TEACHING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

You Can Teach That: Decolonisation and comradeship

Dr Aleryk Fricker

Important notice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers: Pages linked throughout this resource may contain names, images, and footage of persons who are now deceased. We acknowledge the significance and sensitivity of this content and advise reader and viewer discretion.

Curriculum overview

Through subject English, students explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural knowledge, traditions and experiences as they are represented and communicated through text. Specifically, subject English provides students with the opportunity to:

- Appreciate and investigate texts created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and illustrators
- Analyse and respond to texts that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Examine texts that include events, Country/Place, identities and languages, and
- Discuss the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

In the Victorian Curriculum 7–10 English Version 2.0 explicit references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are found in the below content descriptions:

Year 7

- Identify and explore ideas, points of view, characters, events and/or issues in literary texts, drawn from different historical, cultural and/or social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors (VC2E7LE01)

Year 8

- Explain the ways that ideas, issues and points of view in literary texts drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, and a wide range of Australian and world authors, may represent the values of individuals and groups (VC2E8LE01)

Year 9

- Analyse the representations of people and places in literary texts, drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors (VC2E9LE01)

Year 10

- Analyse representations of individuals, groups and places and evaluate how they reflect their context in literary texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors (VC2E10LE01)

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority provides more guidance around the responsibilities of educators to help students deepen their knowledge of the oldest continuous living cultures and contemporary First Nations communities. The below organising ideas are from the Victorian Curriculum F-10 Version 2.0 and are reflected in the *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series.

Country/Place	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Australia maintain a deep connection to, and responsibility for, Country and Place and have holistic values and belief systems that are connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways. (VC2CCPACP1)
Culture	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are diverse and have distinct cultural expressions, such as language, customs and beliefs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural expressions, while also maintaining the right to control, protect and develop culture as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. (VC2CCPAC1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life reflect unique ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing. (VC2CCPAC2)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to the world's oldest continuous cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples demonstrate resilience in the maintenance, practice and revitalisation of culture despite the many historic and enduring impacts of colonisation, and they continue to celebrate and share the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures. (VC2CCPAC3)
People	Australia has 2 distinct First Nations Peoples; each encompasses a diversity of nations across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have occupied the Australian continent and adjacent islands from time immemorial. (VC2CCPAP1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have sophisticated political, economic and social organisation systems, which include but are not limited to family and kinship structures, laws, traditions, customs, land tenure systems and protocols for strong governance and authority, (VC2CCPAP2)
	The significant and ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their histories and cultures are acknowledged locally, nationally and globally. (VC2CCPAP3)

Capabilities

- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Intercultural Capability
- Personal and Social Capability

Introduction to the resource

Dr Aleryk (Al) Fricker is a proud and sovereign Dja Dja Wurrung academic. He is a former English, History, and Humanities teacher who now teaches and researches Indigenous education and decolonising education practices in Australia. His research recognises that First Nations knowledges and pedagogies have the potential to revolutionise education in Australia and benefit all students regardless of their cultural contexts.

In this interview for VATE's *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, Fricker discusses the concept of decolonisation, how teachers can engage with decolonial praxis, and ways in which educators can show up as 'comrades' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their work.

Key knowledge

- Decolonisation
- Decolonial praxis
- Yoorrook Justice Commission
- Strengths-based language

Key concepts

- Truth- telling
- Truth-listening
- Allyship vs comradeship
- First Nations pedagogies

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	What is decolonisation and how does it apply to education?
8:13 mins	How can teachers and students begin to engage with decolonial praxis?
11:42 mins	Five focus areas for decolonising your classroom
16:47 mins	What is your advice for teachers who are concerned or anxious about introducing and embedding First Nations perspectives?
22:48 mins	How can English teachers and students become allies for First Nations friends, peers, and community members?
32:05 mins	Why is it best to adopt a strengths-based approach to teaching First Nations histories, knowledges and cultures?

"Be brave, have courage, engage, and recognise that if you do make an error, there's no hard feelings because we [First Nations people] don't have an issue… There's no harm, no foul… We're always prepared to give people the benefit of the doubt"

The following activities, prompts, lesson ideas and external links are designed to interrogate and embed the concepts, ideas, questions, themes and knowledge presented in the accompanying video. They are designed to gain further understanding of the topic and explore how the topic can be utilised, dissected, or cemented in the classroom. Materials and activities have been selected with a view to creating opportunities for bringing the content of this topic to students and colleagues.

The structure of these activities has been inspired by the 8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogy framework which is grounded in the research of Dr Karen Martin and Dr Martin Nakata and created by Department of Education staff, James Cook University's School of Indigenous Studies, and the Western New South Wales Regional Aboriginal Education Team.

