

Why do we Acknowledge Country?

Acknowledging Country is more than correct protocol, it is acknowledging our nation's identity and our sense of place in country. Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowings (EIKs) in curriculum stories* this identity, Associate Professor Nerida Blair, National Director, Indigenous Education, Faculty of Education and Arts, Australian Catholic University, writes.

History frames our cultural identity and is important for it can reveal the values we bring to our teaching, and subsequently how these influence classroom practice. Many of the everyday choices a teacher makes are mediated by their cultural values. This includes resource selection, teaching strategies, ideas about behaviour management, interpretations of (and assumptions about) students and their backgrounds, and the relationships they build with students on this basis. History is foundational to how we think of ourselves in the present (Phillips J, pp.10-11).

EIKs in curriculum stories our sense of place in this country. It stories our identity as Australians; an identity that is hundreds of thousands of year old enriched with living memories through connection to country. These memories and these stories speak to how we see our nations' history, our identity as Australians; 'how we see ourselves in the present'. This is worthy of acknowledgement.

What does an Acknowledgement of Country do?

What an Acknowledgement of Country does not do is act as a form of political correctness.

An Acknowledgement of Country is an act of connection and connecting. It is an act of relatedness. Connection and relatedness to country, to each other. Connection and relatedness through story. Thomas King, a Native American novelist said, "story, story is all that we are". This is story not as words grouped together in lines across a page but story as dance, performance, drawing – all in many different mediums reflecting relatedness to country. It could be drawing on rocks in Darkinjung country, in Cadigal country, drawing in sand in desert Anmatjere country, drawing on bodies with ochres deep from within the earth.

The countries you are on as you read this article have thousands of years of stories embedded within them. We actively contribute stories every moment of every day to replenish and re-nourish these countries with new stories whilst remembering old ones. In an Acknowledgement of Country we celebrate the Nations of our First peoples: their stories, their places; ultimately our stories, our place. We celebrate education that becomes enriched by such stories, ensuring our growth as a nation. This becomes our collective storying, connecting and relating as a nation over hundreds of thousands of years in ways that are all encompassing. Ways that reflect our diversity and celebrate our co-existence. We can no longer be an Australian history plus a pre-history Indigenous

history. Our place on the global stage demands more, demands a maturing of our reflections as a nation.

EIKs is not as simple as "grafting on the stories of others into dominant spaces" (Prashad, p163). If we do this we merely change the complexion slightly, tint the space by showcasing the exotic. Here there is no genuine understanding. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies are different to western ontologies; not better, not less just different. Our Ways of Knowing are centred in connection and relatedness to country and each other. I will illustrate through one element of Indigenous Knowings - our concept of story.

First Nation's storying does not begin at point A and end at point B. There is no beginning and no end. It is not linear and 'contentcentric'. Indigenous storying is 'not for finding a right story it is for exploring several possibilities', widening the possibilities of stories. Information of different variations is preferred, pooled and maintained as a bundle of possibilities without judgement. Different stories which contradict each other, do not conflict, but simply coexist (Hokari, 2000, pp.8-9). It is not fiction it is law. If this becomes our understanding of story what wealth we as a nation have.

A different understanding of story is a starting place. However, what we are currently doing when EIKs is trying to fit Indigenous Knowings into western frameworks and western ontologies. If we turn this approach around and begin by understanding and valuing Indigenous Knowings, privilege these – then in a space where both frameworks co-exist we are closer to transformational change and more authentic understanding of our national identity.

How do we EIKs?

- Develop an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies
- Ensure that this understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies is used to construct course content
- Use some of the principles embodied in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies to practice, to teach; principles such as storying
- Be critically reflective and analytical
- Develop an understanding of our whole selves as a nation;
- Deconstruct and engage with our whiteness and white privilege, and
- Celebrate our nation's diversity and depth of histories.



“I as a Wakka Wakka woman living in Darkinjung country and working on Cameraygal country acknowledge country, the spirits of the ancestors, traditional owners, elders and contemporary custodians; that is all of you who connect through your engagement with this article – connect with these country’s and have a responsibility to nourish and look after country. This Acknowledgement connects us all through hundreds of thousands of years of stories told, stories shared; growing the spirit of our nation.”

If, for example we are teaching a unit on geometry what do we know about how First Nations peoples and cultures see numbers, space, shapes? Explore, ask the questions, critically reflect. Take some of this understanding and engage with it through western lenses. Deconstruct our position that privileges western, white knowledge; ask yourselves what do I value about numbers, space and shapes? How do I value number, space and shapes? Teaching armed with this information teaches from a more informed

space. There are no blue prints. Make your everyday teaching choices based on the above seven steps. Facilitate transformation and go beyond ‘closing the gap’ to understanding ourselves as nation.

Stories/stories are used and spelt this way so as to convey a different ontological framework.

Countries/country in this context refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations: land, air, space, waters, flora and fauna.

Resources

<http://rrr.edu.au/>

Phillips J and Lampert J, 2012, *Introductory Indigenous Studies in Education. Reflection and the importance of knowing.* Pearson, Australia

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King T, 2003, *The Truth About Stories. A Native Narrative.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

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