

TEACHING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

Truth–telling and education

Dr Matthew Keynes

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
- Engage with and respond to literature that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives for 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](#))

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 English 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. (VC2CCPAC1)
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 Capabilities • Personal and Social Capability	

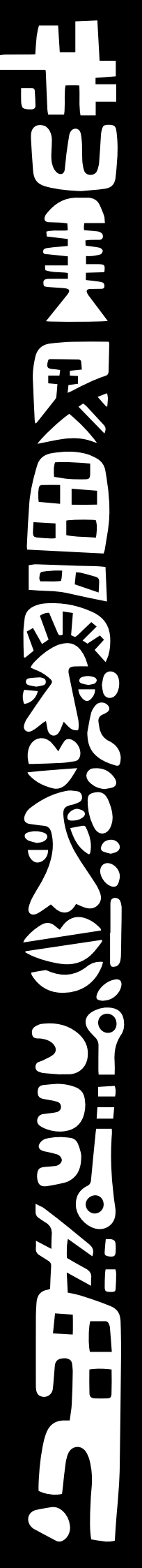
世山美田田家菜菜菜菜菜

In this interview for VATE's *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives*, Keynes discusses the connection between truth-telling commissions, including the Yoorrook Justice Commission, and education.

- The difference between truth-telling and truth commissions
- Systemic injustice
- Educational justice
- Bringing Them Home Report

- Truth-telling
- Truth commissions
- 'Truths both large and small'

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	What is truth-telling and what is a truth commission?
4:23 mins	What is the relationship between truth commissions and the education sector?
8:35 mins	What are some of the Yoorrook Justice Commission's findings about the education system?
16:20 mins	How can English teachers support truth-telling?
19:20 mins	Resources for supporting truth-telling and First Nations voices
24:50 mins	How can teachers work with the knowledge that has been revealed by the Yoorrook Justice Commission?



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 for English teachers to gain further understanding of the topic and explore how the topic can be utilised, dissected, or cemented in the classroom. Materials and activities in this section 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: 'Rich tapestry of truths'

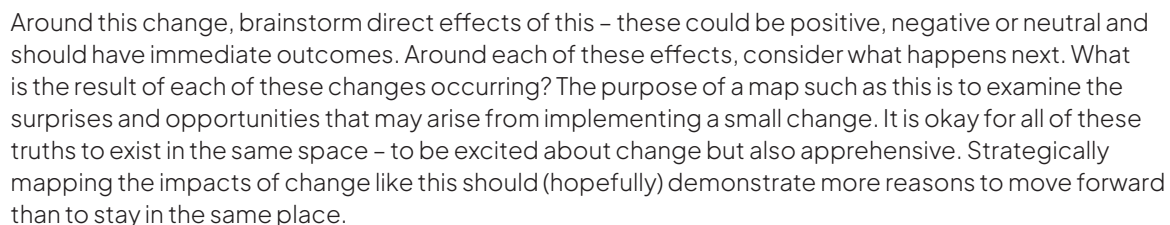
Keynes draws on the work of Stolen Generations historian Peter Read when explaining the role of truth-telling in the classroom. You can read some of Read's research [here](#) where he discusses "the truths, both large and small, of Aboriginal dispossession and the Stolen Generation[s]" (p. 54). (Please note that this article uses some outdated terms that may be offensive.) The overarching concept is that there are large, foundational truths (i.e.: facts) that are indisputable when it comes to Australia's history and then there are smaller anomalies, variations or differences within those large truths which equate for peoples' individual circumstances and experiences. These truths should not disturb the foundational ones.

It is often this obsession with 'needing' to understand the minutiae that prevents educators from moving forward with their teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, histories, cultures and knowledges. Across the *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, each guest has warmly encouraged and nudged each teacher to engage with the teaching of these components, to stop making excuses and step into their discomfort for the greater good. It has been widely said by the guests for the series that educators should expect not to know everything about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, knowledges and ways of being. Some information is simply not culturally appropriate for people to know.

