



Ways of knowing

HOW CAN EDUCATORS AND CURRICULUM DESIGNERS INCORPORATE INDIGENOUS WAYS OF LEARNING INTO EDUCATION? HANNAH RACHEL BELL HAS SOME SUGGESTIONS

The draft national curriculum has hundreds of references that relate to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems in almost every subject. How can educators deliver these lofty, possibly enlightened objectives?

There are important differences in the ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples experience being in the world. My understanding of Indigenous knowledge has been developed through my work with Bungal (David) Mowaljarlai.

Mowaljarlai was a traditional lawman of the Ngarinyin people of the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Raised in both Ngarinyin and Christian traditions,

and with English as his fifth language, Mowaljarlai led a Native Title Directions Hearing for the Ngarinyin people, established Bush University and the Ngarinyin Education Initiative, and was awarded an Order of Australia in 1995. For 50 years he tried to repatriate his people to their traditional lands and to educate non-Indigenous Australians about his people's relationship with country.

For four decades, until his death in 1997, Mowaljarlai and I worked together on political, social and economic challenges, forging a strong friendship and socialising our respective families in each other's culture. Together we explored the differences in our

ways of seeing and being in the world – his traditional Aboriginal worldview and my Western worldview – as we travelled, spoke and lived in both our countries.

We found that much Western thinking is based on the view that humans are a privileged species atop an evolutionary ladder or hierarchical pyramid. Non-Indigenous Australians tend to gain knowledge through method and logic in formal, institutional settings.

In contrast, Indigenous thinking is based around recognition of patterns of how people, places and objects relate to each other. Indigenous Australians tend to gain knowledge through observation and experience.



Given the emphasis in the national curriculum on Indigenous inclusion, the following suggestions may assist educators to tailor classroom practice to suit these different worldviews.

Challenge preconceptions

How many of us continue to believe or perceive traditional, remote Indigenous people as being stuck in a Paleolithic stone-age, or hunter-gatherer past that Europeans, in our 'evolutionary' journey to 'civilisation,' successfully left far behind; that Indigenous peoples and culture somehow stopped evolving at some point in this distant past, and that they need to be accelerated into

modernity to participate in contemporary society? This perception is not only inaccurate, but also deeply offensive to those who continue to live in modern hunter-gatherer knowledge systems. Indigenous worldviews should be considered equal to Western worldviews and education systems promote this equality and accommodate Indigenous ways of learning.

Become informed

There are so many obstacles to face before we can deliver a culturally inclusive education: whitefella ignorance and cultural unfamiliarity are two of the most glaring. This is not a criticism. Like most non-Indigenous Australians I had no exposure to Aboriginal culture at school or at university.

Had it not been for my family heritage and lifelong relationships with remote and urban Aboriginal families, I would not be informed at all. Yet, to change the standard of literacy for Indigenous students we need to overhaul curricula and pedagogies with an approach that begins from the premise that two cultural epistemologies can coexist, and can be extraordinarily, mutually beneficial. But first, we need to become more informed.

Recognise difference

Whether urban, rural or remote, the majority of Indigenous students are framed and shaped by some expression of contemporary hunter-gatherer beliefs and values. They may:

- view life as a literal world in which abstraction, inference and deduction have little meaning
- learn through primarily visual and oral storytelling, and direct experience
- speak and think in native languages – including lingo – that lack or warp the Standard English grammatical structure
- be included in a gendered, age-based family authority structure
- be discouraged by elders from expressing their views or taking initiative but learn by repetition, rote and imitation, and

- regard text-based learning as utterly alien.

Students who have these views and experiences should not be made to change to suit our Western schooling model; rather, educators should tailor teaching to accommodate these factors.

Learn to hear and speak 'lingo'

Lingo is the English used in Aboriginal camps, communities, families and social groups throughout Australia and is the predominant language used wherever actual or residual traditional cultural values dominate. I find lingo an extremely rich language because it says so much more than Standard English. Its richness, though, may be lost when the listener is unfamiliar with its embedded cultural understandings and the stories that are often implied. Lingo reflects an existing and evolving worldview. It is a literal world: metaphorical meanings are often incomprehensible.

In addition, in much of the Aboriginal belief system, singularity, individuality, classification, linear measurement and formal science don't exist. Rather, everything belongs in the tapestry of life expressed in relationships that interweave and overlap. This creates confusion and extraordinary difficulty for Aboriginal children to make meaning from Western pedagogies. Their internal sense of relationality, of being in a fluid, interactive, continuously creative world, has its own expectations of, or demands on, them that are almost impossible to overwrite.