STORY SHARING: Yoorrook Justice Commission

Fricker reminds us that one of the aspects of adopting a decolonial praxis is that "it needs to feel uncomfortable" and the unsettling and discomfort that occurs with decolonial praxis "means it's actually working". He explains that the starting point of engaging in this process is "a critical self-reflection of the individual, but as well as of the systems and structures that surround us". For teachers, this begins with recognising the "colonial construct which is the Australian education system" and the privileges it affords to particular groups over others.

Truth-telling activities and processes seek to recognise and engage with a fuller account of Australia's history and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is one way that decolonial praxis can be adopted. This report by Professor Heidi Norman and Dr Anne Maree Payne outlines the rationale for truth-telling processes, especially in light of the failed Voice referendum. Ambelin Kwaymullina speaks of truth-listening (a process which is expanded on in this article) that is complementary to this as listening, hearing, and sitting with the stories that are being shared by First Nations peoples and resisting the temptation to respond or placate.

In Victoria, the Yoorrook Justice Commission is the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Nations people in the state. Yoorrook's role is to examine past and ongoing injustices experienced by First Nations people in Victoria in all areas of life since colonisation. Their aim is to help develop Victorian people's understanding of the impact of colonisation and highlight the diversity, strength, and resilience of First Nations culture, histories, and knowledges, along with making recommendations for healing, reform, and law and policy change. Public hearings to gather evidence about education's role in colonisation were held in June and July 2024.

Bickford (1996) says, "The riskiness of listening comes partly from the possibility that what we hear will require change from us" (as citied in de Souza and Dreher, 2021, p. 47). With this in mind, invite your colleagues to:

- Engage with the witness statements available on the Yoorrook website. This page includes a range of evidence about the ways in which the Victorian education system could be improved for First Peoples from revision of the history curriculum that is taught in schools, through to the importance of representation for connection and safety.
- Consider the findings from The School Exclusion Project (2024) that explores how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been failed by government education policies "including historical failures to ensure and provide access to schooling, as well as the contemporary use of disciplinary measures that remove a student from their normal learning environment".
- Consider how listening (and reading) about education's ongoing role in colonisation may reshape their practice and pedagogy.
- Evaluate the ways in which policies or procedures in their context contribute to cycles of disadvantage and harm.

STORY SHARING: 'Pick up a book by a First Nations person'

Fricker says that if you want to learn more about First Nations cultures, "pick up a book authored by a First Nations person". Regardless of "whether you recognise it immediately, whether it is signposted, [or] whether it is explicitly explained in the text" there will be cultural nuances that permeate the text. The study of First Nations texts provides "a really powerful way of engaging with a First Nations cultural context which otherwise you may not get". Prof. Tony Birch reiterates this in his interview for this series.

Fricker reminds us that the "beauty of being a teacher is that your job literally allows you to respond in some really important ways". He recognises that there is a degree of apprehension among English teachers to present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, perspectives and histories as some teachers feel like they're "teaching out of discipline" due to a lack education in this space. However, Fricker generously offers, "Be brave, have courage, engage, and recognise that if you do make an error, there's no hard feelings because we [First Nations people] don't have an issue… There's no harm, no foul… We're always prepared to give people the benefit of the doubt". Fricker warmly encourages teachers to be temporarily uncomfortable in the pursuit of growth and to enact meaningful change.

In what ways could your school support a First Nations reading group in order to alleviate some of the concerns you and your colleagues may have? Confronting your own apprehension about teaching First Nations perspectives can be met with proactive steps to 'retrain' by learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by engaging with the work they have written.

Using a PLC structure, you could open the opportunity to colleagues who are interested in reading and discussing works of fiction and non-fiction, interdisciplinary knowledge and ideas, or even contemporary research. You could run this as an open Socratic seminar style reading group with predominantly open-ended discussion around ideas, themes, construction, and individual thoughts, or as a structured study with specific questions that are asked by a facilitator. This article has some ideas for running a book club which could easily be adapted. There are many lists of First Nations authored texts that you could select to read together including the First Nations Classics, titles suggested by the Blackfulla Bookclub, or the back catalogue of texts published by Australia's leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander publishing house, Magabala Books. Publishing houses like Magabala and University of Queensland Press also have teacher's notes for many of their books which are freely available on their websites.

Guided by the Victorian Department of Education's '10 principles of effective professional learning communities', a First Nations reading group could help your school or English department to:

- Examine the histories, cultures, knowledges, and achievements that students learn about and prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, knowledges, and achievements
- Assume collective responsibility for the learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, and cultures
- Share effective teaching and learning pedagogies that best support the teaching of this material
- Support each other in the teaching of new concepts, ideas, or knowledge
- Provide dedicated and privileged time to undertake individual professional learning
- Read and enjoy creative writing and research undertaken by First Nations academics, educators and writers
- Discuss the impact of the readings associated with the First Nations reading group
- Build confidence and capacity in the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, knowledges, and achievements
- Reading literature from people outside of our own ethic and cultural backgrounds fosters empathy and allows us to connect through shared humanity. Martha Nussbaum has written about this exact concept — "world citizenship".

