

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols Guide – for Teachers



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This Protocols Guide is essential reading for teachers embarking on units of study involving First Nations perspectives, histories, content, stories, and peoples. It is highly recommended teachers read this Guide in full before a first lesson.

Before you start:

- Please give 10-12 minutes time to read this Guide. It will help prepare educators to establish a culturally safe and informed learning environment for all students.

This is an abridged version of a comprehensive Guide currently being developed. This longer version will be published in 2022.

SBS is grateful to Aunty Norma Ingram for her sharing of her expertise and knowledges as a consultant on this Protocols project.

1. About This Resource

This is an abridged version of a comprehensive Guide currently being prepared for publication.

This Guide will help teachers establish a safe learning environment, so that all teachers, students, and school community members engage respectfully with First Nations peoples and perspectives.

Any educator embarking on the study of First Nations perspectives, texts, stories, and histories can use this Protocols Guide before the very first lesson.

Introduction

For so long, First Nations histories, peoples and cultures have been positioned within and viewed through a deficit lens. It is critical to acknowledge the depth and power of First Nations cultures, histories and peoples and contribute to redressing the deficit narrative prevalent in Australia's education and social systems.

Additionally, it is important to have a fundamental understanding of 'equity' in this context and to see how an equity lens stands in stark contrast to a deficit lens. Due to the ongoing impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, land and waterways, equitable measures need to be implemented across those systems that were historically designed to exclude First Nations peoples to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience the same access and benefits as other Australians.

At various points, non-Indigenous Australians will need to examine their own identity when they crossover with First Nations content and experiences. Along this process of learning and examining, it is likely you will feel uncomfortable; this Guide will hold your hand through this process as best it can. There will also be areas of work, research, and reflection that you as the educator will need to do of your own volition.

Grab my hand and come along with me. - Aunty Norma
Ingram, 2021

Terminology

The terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, Indigenous and Blak are used respectfully and interchangeably throughout this Guide when referring to First Nations peoples of Australia. These terms are used to respectfully encompass the diversity of cultures, identities, and preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

2. Meet the Authors

Shiralee Lawson

Shiralee is a Wonnarua and Kunja woman currently living, working and raising a family on Dharawal Land. Her passion for education drives her work to dismantle the systems and structures that lock Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities out.



Sarah Harvey, ABC Illawarra

Shiralee works as a Senior Consultant for Indigenous owned and operated consultancy, [Two Point Co.](#)

She has previously worked in tertiary and secondary education, and community roles focused on empowering mob. She holds a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Indigenous Studies and Sociology with Distinction. She has published two articles on the Guardian Australia as part of IndigenousX and hosted the IndigenousX Twitter account.

Shiralee volunteers as the co-chair of Lifeline South Coast's RAP Working Group.

In her spare time she co-led the establishment of an active Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community group within her daughter's school. Key roles of this group include driving conversations and real change to ensure respectful truth-telling about the rich and diverse cultures and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

She hopes this protocols guide will provide future generations with a culturally safe education that tells the truth about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Jarin Baigent - Jarin Street / Trading Blak

Jarin is a Wiradjuri woman, CEO and founding member of Indigenous business collective [Trading Blak](#) and owner of activewear brand [Jarin Street](#). Trading Blak was founded in response to the disempowering and harmful impacts of misrepresentation with the Aboriginal business landscape and is dedicated to supporting the growth of the Indigenous business sector in mainstream national and international retail. Jarin also founded activewear brand Jarin Street which aims to create beautiful and functional activewear and yoga mats for all, while highlighting the artists and their designs.



Jarin Baigent
Image supplied

Jarin has recently launched the first ever Aboriginal owned fashion retail store in a Westfield centre, Jarin Street x Trading Blak.

With a previous 13-year career as a Police officer, Jarin has a unique insight into the systemic issues Aboriginal communities face within the criminal justice system, and is driven to make change.

Jarin a mum of three, is deeply dedicated to empowering young people and amplifying the voices of Indigenous Youth.

3. Creating a safe & appropriate education space

Your Role: Educator and Ally

Teaching First Nations perspectives, content and stories is an opportunity to demonstrate allyship with First Nations peoples.

What does ‘ally’ mean within the education space and for your role as an educator of young people?

Non-Indigenous allies in education are support people rather than self-appointed experts. When First Nations peoples are not in the room, allies should have a base level of understanding to speak on topics raised for study and discussion. It is an act of allyship to state I am not an expert and make clear the parameters of your expertise on First Nations matters if you are not a First Nations person.

By not holding space for the appropriate voice, you are being the opposite of an ally. - Jarin Baigent, 2021

All allies are on a learning journey; wherever you are on your journey, an ally’s voice is always a supporting voice, not a replacement for First Nations expertise, knowledges or lived experience – an act of allyship is never using your voice to cancel out an Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander person’s voice. It shows strength as an ally to avoid claiming knowledge learnt through study, a friendship or relationship as comparable to the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Being an ally of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is valuable in building solidarity. The journey of becoming an ally, and growing as an ally, means you will need to draw on the knowledges of just 3% of the population; this carries enormous cultural load for First Nations peoples – especially if non-Indigenous people consistently demand justification, explanation, and facilitation for their own needs.

Guest Roles: Lived Experience

Nothing supersedes the lived experience of an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person; no voice in the classroom should speak louder than a First Nations voice in relation to First Nations content. In fact, championing the voices of First Nations peoples enhances the learning process and experience.

How do you connect with community members with the appropriate cultural authority?

