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# How teachers can use the Learning from Country Framework to build an Aboriginal curriculum narrative for students

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*Cathie Burgess and Katrina Thorpe share the processes and results of a five-year teaching and research project to support all teachers to develop an Aboriginal curriculum narrative using a framework based on building relationships and listening to Aboriginal people and Country. . .*

As Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors, we are two members of a team of four researchers who undertook a five-year teaching and research project we called Learning from Country in the City (LFC) (Burgess, et al., 2022a). This project emerged from an ongoing commitment to Aboriginal<sup>[1]</sup> education and Aboriginal Studies along with our personal and professional engagement in local Aboriginal community contexts. The project was undertaken with preservice teachers, early-career teachers, and Aboriginal community-based educators<sup>[2]</sup> from 2018-2022 at the University of Sydney, situated on Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation (now referred to as Sydney). We recognise the many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators before us who have worked tirelessly to ensure that Aboriginal voices are foregrounded, and knowledges are embedded in Australia education systems (Holt, 2021). We continue to support these goals by working with preservice teachers to develop their capability to meaningful engage with local Aboriginal communities and move beyond surface-level and tokenistic approaches to the inclusion of Aboriginal curriculum content and pedagogies in their classrooms.



In our teaching, Learning from Country involves immersive learning experiences outside the classroom on Country. Here, preservice teachers walk with Aboriginal community-based educators while listening to, learning from, and observing the layered stories of local Country.

In this article we share our insights to the significance of connecting preservice teachers, teachers, and students to Country-centred learning. A Learning from Country Framework is used to represent the key processes of engagement and learning, which shifts the focus of Aboriginal curriculum planning and implementation *from thinking about* what “Aboriginal content” we might “add” to the curriculum (although this can be one outcome of LFC) to foregrounding the ethical practices and processes that you can undertake to open up opportunities for building connections to local Country and Aboriginal people.

Firstly though, we must acknowledge that learning from/on/with Country is not new and, indeed, has been practised in Australia for thousands of years. The expanding literature that centres Country and Aboriginal knowledges in curriculum is a testament to the continuity, resilience and significance of these pedagogical practices for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers in Australia now and in the future (e.g., Burgess et al., 2022a, 2022b; Country et al, 2020; Dolan et al, 2020; Harrison, 2013; Lowe et al. 2021; McKnight, 2016; Spillman et al., 2023; Thorpe, et al., 2021).

## What does the research in Aboriginal education tell us?

In 2019, 13 academics, from across ten universities, conducted ten systematic reviews analysing over 13,000 research studies reported on from 2006 to 2017 (Guenther et al., 2019). These reviews covered key Indigenous Education topics in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, professional learning, racism, literacy, numeracy, language and culture, community engagement, and remote education. Key findings across the reviews found that successful schools did the following:

- engage honestly and respectfully with parents and community.
- demonstrate deep understanding of the local socio-cultural and political context resulting from colonisation.
- focus on holistic, wrap – around and culturally responsive strategies to support student, family, and community needs.
- articulate high expectations of students, teachers, and leaders.
- ensure curriculum, pedagogy and assessment reflects students’ cultural backgrounds and interests, and is clearly scaffolded and supported.
- implement culture and language programs to deepen students’ sense of belonging to build confident, engaged learners.

## Acknowledging yet overcoming the challenges of doing this work



Many educators are challenged by working in this area for many reasons (Captain & Burgess, 2022). Significantly, teachers themselves have often had little or no education on Aboriginal Australia and feel vulnerable and unprepared. Not wishing to offend Aboriginal students and their families (Rose, 2015), and overwhelmed by a constantly growing and changing curriculum, teachers often avoid this area unless it is mandatory. Compounding this inertia, the Aboriginal content in the Australian Curriculum is limited and while the NSW curriculum improves on this, there is still no coherent, scoped and sequenced Aboriginal curriculum narrative across the Key Learning Areas and Stages, as there is in 'mainstream' subjects. We suggest an Aboriginal curriculum narrative is "a combination and construction of the stories that teachers know (and have probably experienced) about a particular subject or content area that provides knowledge, understandings, and therefore guidance about how and what to teach" (Burgess et al., 2022b, p. 158). This can result in teachers wondering how to start to build this narrative rather than add piecemeal and decontextualised Aboriginal content into the curriculum.

Unfortunately, the impact of racism still permeates education, and some teachers are influenced by the overgeneralisations, stereotypes and deficit discourses that position Aboriginal students and their families as the problem and, through a perceived inability to assimilate, as responsible for their lack of success (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014). Fortunately, many teachers are beginning to listen to Aboriginal voices, embrace truth telling and implement inclusive classrooms where controversial and uncomfortable knowledges can be discussed respectfully.

## Educational policies supporting Learning from Country

Importantly, Aboriginal curriculum is necessary for ALL students; it has not been constructed with only Aboriginal students in mind. In NSW, the Department of Education Aboriginal Education Policy has been mandatory since 1987. Rather than summarising the current policy, we look back to the 1996 version for its clear and simple articulation of three key tenets that underpin all versions of the policy:

1. "Aboriginal students: Curriculum, teaching and assessment programs will be challenging and culturally appropriate. Schools will have a supportive learning environment.
2. Aboriginal communities: Aboriginal communities and the Department of School Education will become partners in the whole educational process.
3. All staff – all students – all schools: All Department of School Education staff and students will have knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal Australia".