NON-LINEAR: Engaging with First Nations pedagogies

Fricker has made significant contributions to the discussions about ways that teachers can decolonise their practice. You can find out more in his article, 'Decolonising your classroom: five ways forward', various publications at Deakin University, and an interview for the Teachers' Education Review podcast. There are five focus areas for decolonisation that Fricker suggests outlined in the table below.

Policy	• Familiarisation with the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026 • Know "how it [Marrung] needs to work, what it needs to look like"
Curriculum	• What are you teaching and why? • Whose texts are you reading and why? • Creating opportunities to move Eurocentric texts to the side • Bringing a critical lens to non-First Nations texts being studied
Pedagogy	• How do you teach the curriculum? • How are you teaching selected texts and why? • Can we engage with First Nations pedagogies like yarning circles, 8 Ways of Learning, and on Country learning experiences?
Places and spaces	• What does your English classroom look like? • Is your classroom designed to allow students to engage in First Nations pedagogies? • Making First Nations cultures, histories, knowledges, and achievements visible – such as displaying the flags, Acknowledgement of Country plaques, artworks and/or murals • Consider reviewing texts in the library that are inaccurate or misrepresent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and replacing them with "up to date, accurate, appropriate books that will support learners across a whole range of discipline areas"
Community engagement	• Fricker reminds us that it is up to schools to build staff capacity in establishing meaningful and appropriate community relationships with local First Nations community groups as key stakeholders • "Lean on and work with [local First Nations community] when it comes to [the] co-construction of learning experiences"

In this YouTube video Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney and Professor Robert Hattam discuss their research into developing an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy that prioritises decolonial praxis as "it is not only Aboriginal students who are impacted by Australia's mono-cultural schooling system" (Rigney, Hattam, et al., p.v). According to Rigney, Hattam, et al., "Australia has now moved beyond multiculturalism" with classrooms defined by 'superdiversity' where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students share a classroom with a mix of different migrant and ethnic groups. According to researchers at the ANU, "superdiversity describes a phenomenon where new waves of immigrants from a raft of countries expand the ethnic and cultural diversity of communities, while bringing with them differentiated forms of religious identification, languages, education and work skills, visa status, and age and family compositions".

As part of their literature review into how culturally responsive pedagogies are encouraged in the Australian Curriculum, they cite the work of Adkins (2012), who explains that culturally responsive English instruction in the United States has four areas:

1. "Integrating curriculum and instruction that is meaningful" (p.74) and that explores societal inequalities, biases, and assumptions in a broad range of texts.
2. "Recognizing the integral role of student voice and experience" (p.75) in all of its forms.
3. "Developing a classroom community characterized by high expectations with support and collaboration" (p.75).
4. Utilising a variety of tools to provide frequent feedback and formative and summative assessment to guide appropriate instructional decisions.

Along with Fricker's areas of decolonisation, the ideas of culturally responsive pedagogy support the enhancement of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a way for teachers to reflect on their practice. As an English department, how can you and your colleagues embed decolonial and culturally responsive pedagogies into your work. The Education Hub has a helpful guide to being more culturally responsive and there are some case studies from secondary schools involved with Rigney, Hattam, et al.'s research on the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy website.

"...non-Indigenous people [need] to be leveraging their power and their privilege" – The most impactful space non-Indigenous educators can do this is in their classrooms.

COMMUNITY LINKS: Towards comradeship

Fricker explains that he has a "challenging relationship with the term[s] ally and allyship". Despite being in use since the 1800s, these terms have now broadened and evolved to reflect the increased advocacy and social justice efforts associated with allyship movements. Fricker says that "the challenge we have with the concept of allyship is it means that those who maintain power are able to opt out whenever things get too spicy without any sort of real repercussions" and notes, there is "actually no guarantee" that an ally will support you in a challenging situation. Similarly, Yorta Yorta academic Dr Summer May Finlay writes, "While allies get their hands dirty from time to time, they often aren't ready to stand with us no matter what." American author Roxane Gay, in response to an especially violent US summer (July 2016) wrote, "The problem with allyship is that good intentions are not enough. Allyship offers a safe haven from harsh realities and the dirty work of creating change. It offers a comfortable distance that can be terribly unproductive".

After exploring alternatives to ally, including 'accomplice' and 'convert', Fricker prefers the term 'comrade' to describe what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need. Comrades are "people who are prepared to walk with us, to stand with us, to march with us. People who are prepared to amplify our voices without taking over the conversation and people who are prepared to act against their own self-interest in the immediacy, recognising that has a far greater capacity and potential to improve the lot of everybody". A comrade "can't just opt out like an ally". They stand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "through thick and thin". Fricker has published more about his preference for the term 'comrade' in this book chapter.