- Connect with the parents or carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within your school.
- Engage with the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community through conversations with key groups and organisations, for example the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group ([AECG](#)), Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Medical Services, etc..
- Identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that are local to the Country that you educate on, for example Elders.
- The historical treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia has led to the disconnection and displacement of many people from their mob and Country. There are a lot of people who are learning about their history later in life. It is important that whilst acknowledging the significance of discovering and reconnecting with family, Country and mob, this does not equate to the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from birth; there is a huge discrepancy between living Blak and learning Blak. This is something for allies to be aware of when engaging people for their expertise but remember, that this is a matter for First Nations peoples and communities alone to manage.

4. Roles in a First Nations education space

Foundation Principles

The teaching and learning of First Nations curricula should be led by fundamental foundation principles designed to guide teachers and influence their engagement from the outset:

1. **Respect**

Approaching the content and people with deep consideration and an openness to building understanding through meaningful engagements.

2. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination**

The rights of First Nations peoples to exert power and autonomy over decision making as it pertains to their social, cultural and economic needs.

3. **Recognition and attribution**

Applying the appropriate acknowledgement for works, art, knowledges and perspectives supplied by First Nations peoples and ensuring that the cultural and intellectual property remains with those persons.

4. **Sacred and customary practice**

Considering whether that which is sacred and customary and how it is used, represented and spoken about. Have you considered or asked whether or not is it disrespectful for you to speak about this practice? Have you engaged with the appropriate cultural knowledge holders and received the appropriate permissions?

5. **Humility and cultural accountability**

Acknowledging and accepting that you are going to be on a learning journey,

constantly seeking to learn more, and your study cannot replace actual lived experience.

Cultural Safety

This is a brief and by no means comprehensive section about cultural safety. Further detail on this important topic will be in the full-length version of this Guide.

The cultural safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community members that will intersect within this learning environment is a paramount consideration for teachers. The learning environment should be curated so that First Nations students can feel emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually safe to engage in that space, and that they will not have their identity challenged or examined. This consideration extends to the impact that teaching First Nations content and perspectives will have on teachers, students, families, communities and within the broader context of the education system.

The Teacher's Commitment

Approaching the teaching and learning of First Nations curricula requires a commitment to understanding and establishing best practice. This will necessitate a process of examination through which the teacher will challenge the biases and perspectives through which they interpret First Nations content. Teachers will need to commit to a place-based approach to interpreting and embedding First Nations curricula and building genuine and sustained partnerships with First Nations peoples and communities.

- Teachers will be required to **make sure ALL students are safe** through the teaching and learning of First Nations content. This requires an acknowledgement of potential traumas associated with the content and the lived experiences of students and their families and communities.
- Teachers will need to ensure that their class is equipped to engage with the learning process and class discussions in **a respectful and inclusive manner**. It is strongly suggested that teachers first test the readiness of the class and undertake any necessary preparatory lessons prior to engaging with First Nations content.
- **Teachers should practice self-awareness** and actively manage their position within the teaching and learning of First Nations content, ensuring that teachers **do not centre themselves in the content**. Teachers should give prevalence to First Nations knowledges and perspectives and remove the shadow cast from any personal views or experiences.
- Teachers should **give deep consideration as to how First Nations students are engaged in the learning** of First Nations content. The teacher needs to walk with the students and ensure that the burden of teaching does not rest with the First Nations students. Undue emphasis should not be placed on the First Nations students to share with the class, and their willingness to participate should be managed with care and consideration as to their wishes,

- Teachers should have clarity as to **the appropriate course of action should a student or teacher become distressed** through the teaching and learning of First Nations content. Teachers should ensure that the support services accessible are culturally appropriate; consider the cultural competence of the school counsellor or ensure that you have engaged an Aboriginal Education specialist.

5. Using First Nations content in your classroom

Using Place-based First Nations content

Placed-based Guidelines for engaging with and teaching First Nations curricula, embedding, or using First Nations knowledges, perspectives and cultures in curricula.

Definition of place-based in this context:

Developing plans, relationships and resources specifically tailored to the cultures, knowledges and experiences of your local Traditional Custodians; there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ website, book or methodology of teaching First Nations perspectives. Your school’s approach must be specific to your location.

There is no substitute for building meaningful relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, organisations and Elders. Every community is different – you will need to tailor your approach, relationships and lesson planning accordingly. Speak to your school community first – your local or regional AECG as a first point of contact. According to co-author of this Protocols Guide, Shiralee Lawson;

It is important for ALL students to have access to these stories and knowledges as part of the truth-telling journey that ‘Australia’ needs to take. - Shiralee Lawson, 2021.

Using this Protocols Guide

How long will this Protocols work take?

Allocate at least two lessons to the processes outlined in this guide (in addition to teaching the text/topic). In addition, allocate at least two lessons to reflection at the end of the unit of work.

There should also be a lesson (ideally a double lesson or longer block of time) reserved for guest speaker/s during the unit.

Including Reflection work

For students:

Depending on the resource or body of work, it might be appropriate to ask the students to write two or three paragraphs in a journal style after a particular lesson to reflect. Did you learn about something new today? How did you feel about [specific content reference]? Do you have any questions that weren't answered?

For teachers:

Teachers can undertake a similar exercise where they answer some questions about the content that they have consumed before delivering it to their students and then their observations of the class and how they felt after they've executed the lesson/s.

6. Further Reading

- The [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)
- NITV online [article](#): How to Be a Good Indigenous Ally.
- Teela Reid's [article](#) on truth-telling in schools

7. Copyright

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