This and subsequent Aboriginal education policies are also reflected in two of the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leadership (AITSL), Australian Professional Standards for Teachers:

1.4.2 Design and implement effective teaching strategies that are responsive to the local community and cultural setting, linguistic background, and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

2.4.2 Provide opportunities for students to develop understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages.

While past and present Aboriginal education policies provide teachers with the policy parameters to work within, teachers are yet to “heed the call” to enact the Aboriginal education imperatives (White et al., 2022) that have been articulated over many decades.

The Australian Curriculum’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross Curriculum Priority (ACARA, 2011) is designed for application across KLAS and Stages. It consists of three interconnected aspects: Country/Place, Culture, and People, with three organising ideas in each. While these provide a reasonable base to work from, there are clear omissions that not all teachers will recognise or address. These include the lack of breadth and depth of Aboriginal content where concepts such as self-determination, Aboriginal resistance, treaty, truth telling, and racism are absent (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013). Moreover, while there has been a plethora of resources developed over the last decade or so, they have ‘unfortunately been left to sit on the “virtual shelf” to date, with minimal uptake by the teaching profession’ (White et al., 2022, p. 13)

## The Learning from Country Framework

We have created an LFC framework that can be used by teachers to localise curriculum, build relationships with community, engage learners, and create culturally responsive and sustaining classrooms. In describing the processes in Figure 1, we acknowledge the nonlinear, reflexive nature of Aboriginal Country-centred learning that links the past, present, and future.

QUICK LINKS



*Italicised words cited from Yunkaporta & Shillingworth, 2020, pp. 11-12*

Figure 1. Learning from Country framework. © Dr Katrina Thorpe, A/Prof Cathie Burgess, Dr Suzanne Egan, Prof Valerie Harwood in C. Burgess, K. Thorpe, S. Egan and V. Harwood, in ‘Towards a conceptual framework for Country-centred teaching and learning,’ *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 28(8), p. 931



The graphic was designed by Dharawal artist Michael Fardon. It can be described as follows:

*The dark blue acknowledges that Country is strong—it is “full” of knowledge. The light blue circles represent the “activity” emanating and rippling throughout the Learning from Country processes which include deep listening to Aboriginal community voices and truth telling ... As each waterhole ripples with new knowledge and impacts on existing knowledge, it flows into the next waterhole. The connecting waterways between the waterholes represent the ebb and flow of knowledges and understandings that ripple through each waterhole. (Burgess et al., 2022a, p. 164)*

*Country-centred relationships* requires listening to local Aboriginal people about the cultural and socio-political history and current issues in the local area. Once you have begun this journey, you will be able to see, and enact, ways of bringing Country into the classroom, as well as explore Country beyond the classroom door. This makes learning more ‘hands on’ and engaging for students and contributes to a local Aboriginal narrative for use in your curriculum.

*Relating* deepens these connections through truth telling which includes listening to Aboriginal lived experiences of colonisation in this country. While this can be uncomfortable or even distressing, it is important to emotionally engage with these narratives to build empathy and understanding and to create a sense of belonging for everyone involved in this process. The Aboriginal community-based educators often talk about the healing power of these experiences and their sense of empowerment in educating future generations. To ensure you are being respectful, speak to Aboriginal staff and get to know your students and families to seek advice. All education systems have some level of regional and/or statewide support for teachers, and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) has local branch meetings you can attend.

*Critical engagement* occurs when you reflect on the emotional and intellectual learning you have encountered through LFC experiences and prompts you to reflect on how this impacts your personal and professional identity. By positioning yourself as a learner rather than a teacher, new ways of knowing, being and doing through an Aboriginal lens, helps you reimagine what an Aboriginal curriculum narrative might look like.

The ‘doing’ occurs as you develop *culturally nourishing and sustaining teaching and learning practices* that engage all students and brings the school-community closer together. This occurs throughout the LFC processes as you continue to think about how you will enact LFC in your classroom and maintain the relationships necessary to do this work.

## Conclusion

We acknowledge that this is challenging work as it asks you to rethink how you experienced education, but once the processes are underway, you will be rewarded by increased confidence in your curriculum and pedagogy, more engaged learners and calmer classrooms. Building relationships and listening to Aboriginal people and Country, is the place to start to develop an Aboriginal curriculum narrative. At the same time, you should explore resources and build your own knowledge of Aboriginal histories and cultures and reflect on these in relation to your local community. Truth telling, listening to Aboriginal community narratives, and Learning from Country reveals paths of resistance, resilience, and activism to mobilise genuine educational change for future generations.



[1] We use the term 'Aboriginal' as this is the preferred term in our local communities and the preferred term of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. We acknowledge there are many Torres Strait Islander students, teachers and parents and we respectfully include Torres Strait Islander peoples within this.

[2] Aboriginal community-based educators agreed on this term to describe themselves which includes Elders, community workers, knowledge holders, political activists, cultural educators, Department of Education workers.

## References



## Appendix



## About the Authors



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