Accessed 22nd September 2012 from: <http://www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au>

Curriculum Corporation (1995) *A Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies* Retrieved 22nd September 2012 from: http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/downloads/approach/indigenous_g008_0712.pdf **ET**

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