Discover and explore embedded knowledge in storytelling

The concept of 'belonging' is one that appears in Kinder to Year 12 curricula. Mowaljarlai once said to a group of Bush University visitors, 'Everybody who been here can come back now, because when you're walking around, skin fall off, hair drop down, even finger nail go onto the ground. All these things go into the earth, that way the land remember who been here, because you become part of that land.'

Here we have a glimpse of a perspective of belonging where the focus is the earth, land or, more specifically, habitat, rather than the individual. Mowaljarlai's comment implies rich scientific knowledge that includes life cycles, decomposition, even the endurance of DNA and cellular memory. It suggests the living, dynamic relationship between all elements in an environment. In fact, it suggests that we all inhabit life equally, so we all belong relationally in the Earth. This is a practical, realistic, literal, organic, reasonable, logical view that encompasses concepts, principles and beliefs far broader than the Western view. It makes possible a reconfiguring of our own thoughts about belonging and identity, and perhaps makes us a little more appreciative and accountable in recognition of those places in which we scatter bits of ourselves. Consider our own homes, gardens – where we leave sweat, blood and tears in the earth to feed other critters, and the microbes, grasses, birds and plants that feed or touch us; our schools, parks, streets – any part of the habitat that we inhabit. Then consider the extent to which we can conceive of trees, birds, insects, in fact all the species and entities that constitute the natural world as 'our relations,' because we become part of them, and they become part of us. Such possibilities can open us to an understanding of blackfellas' claim, 'they our relations..; that tree my sister, that earth my mother.'

Explore comparable or complementary beliefs and ideologies

In the hunter-gatherer worldview, humans are not a privileged species atop an evolutionary ladder; human persons and non-human persons are integrated within the whole pattern of life. Ngarinyin lawman Paddy Neowarra expresses this worldview succinctly when he explains the connectedness of human and non-human persons in life to a Bush University group: 'See that Milky Way: that Wanjina lying down. 'E got his foot in the water. Wanjina come right down to the ground at night-time. We in that water right now; only this fire keep us dry! Spirits float-

ing around all the time, night-time, in that water. We nearly all water ourselves. That's why we all joined together; trees, animals, plants, humans, heavens, waterholes. We all joined in water.'

Neowarra raises another point relating to the knowledge system reflected in this passage. Western science would direct us to the water cycle – condensation, evaporation, weather patterns, cloud types, heat thermals and the like. Neowarra's story, however, also invokes a great deal of scientific knowledge. He reveals a comprehensive understanding of the water cycle, but with many added dimensions. He doesn't objectify the behaviour of water as something outside of us, a resource, something to observe as a separate phenomenon. He integrates all human and non-human persons within the action of water itself, through all its manifestations. The science is there, the knowledge is there, but so is its context, revealing a deep apprehension of the nature of nature and the universe.

This view is based on experience and detailed observation by people who see themselves as an integral part of action in dynamic life, a belief that is, in fact, reflected in the latest environmental thinking. It contrasts dramatically with the Western view of self as an individual in control of life, place as a defined geography, astronomy as an objective, discrete, scientific discipline, environment as controllable natural habitat, and so on: a view utterly challenged by our current knowledge and experience of global warming.

Make friends with an elder's family

There's nothing quite like jumping in at the deep end to immerse yourself in the family life of 'the other.' When you begin to enjoy a shared story and are woven into the relationship system of each other's family lives, you are then able to draw on this to create relevant learning experiences, as well as gaining personal support from this friendship. Indigenous knowledge holders from your community can be invited to participate in the development of teaching and learning

pedagogies, strategies and resources that incorporate both Aboriginal and Western methods of learning, including, where relevant, Aboriginal preference for repetition, rote and imitation.

Collect and share information and experience

Every teacher is in the same boat with the national curriculum, and many will be floundering as they attempt to include Indigenous ways of learning in curricula delivery. For the next decade we need to share resources and information, stories, strategies and so on. Apart from the most obvious need for seeking in-service professional development in cultural awareness, it would certainly help to have access to a dedicated, teacher-maintained website that included existing and new strategies, visual, oral and aural resource materials sourced locally, regionally and nationally that reflect cultural variation and relevance, and other culturally responsive materials.

As educators, we presume our students are or can become familiar with basic scientific and philosophical assumptions embedded in our discourses, often because our own cultural discourse is all we know – but there's more than one way to know things.

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LINKS:

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