Fricker gives some tangible examples of what comradeship can look like, such as petitioning and advocating for policy change, or donating to charity, but explains that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are seeking comradeship with English teachers and English students in English classrooms as they "recognise the inherent value just from the existence of First Nations people and contexts [and can] seek to amplify that in every way possible".

Comradeship is a complex commitment that takes place in the hidden curriculum. While the Victorian Curriculum mandates assessable content descriptions and big concepts like the general capabilities, challenging and/or validating the ways in which students see and react to the world happens through the unspoken rules, expectations, and unofficial norms, behaviours and values that schools promote. As Fricker says, "non-Indigenous people [need] to be leveraging their power and their privilege" – the most impactful space non-Indigenous educators can do this is in their classrooms.

It is well documented that allyship, or in this case, comradeship, begins with self-reflection. Individually or with your English teaching colleagues, consider the ways in which your school influences students' positions, views and judgements based on the hidden curriculum in your context. Examine:

- Are your school values reflected in what your school does?
- How are your own personal values and beliefs reflected in your practice?
- Does your school curriculum allow for questioning and critical thinking?
- Do the pedagogical models you use support the formation of students' own opinions and views?
- How does your school react to important events, movements or celebrations about other groups? For example, did you school make a statement regarding the referendum on the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a voice to Parliament, or does your school acknowledge, promote and celebrate NAIDOC Week?

Consider also how your students indirectly learn and absorb your individual values and broader societal norms:

- Is your lesson planning or curriculum design biased toward a particular style of learning?
- Where are there gaps and silences – in histories, perspectives, voices, opinions, positions? Absence is also bias.
- Do you historicise the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- Do your accounts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures romanticise the false 'hunter gather' and 'noble savages' myths? Jeanine Leane discusses this in her critique of Evelyn Araluen's *Dropbear*.
- Are your discussions about issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples taking place only in relation to white people or are they explored in their own right?
- What kind of representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are you selecting and privileging and where do these representations come from?

COMMUNITY LINKS: Decolonise yourself

You may have recognised the artwork that accompanies the *Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series as that of Aretha Brown. Brown is a Gumbaynggirr woman whose murals intersect with her work as an activist. As well as her public artworks, Brown has also created a resource for allies - Decolonise Your Self – a pack of conversation cards for the thoughtful ally. As she writes, "We understand that tough conversations and self-reflection are necessary to be had, to foster real change and truth-telling. Teach Blak History!"

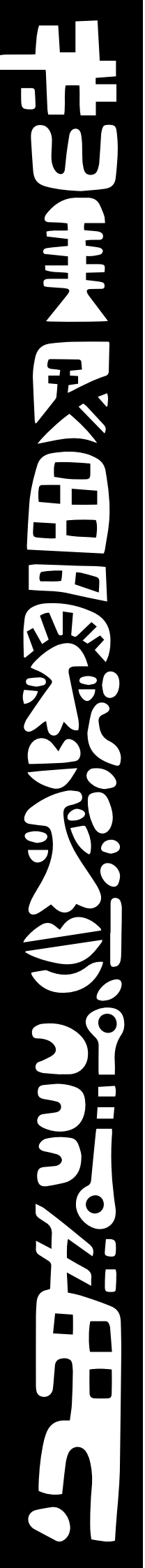
The conversation cards are designed to support allies to explore their relationship to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and allyship. Questions for exploration include:

- "Have you tried cooking or eating Indigenous cuisine?"
- "Have you ever been racist? What happened? Did you get called out?"
- "What is your favourite Aboriginal film? When was the last time you watched Indigenous media?"
- "Do you know who your local elders are? What roles do elders have in your community?"

You could use these cards to set the tone of your lesson, to inspire conversation amongst your classes, or to encourage friends and family to consider the ways in which they can be better allies for First Nations people. Students could even create their own decolonisation conversation cards that are particular to their school or English classroom. These conversation cards are available here with the option to request a free PDF copy if you're unable to support Brown's small business.

ADDITIONAL READING

- Summer May Finlay (2020) 'Where do you fit? Tokenistic, ally – or accomplice?'
- Anti-Racist Guide (nb: this website is grounded in a US context, however, much of the material is relevant and adaptable)
- Professor Melitta Hogarth recently wrote about the history of advocating for Indigenous knowledge within Australian education
- Festival of Dangerous Ideas Digital 2020: Marcia Langton delivered an address titled 'Dangerous Fictions' about Australia's reluctance to engage with our colonial past.



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Design and layout by Kushla Ross, Studio Cahoots.

This resource has been reviewed by Darby Jones, a freelance writer and editor of Kamilaroi, Scottish and English heritage. View Darby's work at https://www.darbyjones.au/.

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