Keynes calls on teachers to recognise a "rich tapestry of truth" and Read writes "[m]aybe it is more important in the end to inform those who want to know and understand the small truths which stand beside and enlarge the large truth" (p. 59) – this is the role of the English classroom. Keynes encourages us to have courage – through hearing the stories shared through the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#), in reading the [recommendations](#), in interrogating education's role in the [exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#) from learning – to embrace the stories and experiences, forms of knowledge and different voices. This will equip us to render a three-dimensional, more accurately represented past and present for Australia.

Consider undertaking a futures wheel activity as an individual or with your English teaching colleagues. You can download a template to use [here](#) if needed. A futures wheel is designed to brainstorm the ripple effects that come from a potential change. Pick a change and write that in the middle of the page. Changes could be things like:

- 'We increase the representation of First Nations authors on our text list'
- 'We start to include Aboriginal languages in some of our lessons'
- 'We engage with our local Aboriginal community in a reciprocal way'
- 'We prioritise decolonial pedagogies in our classroom'
- 'We unpack our positionality to understand our identity and how this informs our teacher identity'
- 'We explore colonialism and settler colonialism with our students'



In the future...

- Consider a future world where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their ways of knowing, being, and doing are centred and shape the landscape of your English classroom and English curriculum decision making.

DECONSTRUCT/RECONSTRUCT: Changing the curriculum

Keynes' [research](#) identifies three things that the curriculum must do in order to inspire open reflection and dialogue about Australia's past. They write that while the inclusion of truth-telling in the curriculum is a good step forward, "including truth-telling in the curriculum does not necessarily disrupt colonial knowledge, ways of knowing and the colonial power structures they continue to uphold". In order for this to occur, discussions about truth-telling must be situated in the understanding of "the broader structures behind [the] discrimination and their legacies in the present".

Keynes identifies that for many educators, personalising history and the impacts of colonialism through the inclusion of personal stories of injustice is a popular teaching strategy. Choosing texts that highlight the individual struggles of a diverse range of peoples, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, studying their experiences and the ways they have been disadvantaged is the bread-and-butter of English text study. However, while these stories are important and contribute to the rich tapestry of truths that make up our shared history, Keynes' research highlights that "an over-emphasis on personal stories of injustice" creates a "shallow" understanding of injustice as individual failure or evil. Without the context of "complex historical processes like colonialism, war, migration and revolution" disadvantage can be seen as "an individual problem" rather than a complex result of the "broader structures behind discrimination and their legacies in the present".

Keynes' three steps for the curriculum to make an impact on truth-telling are:

1. It must help non-First Nations young people to understand how past injustices influence their contemporary lives.
2. Reforms must be complemented by teacher education and professional learning.
3. Truth-telling must be led from a First Nations cultural lens, and the curriculum must embrace First Nations ways of knowing, learning and being in the process.

One way to investigate how you may be able to use your curriculum to make an impact on truth-telling is by undertaking an inquiry into the teaching of First Nations literature, knowledges and/or ways of learning in English. [Here](#) is the VATE Narrative Inquiry Cycle (2.0), created for use with the 2025 VATE Fellowship participants. This cycle, designed with input from Associate Professor Aleryk Fricker from Deakin University, outlines three areas that teachers can work through when undertaking an inquiry.

Suitable inquiry questions could be:

- What teaching practices help prevent the tokenisation of First Nations content in the study of text/s?
- How can we ensure that our engagement with First Nations texts honour cultural protocols and the lived experiences they represent?
- How do we balance the inclusion of First Nations texts alongside the curriculum's current texts in ways that challenge rather than reinforce dominant narratives?
- In what ways can First Nations literature disrupt and enrich our current approaches to themes like identity, power, place and belonging?
- What can First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing teach us about storytelling, language and interpretation in English?
- How can yarning and connection to Country be embedded meaningfully in English learning time?
- How can we examine our own assumptions and biases when selecting and teaching texts?
- What professional learning do we need to confidently and respectfully teach First Nations content?
- How can we collaborate with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to co-design and enrich English curriculum content, and how do we properly remunerate them for these contributions?

Divide your faculty into smaller groups to undertake research and discussion about their selected inquiry area. Use the Narrative Inquiry Cycle to inform the direction of your inquiries.

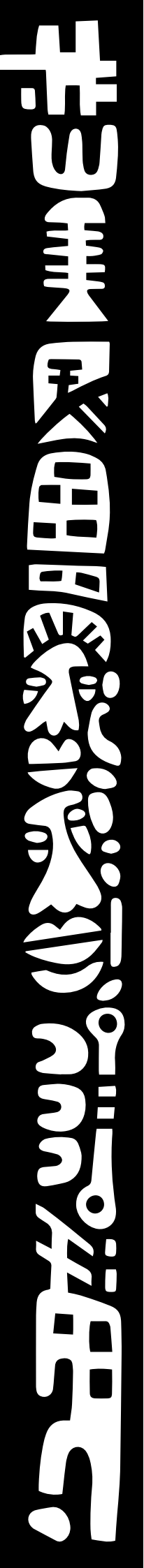
COMMUNITY LINKS: Resources for supporting truth-telling

Keynes mentions a number of resources to support truth-telling and for helping to build teachers' capacity for truth-telling in the classroom. They suggest:

- [Ngarrngga](#) project at the University of Melbourne
- [Narragunnawali](#) education resources (create a free account to access many curriculum mapped resources)
- [AIATSIS](#) resources
- [NITV](#) on SBS
- Reading and subscribing to First Nations news sources like the [Koori Mail](#) or [IndigenousX](#)
- Looking at the work of the [Literary Education Lab](#) by Sarah Truman and Larissa McLean Davies including their [online reading groups](#)
- Reading the [National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition](#) (NIYEC) report on school exclusion and supporting their work
- [Magabala Books](#) – Australia's only First Nations publishing house
- [Australian Association for Research in Education](#) (AARE) and their [Special Interest Groups](#) (SIGs)
- [Australian Education Union](#) – read the AEU Victoria statement in support of the Yoorrook Justice Commission's final report and [pledge](#) to be a Friend of Treaty for Victoria
- [The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria](#)
- There is also the other interviews and resources in the *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, *Idiom* (Vol 61, No 1, 2025) 'A Chorus of Voices: Sharing Stories, Knowledge, Truth', and *Listening from the Heart: Rewriting the teaching of English with First Nations voices* by Cara Shipp.

Building familiarity with these sources, understanding the perspectives of a range of First Nations peoples throughout Australia, and actively looking to engage with professional learning around truth-telling in education is just one way that educators can alleviate some of their concerns but also understand their responsibility to contribute to educational justice for First Nations young peoples.

Actively looking to engage with professional learning around truth-telling in education is just one way that educators can alleviate some of their concerns but also understand their responsibility to contribute to educational justice for First Nations young peoples.



© 2025 Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE)

This resource has been prepared for VATE with assistance from the Department of Education's Strategic Partnerships Program and may be used for educational purposes only. It contains the writer's perspective and does not necessarily reflect the views of VATE. Every effort has been made to ensure that the material contained in this resource, including links to websites, was correct at time of publishing. VATE will be pleased to hear from interested parties to rectify any errors or omissions.

Artwork provided by [Aretha Brown](#) and reproduced with full permission of the artist.
Design and layout by Kushla Ross, [Studio Cahoots](#).

This resource has been reviewed by Darby Jones. Darby is a Blak writer and editor with matrilineal ties to the Kamilaroi mob in Southwest Queensland. View Darby's work at <https://www.darbyjones.au/>.

www.vate.org.au

ABN 22 667 468 657 Inc. No. A0013525E

TEACHING
FIRST NATIONS
PERSPECTIVES

VATE
VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH