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# TEACHING FIRST NATIONS CONTENT AND CONCEPTS IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM

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## ADVICE FOR TEACHERS IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

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KAMARRA BELL-WYKES, RACHEL FORGASZ & DANIELLE HRADSKY

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Nations of Australia.

They have never ceded sovereignty, and remain strong in their enduring connection to land and culture.

We acknowledge their Elders past, present and emerging.

# Endorsement

**The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI), as the peak body for Koorie education in Victoria, hereby endorses this document as a teaching resource.**

The motion to endorse this document was unanimously passed by the VAEAI Representative Council on 13th March 2020.

**Council Members present on this day are listed as:**

Dr Geraldine Atkinson.....VAEAI President  
Linda Bamblett..... VAEAI CoM Secretary

*Specialist Representatives:*

Aunty Rose Bamblett ..... Early Childhood Education  
Nicky Briggs ..... Primary School Education  
Vera Briggs .....Secondary School Education  
Bobby Wise .....Catholic School Education  
Miranda Edwards..... Independent School Education

*Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Representatives:*

Lea Jones ..... Eastern Metro (Chair)  
Trish Cerminara ..... Owens-Murray (Chair)  
Deidre Rose..... Drouin (Chair)  
Dean Staples ..... Horsham (Chair)  
Judith Hood..... Warragul (Chair)  
Vera Harrold..... Traralgon (Chair)  
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Roslyn Gardner ..... Dandenong (Chair)  
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Joey Chatfield .....Warrnambool (Chair)  
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May Owen ..... Barwon-Geelong (Chair)  
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Leanne Fary .....Bendigo (Chair)  
Nicole Atkinson..... Goulburn Valley (Chair)  
Ashlee Rodgers.....Ballarat (Chair)  
Keith Randall ..... Western Metro (Chair)  
Maureen Hood ..... Bairnsdale (Chair)

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# INTRODUCTION

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## A note from the authors

### **Kamarra**

I extend my deepest respects to the Peoples and Lands of the Wurundjeri and the Boonwurrung and surrounding Kulin Nations for their continuous generosity and graciousness as Cultural hosts and leaders.

I think of my role on this project more as a facilitator than author and would like to thank the many artists and their respective ancestors who contributed to this work for their astounding commitment, dignity, interrogation and integrity, as we continue to curate the path of education and transformation of “Australia” through the Arts. I am humbled by the strength and generosity of my community, the First Nations Peoples of this country, everyday, in so many ways. Thank you Rachel and the rest of the team for seeing what I couldn’t, having the energy and earning the trust to take it there.

To the students and the people privileged enough to teach them:

First Nations Histories and Cultures are the most diverse, resilient, complex and continuous in the world. We have continued to develop and evolve under the most extreme Genocide in history. Ever. True understanding takes time, care and respect. We are still here. Get to know us.

### **Rachel**

Working on this project has been an extraordinary experience of learning and transformation. I am deeply grateful to Kamarra for instigating the project and for overseeing the work of the ILBIJERRI Advisory Groups. Together, they provide the intellectual substance and the emotional heart of this resource. I’m also grateful to Kamarra for inviting me into the work, for teaching me so much, and for embarking on our collaboration with an open mind and heart. I am grateful too, for the addition of Danielle’s perspective and for the driving force of her enthusiasm which ultimately ensured that the work got done.

As an author team, we three celebrated each other’s strengths, exposed each other’s blind spots, and openly acknowledged that our collaboration allowed us to do much more than any one of us might have achieved alone. Such things take time. By going slow, we formed real relationships, the kind that make it possible to be vulnerable, to be challenged, and to learn and change. It is my sincere hope that as you engage with this resource, you will feel safe to enter these spaces too.

### **Danielle**

As the last author to join the team, I am in awe of the work which has gone into developing this resource, and the many, many people who have been involved. Remove any of those people, or take away the time taken to build relationships and follow protocols, and this resource disappears. I am immensely proud of my own contribution, condensing the original discussions down while still trying to capture their complexities, contradictions, and voices. I wish that every Drama teacher could have the experience of reading those transcripts, and hope that you will get something of that experience through this resource.

## Using this resource

This resource addresses questions about embedding First Nations content and perspectives in the Drama classroom. There are many ways you can do this, including seeing performances by First Nations artists, studying plays by First Nations playwrights, and devising work about aspects of Australia's past, present, and future. Whichever approaches you choose, this resource is intended to support you to be a positive presence at the cultural interface.

According to the Victorian Curriculum, when teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, all teachers have a responsibility to:

- protect the integrity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expressions;
- ensure that they and their students engage respectfully and feel connected to this identity;
- provide a welcoming environment for Aboriginal community members; and
- work respectfully with the Koorie community to enrich schools' teaching and learning programs.

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers require all teachers to demonstrate that they:

- understand strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and
- understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

This resource is designed to develop your confidence across all of these areas and to support your thinking about:

- what it means to engage appropriately, respectfully, and practically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' histories, cultures, and arts practices in the drama classroom; and
- the kinds of practical strategies you might apply when working with First Nations plays, artists, and texts.

The development of this resource was instigated through the vision, insight, and determined spirit of Kamarra Bell-Wykes (Yagera/Batjala), ILBIJERRI's Education and Learning Manager from 2014-2018. Its realisation was made possible by Kamarra, together with the First Nations performing artists who contributed to the ILBIJERRI Advisory Groups she convened in 2015 and 2016. As a community of Victorian drama educators, we are the beneficiaries of their extraordinary generosity of spirit, their creative acumen, and their belief in our work as teachers.

## Background

This resource was developed as part of an ongoing collaboration between ILBIJERRI Theatre Company, Drama Victoria, and Monash University. It was co-authored by Kamarra Bell-Wykes, Rachel Forgasz, and Danielle Hradsky.

Kamarra Bell-Wykes (Yagera/Butchulla; ILBIJERRI Education and Learning Manager 2014-2018) began working on this project in 2015 after fielding countless calls from teachers seeking advice about exploring First Nations content in the drama classroom. Questions about devised performance had not really been addressed in Drama Australia's education guidelines, and while there were existing protocols for professional performing arts industries (links in Resources), Kamarra recognised that school-based drama and theatre contexts presented quite different potential problems and possibilities.

Through Drama Victoria, Kamarra surveyed Victorian Drama teachers, asking about their areas of confidence and their concerns about teaching First Nations content, perspectives, and performance conventions. She also established an ILBIJERRI Advisory Group of First Nations performing artists. The group composition invited multiple perspectives and included the voices of performing artists at different career stages, working across multiple art forms, and in diverse contexts. Their brief was to consider teachers' survey responses, and to develop advice about teaching First Nations content and performing First Nations plays in school contexts. The group made significant progress over several meetings, but without ongoing funding to support it, the project stalled in mid-2015.

Kamarra first worked with Dr Rachel Forgasz (Monash University) on a 2016 discussion panel exploring drama teachers' fears about teaching First Nations content. Kamarra was a panellist, along with Andrew Byrne (Drama Victoria). Soon after, a small grant from Monash University enabled the work of the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group to be resumed. The 2016 Advisory Group comprised new and returning members, including Andrew as a teacher representative. With permission, the meetings were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed to form a content base for writing this resource.

Analysing the transcripts was a complex process. As well as answering teachers' questions about what and how they should teach, the transcripts also provided fascinating insights into the why. Multiple and sometimes contradictory views were expressed about why some approaches are more appropriate than others, why it matters to teach First Nations peoples' perspectives in the first place, and what is at stake in doing so. In the resource itself, we deliberately kept competing perspectives in play since they provide rich opportunities for learning and reflection.

The analysis process progressed slowly until late in 2018 when the unique opportunity to trial the resource with Drama Victoria Theatre Festival teachers created a sense of urgency about its completion. To assist, Danielle Hradsky (Monash University/Drama Victoria) joined the author team. Guided by Kamarra, she and Rachel collaborated to draft an abridged resource for the Festival. Deeply encouraged by teacher feedback, drafting continued until December 2019 when the full resource was unofficially launched at the Drama Australia National Conference.

In February 2020, the resource was presented to a meeting of the VAEAI Schools Sub-Committee, in the very same room where the original ILBIJERRI Advisory Group had convened for its inaugural meeting back in 2015. On 13 March, 2020, the resource was subsequently presented to a meeting of the full VAEAI Representative Council, and was officially endorsed by the association.

## Structure

- The remainder of this document is structured using a Question & Answer approach. This approach is intended to make things easy for you as you scan the table of contents for the question you need answered. It is also intended to highlight that there are very rarely easy answers to what are difficult and sometimes awkward questions. What is important is to be willing to ask the questions and to act in the face of uncertainty.
- The document is peppered with direct quotations from the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group and are indicated by *this font*. These are intended to give you a stronger sense of how their voices informed the advice given throughout this resource, and a more expansive appreciation of their perspectives as spoken in their own words.
- The advice in the main body of the document is drawn from the views expressed by the Advisory Group. In some cases, their views were directly paraphrased and summarised as answers to the questions posed in the document. In other cases, disparate comments and perspectives gleaned from across the transcripts were synthesised, analysed, and interpreted for their meaning in relation to particular questions. In others still, their broad advice was expanded through further research by the writing team (often in response to particular suggestions made by the Advisory Group in the transcripts).
- The [Resources](#) section includes links to an extensive range of resources. We hope these will further build your confidence by supporting you to undertake independent research via trusted sources and to make connections with kindred spirits and enthusiastic collaborators. Including us!

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# BEFORE WE BEGIN

The background of the page is a complex, abstract geometric pattern composed of numerous overlapping triangles and polygons. The color palette is a gradient, starting with deep, dark blues and purples on the left side, transitioning through lighter blues and teals, and ending with warm oranges and yellows on the right side. The overall effect is a textured, crystalline surface that changes as the viewer's perspective shifts.

**Q:** Should I refer to First Nations peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Aboriginal Australians or Indigenous Australians?

**A:** It depends who you ask.

As teachers, you are probably familiar with the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since it is the one used by ACARA, VCAA and AITSL. Given this, it is understandable that you might be feeling confused by our use of the term 'First Nations' instead.

Deciding which terms to use in this resource was a learning experience for us and we were surprised to realise that there were different norms operating in our various work contexts. Here's the terminology we eventually settled on, and why:

- We use the term 'First Nations' to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in recognition that they are the sovereign peoples of these lands and that each of their language groups is a separate and sovereign nation. After doing some research, we eventually chose 'First Nations' on the advice of our First Nations partner (ILBIJERRI Theatre Company) that this is the increasingly preferred term for describing the First Peoples of countries across the globe.
- Through additional research, we came to understand that while the term 'Indigenous Australians' is increasingly deemed problematic, 'non-Indigenous' is still an acceptable opposite. We use it in this resource, preferring it over alternatives such as 'other Australians' and 'the wider community.'
- Where we are quoting from other documents or sources that use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' or 'Indigenous', we have left those terms intact.
- We also refer to 'Contemporary Indigenous Theatre' as a distinct performance tradition since the term is still in popular use and we found no definitive alternatives. In some cases, it might be more appropriate to talk about theatre made by a First Nations artist or based on First Nations peoples' experiences.

Here are some things to consider when deciding which terms you will use:

- These and other terms are used interchangeably by First Nations peoples. Consider reaching out personally and asking about the preferences of the individuals or communities whose histories, cultures, or arts practices you are exploring.
- Broad categories (Indigenous, Aboriginal) imply sameness and therefore deny distinctiveness and multiplicity. Be as specific as possible (Koorie Peoples, Kulin Nations, Boon Wurrung woman).
- Using plurals (peoples, histories, cultures) acknowledges diversity.
- Acronyms (ATSI) are dehumanising – don't use them.
- Do some research. Seemingly benign terms often turn out to have offensive subtexts or connote racist histories. (See links in [Resources](#))
- Be thoughtful. Language is politically loaded and acceptable norms are always changing. Check that your understanding is up to date.

**Q:** Why can't you just give me straightforward answers?

**A:** Because there are none.

This became very clear, very quickly, through the discussions of the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group. In some cases, there were as many different perspectives on a question as there were people in the room.

Nevertheless, several key tensions repeatedly arose in Advisory Group members' responses:

- Teaching about the decimation of First Nations peoples and cultures as part of our shared Australian history vs celebrating First Nations as some of the oldest living cultures on earth.
- The desire to give of oneself generously vs the fear of something being taken forcibly.
- Ensuring that non-Indigenous students feel invited into the culture vs making sure that the culture is protected from them.
- The desire to share First Nations arts and cultures with non-Indigenous Australians vs fear of cultural appropriation.
- Encouraging First Nations students to feel and express pride in their cultural identities vs imposing unwanted attention and expectations of who they should be.

*"I suppose the protectiveness comes from the abuse that has been going on in the past... If you've been abused, you're going to be protective."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

*"We've also got to make sure that people feel invited into the culture."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

Take some time to reflect on each of these tensions. When new questions arise in your own classroom practice, try to imagine the answer in light of both sides of the relevant tensions. This process will probably raise more questions than it answers. But that's the point: there are no definitive answers. As with the many other dilemmas we face as teachers, learning how to work with First Nations content is less about knowing The Right Answer and more about understanding all the kinds of questions we might ask, the range of possible answers, and why we might answer in different ways in different contexts.

**Q:** I don't know the first thing about the cultures or performance traditions of First Nations peoples. How am I supposed to teach this stuff to my students?!

**A:** Do some research. Find out.

Seems pretty simple, doesn't it? After all, teaching ourselves new content is something that teachers do all the time. So why does this feel different? Maybe it's because the stakes seem unusually high? Maybe it's because you don't know what you don't know? Maybe you're just time poor, overwhelmed, or simply don't know where to begin? Here are a few things to keep in mind:

*"Take the initiative and do that research work so that it's meaningful to you, personally meaningful."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

- Don't be too hard on yourself! Many teachers lack even basic knowledge of First Nations peoples or cultures because it wasn't taught when we were at school. As teachers today, 'not knowing' isn't a problem. It's the unwillingness to dive in and get educated.
- If this work is new to you, start small, be led by what is most relevant to your students, and follow your own interests.
- Make a point of engaging with the voices and perspectives of First Nations peoples.
- Whatever you read or watch, always ask yourself who the author is, whose views they represent, and what their vested interests might be.

- Check out the list of trusted [Resources](#) at the end of this document to support your professional learning.
- Notice any feelings that come up for you – especially uncomfortable ones like shame, guilt, and fear. As uncomfortable as it might be, stay with those feelings. Try to feel them in their fullness and without judgement. With understanding, these emotions can inspire new awareness and determined action.

**Q:** Am I supposed to be teaching about the traditional performance practices of First Nations peoples, their histories and cultures, or Contemporary Indigenous Theatre?

**A:** From a curriculum perspective, any and all of these. The most important thing for teachers is to understand that they are different things.

- *Contemporary Indigenous Theatre* is produced by First Nations artists for First Nations and non-Indigenous audiences. While it may incorporate or reference traditional songs, dances, music and stories, it is just as likely to tell contemporary stories through contemporary performance practices and cutting-edge theatre technologies. (see [Resources](#))
- *Ritual storytelling and performance* play an enormously significant role in First Nations cultural traditions. They have much more to do with spirituality than entertainment. Strict rules (or *protocols*) determine who is allowed to perform and observe particular stories and practices. It's important to be aware of these. See [Performing Traditional Cultures](#) for more specific advice.
- *First Nations histories* are complex and multifaceted, beginning tens of thousands of years ago with pre-Invasion *ancient* history and continuing on to the post-Invasion *modern* history we are living and writing today. Drama can be a powerful way to explore these histories with your students. *First Nations cultures* are ancient, contemporary, complex and constantly evolving.
- Teach your students about these important differences between Contemporary Indigenous Theatre, the role of ritual storytelling and performance in First Nations cultural traditions, and the scope of First Nations histories and cultures.
- Teach your students about the powerful *connections* between them too. Remember that First Nations cultures are *living cultures* that are always evolving. Often, First Nations traditional cultural practices and histories inform Contemporary Indigenous Theatre.

*“Aboriginal culture is always evolving and doesn’t stop. Our dances and even our languages are our tools. And our practices changed based on who we came into contact with, even before the English colonisation. So the way we practice our art, whether it is using old language and old dances or new ways of dancing, it’s still our cultural practice if we’re doing Aboriginal storytelling. It’s not like it’s stopped.”*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

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CONSIDER  
YOUR  
CONTEXT

**Q:** What should I do if there are First Nations students in my class?

**A:** It depends on the student.

As teachers, we understand that no two students are alike. If that is so, then it follows that each First Nations student's learning experience will be uniquely their own. We must never presume otherwise. For example, while one student might achieve greater esteem with every invitation to demonstrate their vast cultural knowledge, another student disconnected from Country and community might endure misplaced shame in the same situation.

- Plan for the empowerment of your First Nations' students. Be very clear with yourself about how you are intending to achieve this. Read the [Protocols for Koorie Education in Victorian Primary & Secondary Schools](#) for help with this.
- Really try to imagine the enormous diversity of First Nations students' life experiences. Think about how any one of these experiences might influence a student's learning in a way you hadn't previously considered. Make this an ongoing part of your planning process.
- Get to know your First Nations students. It will be enormously helpful with the above.
- Connect with your region's [Koorie Education Coordinator](#). Their support is highly sought after, so reach out as soon as possible and be patient if it takes a while for them to reply.
- Find out who the Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) are for your school's region Your school region's [Koorie Education Coordinator](#) can assist. If possible, make contact with them before you begin teaching. Share what you are planning to do and which First Nations students will be involved. Ask for feedback. Unpack any concerns. Seek alternative perspectives. You might even invite them into your classes.
- Make some one-on-one time with your First Nations students and their families to let them know about your plans ahead of time. Find out what they think and feel. Be prepared to rethink things in response. Ask them if they have a sense of how they might want to participate. Ask again later. Establish a process for ongoing communication. Encourage reflective dialogue with the KESO.
- You never know how this work might touch on histories that are very recent and very personal for your First Nations students. All kinds of unexpected feelings might come up. Be sensitive to changes in students' behaviours and attitudes and responsive to their changing needs.

*"Ask yourself, 'How will this contribute to a deeper understanding of Australian Aboriginal culture, customs, history and present issues?'"*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

**Q:** What if my students do something racist?

**A:** Don't be surprised.

You are bound to have at least one experience of a student either doing or saying something racist. Someone might repeat a racist remark they've heard at home, seen in the news or read online. Or maybe it will be an improvised scene with unintentionally racist stereotypes.

- Racism is racism whether you intended it or not.
- Be prepared for that racist moment (and the next one and the next). Turn it into a teachable moment through non-judgemental whole class discussion.
- Think of other ways to turn racist moments into opportunities to teach students to care more about their impact than their intent.

- Supporting students to relearn their relationships with racism is challenging. To better understand why, read about, learn about, discuss and explore concepts such as white fragility, white privilege, unconscious bias and whitewashing (see links in [Resources](#)).
- Consider reaching out to parents. Invite them to support this work by continuing the conversations at home.

**Q:** How am I supposed to take all of this on by myself?

**A:** You're not.

There are all kinds of connections you can develop, not only to get support from others, but because collaboration is generally considered good practice when working in this cultural space.

- Take a whole-school approach. If the information is not publicly available, do some investigating to get a sense of how and where First Nations content is being taught across your school's curriculum. Be public about what you are doing and why – you may be the start of a school-wide change for the better.
- Establish genuine connections with local First Nations peoples. Organise a consultation and/or incursion with a local professional cultural advisor. Most language or nation groups have a website with contact details. Although consultations and incursions can be expensive, they are the most effective way of informing First Nations knowledge in schools. Consider doing a school-wide consultation and/or incursion, or creating a local network with other Drama teachers to add a further layer of support and share the costs.
- Read and follow the [Protocols for Koorie Education](#).
- Check out the links to other resources for teachers and schools in the [Resources](#) section.

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# GETTING STARTED

**Q:** How do I get my students to feel interested in First Nations histories and cultures?

**A:** Support them to feel that it is their history and culture too.

It makes sense to think about the history of the First Nations of Australia as a part of Australian history. But too often, it's taught as something completely separate and students understandably struggle to see the relevance to their own lives. Likewise, if First Nations cultures are only referenced when teaching First Nations content, it is difficult for students to think of those cultures as having anything to do with their own. On the other hand, by embedding First Nations awareness in your everyday classroom culture, you encourage familiarity and connectedness.

*"If they embrace that history, if they were taught that history from when they were young, then it is their history just like Captain Cook is their history."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

Here are a few simple ways to begin:

- Include an Acknowledgement of Country as part of your daily or weekly routine. Have students research and present their own personal acknowledgement to develop ongoing awareness of the histories and peoples of your local Country.
- The [AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#) is a good place for students to begin researching the history of the Country your school calls home.
- Decorate your classroom with words and images of your local Nation and Country.
- Display the AIATSIS map as an easy reference point to connect First Nations playwrights and stories with Country.
- Celebrate and acknowledge key dates on the [Koorie Education Calendar](#).
- Arrange an incursion. There are many fantastic groups who will come to your school and work with your students. The best place to start looking for one is on the website for your local First Peoples. They will direct you towards incursions that are culturally relevant to your area.

*"When you're going into doing a play, it's not like, 'Now we're doing this black thing.' It's like, 'This is just an extension of what's already been in our environment.'"*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

On a deeper level, we can encourage empathetic understanding by engaging students in drama-based explorations of the similarities between different people's histories and cultures, including First Nations peoples, themselves, and their extended families and communities.

Here are some suggestions for making connections:

- Map and explore all students' family origins – after all, everyone is indigenous to somewhere.
- Study traditional and contemporary First Nations cultural practices that are relevant to your students' backgrounds and interests. For example, have students compare traditional Chinese and First Nations healing practices, Australian Rules Football and Marngrook.
- Explore similarities with experiences of colonisation or oppression in other cultural contexts, including students' own (eg the colonisation of India or Africa; oppression of Jews, homosexuals, people with disabilities, and others during the Holocaust; forced post-war migration of poor British children to Australia and Canada).

*"Make the links, find out what experiences exist within the history of the kids within the classroom because we're ultimately trying to humanise and make what happened to us here mean something to them."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

*"Anytime that you're exploring an Indigenous concept or a historical thing, pan it out to the world experience, the universal experience."*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

- Explore parallels between Dreaming stories and origin stories from other spiritual traditions, including students' own. This strategy can also support students to understand the spiritual significance of First Nations Dreamings.
- Think about your existing strategies for supporting students to feel personally connected to the social, political and cultural contexts of particular plays and performance traditions. How could you adapt and apply them to encourage connections with First Nations cultures and histories?
- Introduce relevant Contemporary Indigenous plays that parallel other texts and performance styles you are teaching. For example, if you are studying *Medea*, look at *Black Medea* as a contemporary adaptation. If you are teaching about stock characters as a convention of *Commedia dell'Arte*, explore how stereotypes are subverted in plays like Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back* and Sam Cook's *Got No Dot*.

**Q:** How can I support students to move through difficult feelings?

**A:** Providing opportunities for students to genuinely reflect on their emotions, attitudes, discomforts, and assumptions is probably the most powerful way to teach for reconciliation.

- Embed opportunities for reflection throughout the entire process. Incorporate both individual and collaborative reflective tasks. Invite students to reflect through multiple mediums; for example, class discussions, journal writing, painting and drawing, mind maps, video diaries, etc.

- Facing the difficult truths about our shared history as First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians will be confronting for many students who are likely to feel all kinds of uncomfortable emotions. Create regular opportunities for students to reflect on their feelings – especially uncomfortable ones like shame, guilt, and fear. Encourage them to feel into the fullness of their feelings without judgement and then reflect: Where do those feelings come from? Who do they serve? And how might they resolve them?

*“Imagine everywhere you walk, there’s massacre blood. When you grow your vegetables, it’s grown out of the blood of Aboriginal people. You’ve got Aboriginal DNA in you because the food that you’ve eaten has got Aboriginal blood on it. We’re marinated in it.”*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

- Expect your students to feel shocked and unsettled by this work. Encourage regular reflection on how students' identities and identification with colonial Australia are being shifted or challenged. Encourage reflective attention not only on Australia's colonial past, but also the present. Support them to make connections between the two. At the end of the devising process, invite extended reflections on how their attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, or behaviours have been affected through their experience.

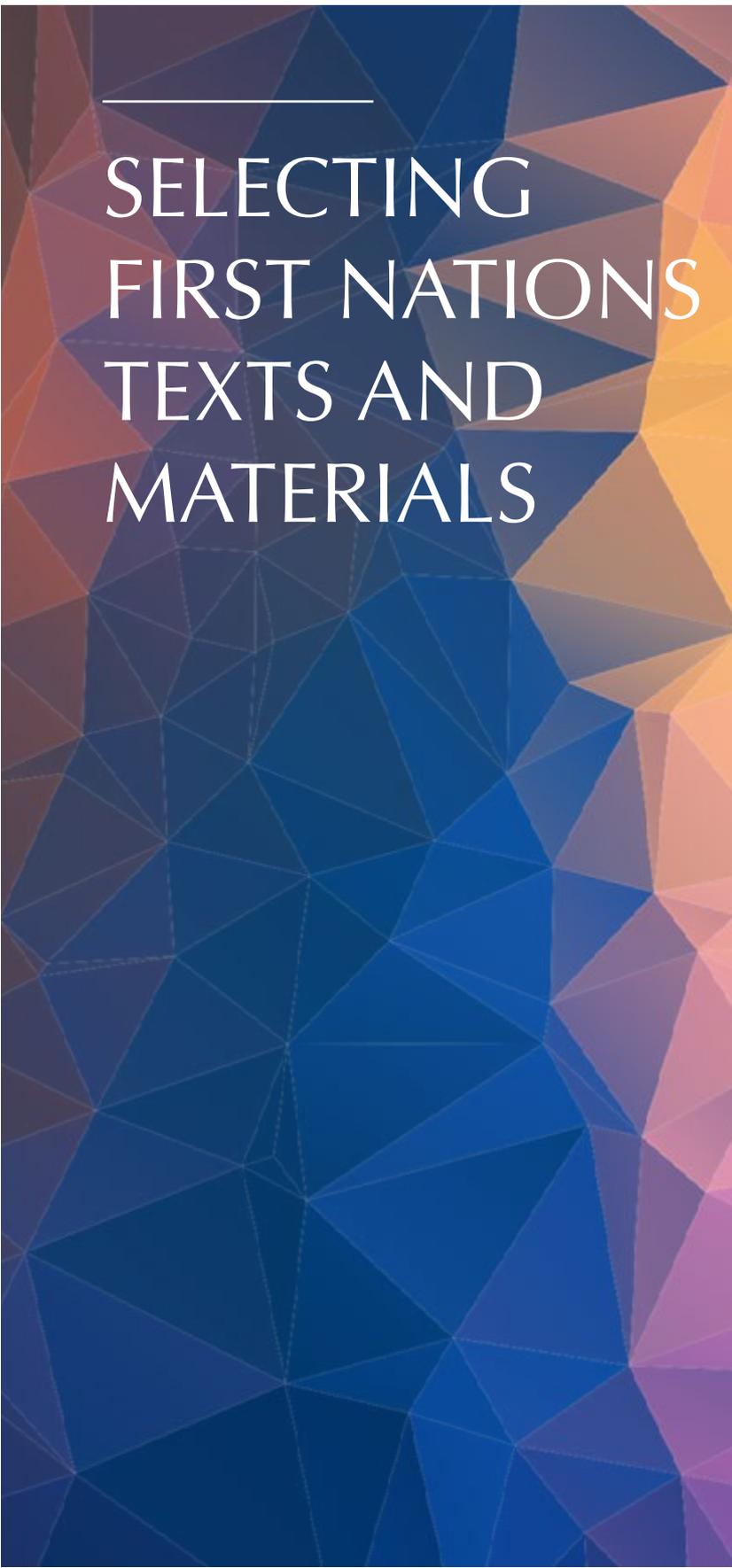
*“There is a disconnection. A lot of people - not only students - go ‘Oh, that happened a long time ago, don’t worry about that.’... Make that connection between the past and the present. Everything you do in the past affects right now.”*

ILBIJERRI Advisory Group

- Throughout this resource, you are encouraged to share with your students the complex and sometimes conflicting perspectives on what it means for performance-makers to work respectfully with the content, perspectives, narratives, and arts practices of First Nations peoples. In doing so, we hope that students will feel a genuine responsibility to learn more about working with First Nations peoples and performance traditions while simultaneously appreciating why there can never be simple answers or straightforward solutions. Invite students to reflect on what they've learned about professional theatre practices and the responsibilities of individual performance-makers within the industry.

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# SELECTING FIRST NATIONS TEXTS AND MATERIALS

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**Q:** Which First Nations texts should I use in class?

**A:** The ones you have permission to use

Whether you are working on a student-devised piece or a scripted drama, there are all kinds of First Nations texts and materials you might want to draw on during the creative process and there is certainly no shortage of available resources (especially online). When choosing materials, it is important to understand the long history of the theft of First Nations art, stories, languages and knowledges. This theft has many guises, including cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is when a *dominant* culture adopts elements from the cultures of *marginalised* or *disadvantaged* minorities and misuses them in some way. For example, without permission, without remuneration, or without regard for the original cultural or spiritual context. This power imbalance between groups is the problem that distinguishes cultural appropriation from equal cultural exchange.

Cultural appropriation takes various forms. Here are some ways to avoid it when selecting First Nations texts to use in your classroom:

- Consider the original purpose, context, and intended audience.

- Confirm that the material has been published by the artist or with their permission. Historically, many art works by First Nations peoples were used without permission and/or without any remuneration to the artist. One famous example is the painting depicting the sacred mourning rites of the Manharnju people on the Australian \$1 bill. Yolngu artist, David Malangi Daymirringu, was neither consulted about the use of his painting nor even advised of it until after the \$1 bill was already printed and in circulation. Although he was eventually paid, it is doubtful that he would have agreed to the painting being used in the first place.

*“It’s important to ensure that the story you’ve borrowed from a book has got on it that it has been retold by an Aboriginal person from that area and that it is an authorised book.”*

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- Be especially wary of potential copyright breaches and cultural violations when selecting online materials. Beware of unauthorised recordings of sacred ceremonies and contemporary performances and non-Indigenous renditions of stolen Dreaming stories. Here are some other suggestions for selecting and using online materials in particular:

*“There are many stories that are not for use for public availability... Traditionally this would be equivalent to breaking the law.”*

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- All media: Acknowledge the artist when presenting their work to your students.
- Photographs: Wherever possible, seek permission to use the image, acknowledge where it has come from and who is represented in it. If it is not possible to find this information, explore why that might be the case.
- Video: Contact the people who took it to check that it is ok to use. Some videos are recorded without permission. If it looks like this may be the case, don’t use them.
- All visual media: Consult with your local community about the protocols for depicting deceased persons. While mourning protocols vary between Nations, it is a common practice for a deceased person’s name to be changed and for images of them to be suppressed for a period of time after their death. Teach your students about this cultural practice. If you teach First Nations students, privately discuss how you will attend to observing these protocols in class. If you are doing a public performance, include a warning to advise if you will be showing images of deceased persons.
- Music: make sure that your school has the appropriate permissions to use it and that it is appropriately paid for.
- Wherever possible, choose materials with local significance, created by local artists. Many people think of the Rainbow Serpent, didgeridoos, and dot-paintings as iconic representations of ‘Indigenous Australian culture.’ Actually, there is no such thing. Different Nations have their own unique cultural traditions of story-telling, dance,

music, and painting. Too often, the complexity and variety of First Nations peoples and cultures both pre- and post-Invasion are misrepresented and oversimplified. By choosing materials of local significance, you are modelling awareness of the importance of Country and of the diversity of First Nations cultures.

- Because so many traditional stories, artefacts and techniques have been lost and destroyed since Invasion, finding local materials can be quite challenging. If you get stuck, try the following:
  - Find online materials by using the Country where your school is located as a search term. If you don't know this, find out. The AIATSIS website includes a [map of First Nations](#).
  - See if your school and/or local library have print resources which are not available online.
  - Contact your school region's Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO), and ask them for help.
  - If, for whatever reason, you choose materials from non-local artists, discuss your choice with students. Explore the original context, how it is relevant to your own, and possible reasons why similar local resources are not available.

## Further advice for selecting plays that students will study and perform

- Be clear (with yourself, with your students) about why you're choosing to study a First Nations play.
- Study local plays. Having said this, 'local' is sometimes a complex idea since one play can have connections to many different communities. For example, *Coranderrk: We will show the country* (2013) was co-written by non-Indigenous (Giordano Nanni) and Yorta Yorta/Kurnai (Andrea James) playwrights. The play is set on Wurundjeri Country, and is 'local' to Healesville and Melbourne in particular. But the play also features First Nations characters (based on real people) who are Woiwurrung, Taungerong, and Dja Dja Wurrung, all of whom came to be living on the same land. As a story of Koorie resistance to colonisation and First Nations struggle for self-determination, *Coranderrk* could be considered 'local' to these Nations, too.
- If you choose a play that isn't local, develop a local perspective on it.
- Study recent plays as well as older ones (see the [Narragunnawali list](#) or [BlakStage](#) for ideas).
- You may be concerned about studying contemporary plays with scenes that depict challenging content such as abuse and suicide. Exploring these stories with students is important work in supporting them to understand the ongoing effects of institutionalised racism and intergenerational trauma. Rather than ruling out these plays altogether, consider other possibilities such as editing out explicit scenes (especially for performance explorations) while still addressing the broad themes as part of your play study.
- Whichever play you choose, it is important to do thorough – and critical – dramaturgical research into the historical, social, political and cultural contexts in which the play is set and in which it was written. Because of this, you might prefer to choose plays that come with extensive notes to help you out, eg Jack Davis' *No Sugar*, Jane Harrison's *Stolen*, Steve Hawke's *Jandamarra*, and Nanni and James' *Coranderrk*.

*“The expectation is just as with any other play: That they research the play; they research the background. You know, you do it with Shakespeare, you do it with Greek Tragedies, you do it with everything else. Why can't you do it with our work as well? Plays are all about context. If you're not exploring the context you shouldn't be exploring the play.”*

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- The advantage of this approach is that you will be well supported in being able to confidently teach the play in (a frequently complex) context. The problem is that it can lead to the reproduction of a very small number of plays at the expense of many others which are just as worthy of study and performance.
- If you do opt to have students study and perform a lesser known play, consider making publicly accessible your dramaturgical and teaching notes and strategies in order to support the future work of other teachers and students.

## Further advice for deciding which professional productions students will study

Taking your students to see productions by First Nations playwrights and production companies is a powerful way to embed First Nations content in your Drama program. Here are some things to consider about which plays you will see:

- Melbourne’s most well-known contemporary First Nations performing arts companies are [ILBIJERRI Theatre Company](#) and [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#). There are many other First Nations theatre and dance companies operating in Victoria and Australia, too (see [Resources](#)).
- [Malthouse Theatre](#) and [Melbourne Theatre Company](#) tend to produce at least one production each year by a First Nations playwright (see [Resources](#)).
- Contact your local Art Centre, Language/Culture Centre, or other community organisations to see if they are hosting any First Nations events.
- You might also choose to take your students to see productions of plays by non-Indigenous playwrights that include First Nations themes and characters. Sometimes, these plays are developed in collaboration with First Nations communities. Often, they are not. In such cases, non-Indigenous playwrights may be seen to be problematically appropriating the narratives of First Nations peoples for their own financial or artistic gain. In the absence of consultation, these plays risk presenting stereotypical and damaging portrayals of First Nations peoples. In any case, they do not ‘count’ as including First Nations perspectives in your classroom.
- If you decide to see – and study – a professional production of a play by a non-Indigenous playwright that explores First Nations themes or characters, discuss these subtle but vital distinctions with your students.

*“They’re not always Aboriginal-endorsed plays. They may be problematic performances... So they think that they’re ticking their ‘Indigenous content’ box but what they’re actually going to see is, again, the European narrative on our stories.”*

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# PERFORMING TRADITIONAL CULTURES

**Q:** Is it appropriate for students to perform traditional dances or ceremonies within the performance?

**A:** No.

Even amongst First Nations peoples, there are strict protocols governing who can/not perform particular traditional rites, dances, and ceremonies. Because traditional culture is not intended for public performance, any artist (including First Nations artists) who wants to include aspects of traditional culture in their theatre practice has to obtain special permission and work with cultural advisors to ensure it is done appropriately.

*“Even as Aboriginal people writing our own stories, we have to go through the same protocols of getting permission: Is it appropriate for us to use this language? Where does this story come from? We have to do all of that or we get in trouble ourselves.”*

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Advice and implications for your work with students:

- Explicitly teach about the sacred significance of traditional performance as spiritual practice so that students can understand *why* it is inappropriate to mimic traditional cultural elements in their performance work.
- Never encourage your students to recreate a traditional dance or ceremony without explicit permission and guidance from an Elder.
- When exploring performative elements of traditional culture (eg story-telling, dance, music, symbol), focus on developing students’ deep understanding of *sacred purpose* and how it is realised through the applications of *dramatic conventions*. For example, have students explore the role and essential elements of ritual ceremonies across cultures and then apply those elements to develop a ritual ceremony which is personally and collectively meaningful.
- When devising, if students want to include sacred dances, ceremonies, or ritual objects in their performance, ask them why. What narrative purpose does it serve? What is their intent? If you are satisfied with their responses, facilitate a devising process that will support them to create respectful theatrical representations and include opportunities for them to develop appropriate solutions of their own. For some examples, see ‘ceremony’ and ‘dance’ in the further advice below.

**Q:** Can we use real artefacts as props and costumes?

**A:** No.

By using real artefacts or worse, cheap knock-offs from tourist shops, you are appropriating important cultural and spiritual objects for entertainment and feeding an industry of exploitation. Didgeridoos (more properly called *yidaki*) and ochres have particularly strong spiritual significance and special permissions are always required. This makes them especially inappropriate for classroom use. Instead:

- Keep traditional props and costumes to a minimum. Have students explore the use of Brechtian techniques, mime, narration, and other theatrical devices instead.
- Use the stuff you’ve already got (eg in your drama storeroom) to suggest cultural objects.
- Where appropriate, use multimedia representations of First Nations peoples engaging in traditional cultural practices (see advice on [selecting First Nations texts and materials](#) for important things to consider if you want to go down this path).
- If a First Nations student wants to use elements of traditional culture in a performance, talk with them privately to ensure their parents/community are happy for them to share this.

*“Ask yourself: What are ways that we could truthfully represent that spear with the stuff that we’ve got?”*

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## Further advice for performing plays with scenes depicting traditional dances, ceremonies, or elements of culture:

- Ceremony: Rather than *performing* it, have students *narrate* it over a dark stage. They can do this by reading the stage directions or by developing a monologue. Students will have to develop deep understanding of a ceremony in order to convey its mood, ritual significance, and symbolism through language alone.
- Dance: Cautiously use movement to develop a personally and collectively meaningful scene that does *not* draw on traditional First Nations dance.
- Ochre: Don't use it, even if it is mentioned in the script. Mime the scene rather than using paint or another substitute.
- Language: If Language is included in a play, that is a strong sign to contact the playwright about permission to perform it. Involve your students in this process to help them understand that anyone doing this play would have to get the language right and permission to speak it. If you do get permission, ensure that you get the pronunciation and meaning right—if at all possible get a speaker of the language in, but otherwise look for apps, advice, send emails etc.
- If you decide that it is appropriate to perform a scene as scripted, ensure that students precisely follow all explicit stage directions.
- Work with your local community and/or cultural advisors to devise other solutions.

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# DEVisING WORK WITH FIRST NATIONS THEMES



**Q:** What kind of devising processes should students use?

**A:** You will have your own preferred play-making techniques and approaches for teaching devised ensemble performance. There is no reason to think that you need to abandon those processes or adopt new ones just because you are exploring First Nations histories or artworks.

Having said that, it is worth reflecting on your preferred techniques and conventions in light of context. For example:

- **Improvisation:** It is a sad and strange reality that many of your students may not ever have come into contact with a person of First Nations descent, let alone have any appreciation of First Nations peoples' life experiences before or after Invasion. With limited awareness and understanding, asking students to improvise scenes about the experiences of First Nations characters risks all kinds of problematic representations including historical inaccuracies, racist generalisations, stereotypical characterisations, and cultural appropriation. This is not to suggest you should abandon improvisation altogether, but you might need to adjust your approach. For example, avoid stereotypical and generalised representations by inviting students to improvise scenes based on a researched understanding of specific people or events.
- **Comedy:** Any time you are exploring the oppression of minority groups by a dominant culture is a great opportunity to drill down into the political function of satire in critiquing the powerful. It is crucial that students understand the difference between using comedy to lampoon the powerful and using comedy to mock the powerless (eg through parody, pastiche, caricature, etc) which should never be tolerated.

*"In their lifetime, some people don't ever see an Aboriginal – they never see an Aboriginal person."*

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The techniques and conventions from the following performance traditions are also great for exploring power and oppression, and for making connections to students' own lives:

- **Theatre of the Oppressed:** Encourages critical thinking about oppression and power. Forum Theatre processes support participants to explore oppressions and rehearse solutions on stage before trying them out in the 'real world.' Image Theatre processes expose assumptions and prejudice by making them tangible through bodily expression.
- **Process Drama:** In its various forms, Process Drama invites exploration of a problem or theme through improvised activities in which students and the teacher participate both in and out of role. By switching roles and experiencing multiple perspectives, students access more holistic and empathetic understandings of the subject under investigation.
- **Epic Theatre:** Aims to prevent the audience from losing themselves in the world of a play, instead inviting metacognitive thinking about what is occurring on stage and the relevance to their own lives. Actors frequently play multiple characters, break the fourth wall, change the set in full view of the audience, use placards to announce subtext, and use freeze-frames to encourage the audience to think about the frozen moment.

*"This is the beautiful thing about drama: that the tools are there to be able to do it."*

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**Q:** What themes and concepts should students explore?

**A:** Any. What is important is that the exploration emphasises the complexity and diversity of people's experiences, including those of your students.

- Explore the complexities of 'place'. What do the words 'my community, my country, my home' mean to students? How do they build their sense of identity? Where have their ancestors come from? How have they come to be living where they are now? Who lived there before? If you do not have any First Nations students in your class, incorporate a First Nations perspective into discussions and performances using verbatim theatre techniques.
- Explore the multiple and contested meanings of various words (eg Community), events (eg Australia Day), and texts (eg Australia's national anthem).
- Explore First Nations perspectives of aspects of Australia's settler mythologies (eg convicts and bushrangers). Tell all sides of the story. Encourage students to understand that there is never one perspective or one experience that can be generalised to a whole group.
- Use real artefacts - letters, photos, diary entries, newspaper articles, policies, etc – to give your students an entry into the diverse social, cultural, and political contexts of Australia's past and present.

**Q:** Is it appropriate for students to devise work based on Dreaming stories?

**A:** Yes, and no.

Dreaming stories are multi-layered, complex systems for communicating knowledge and law. At the risk of generalising, if you are a non-Indigenous teacher, the stories you are familiar with are probably the simplest versions, the kind told to children. Likewise, many of us learned these stories in primary school so our appreciation of the genre is probably quite simplistic. Handled with the humility of this understanding, it is possible to use publicly available Dreaming stories when devising work with students, but it is vital that we contextualise these stories as playing a very particular part within a large and complex system of lore.

*"The misconception around is the fact that they use the word 'simple' in the same sentence as 'Dreaming stories'. Actually, Dreaming stories are so complex, multi-layered, but they think of them as little fables. And it's, again, because that's the way that they've been presented."*

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- Contextualise students' understanding of Dreaming stories by exploring the role of storytelling in oral traditions, the place and purpose of Dreaming stories within First Nations spiritual practices, and/or the conventions of Dreaming stories as a narrative genre.
- Only use stories which have been published by First Nations peoples - and buy a copy!
- Dreaming stories are connected to Country so it is important to draw on local stories wherever possible.
- Create opportunities for holistic experiences of Dreaming stories. Connect the exploration to the Country you are on. Use song, dance, acting, art, science, and any other forms and ways of knowing that may be relevant to a particular story. Remember that First Nations knowledge is not separated into the siloes of Western disciplines.
- If you decide to use Dreaming stories as a stimulus for students' original devised work, ensure that you frame and explore the stimulus stories in the same way you would a biblical story, or other religious and sacred text.

*"Start local. Engage with local community. Invite elders in to tell stories from local areas."*

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# CASTING FIRST NATIONS ROLES

**Q:** Is it ok to cast non-Indigenous students as First Nations characters?

**A:** It's complicated

To understand the complexities, it's important to consider current perspectives and protocols regarding the casting of First Nations roles in *professional* theatre and film contexts. Specifically:

- First Nations characters should be played by First Nations actors.
- There are protocols for First Nations actors to follow regarding who can play certain roles, depending on gender, Nation, law, and other factors.
- Non-Indigenous performance-makers should not make money from telling First Nations stories, unless it's in collaboration with First Nations artists or communities.
- Ignoring these protocols is a form of cultural appropriation.
- These same arguments are also currently made in relation to the casting and representation of other minority groups and their stories (eg gender and sexually diverse characters).

*"Oh, White people have stolen so many stories... It's always at the sake of mob that have lost everything already."*

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Teach your students about how casting norms in the theatre industry have changed over time in response to broader societal shifts in attitude and consciousness (to learn more about cultural appropriation and other casting considerations, check out the links in [Resources](#)).

**Q:** Ok, so should I apply the same industry standards with my students?

**A:** Good question.

This question was the focus of robust deliberation by the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group. In particular, the group recognized that:

- Because Drama is a powerful tool which can be harnessed to encourage empathetic understanding, there are particular educational benefits in having students study First Nations perspectives and experiences through drama-based explorations of First Nations content and characters.
- If professional protocols were applied in schools and non-Indigenous actors were prohibited from playing First Nations characters, there would be many Australian classrooms in which First Nations stories simply could not be explored. In this sense, transferring industry protocols to educational settings could inadvertently contribute to the continued silencing of First Nations peoples' stories and voices.

*"Creating work is how you put yourself in someone else's shoes and really create understanding about the lived history of what happened, rather than just reading it out of a book or watching a documentary and expecting that that's going to have some emotional impact... This is the reason why we're artists and we work in this space. It's because we know it's a powerful tool."*

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In the end, the group cautiously agreed that:

- Provided there are clear educational reasons for doing so, non-Indigenous Drama and Theatre Studies students *should* be allowed to explore and present First Nations characters.
- This advice should be applied only to productions that are part of the formal Drama and Theatre Studies curriculum. It does not extend, for example, to non-Indigenous students playing First Nations characters in co-curricular productions (eg school musicals, House drama competitions, etc). To avoid cultural appropriation when selecting texts for co-curricular productions, teachers should consider the tensions discussed at the beginning of this document, consult relevant industry protocols, and seek further guidance accordingly.

*“There was one Jewish school that did a performance of Stolen ... and at the end, when they broke out of character, they actually talked about their own family experiences with the Holocaust... and it educated a whole generation of Jewish people about the Stolen Generations.”*

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- It is ultimately your responsibility as the teacher to ensure that your students appreciate the complexities, that they understand that it is inappropriate for non-Indigenous actors to perform First Nations characters outside the school context, and that their portrayals of First Nations characters are sensitive, appropriate and true.
- For further advice on respectfully developing and performing First Nations characters, check out the sections on [Developing First Nations Characters](#) and [Public Performances of Devised & Scripted Works](#).

If there are First Nations students in your class:

- First Nations students should not be limited to playing First Nations roles.
- First Nations students should never be expected to act as spokesperson or expert, to play particular kinds of characters, or to have all the answers. If they choose to offer advice or ask to take on First Nations roles, teachers should welcome their input and ensure that other students respect their offerings.
- In some cases, it may not be appropriate for your First Nations students to play certain roles. Discuss this privately with them and/or their family.

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# DEVELOPING FIRST NATIONS CHARACTERS

The background of the page is a complex, abstract geometric pattern composed of numerous overlapping triangles. The color palette is diverse, featuring deep blues, purples, and oranges, creating a textured, low-poly effect. The text is centered in the upper portion of this patterned area.

**Q:** What can I do to ensure that my students create sensitive and appropriate portrayals of First Nations characters?

**A:** At the heart of this answer is a basic tenet of acting: Play for truth.

- Students need to research their characters in depth and draw connections to them—personalise them, want to take care of them.
- To deepen character development, encourage students' empathetic understanding. Invite them to imagine themselves in their character's shoes, applying their research to help them feel into their character's fears and feelings.
- The rehearsal process should support students to discover the truth of their characters so that they begin to think of them simply as characters, not First Nations characters.
- Prohibit mimicry, mocking, or reliance on stereotypes to develop characters.
- When devising: basing their characters on researched understanding of the lived experiences of real historical and contemporary First Nations people will help your students avoid stereotypes, and represent a variety of perspectives and experiences.
- When working with scripts: Consider the protocols of different First Nations cultures around gender. It can sometimes (though not always) be inappropriate for a student to play a different gender in a First Nations play. Look into other relevant protocols before you begin. Consider how you might use theatrical devices to address them (with permission from the publisher or playwright, of course).

*"It's about playing the truth. And truth doesn't come down to accents or skin colours or stereotypes. It's about emotion and experience and feelings."*

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**Q:** Should students use Aboriginal accents?

**A:** No. Never.

Aboriginal English is a dialect of Australian English, with its own distinctive vocabulary, grammar, and regional varieties. Spoken by many First Nations peoples across Australia, Aboriginal English(es) reflect cultural values and concepts within First Nations cultures, and can contain traditional words and non-verbal communication, depending on the region. Because it has been used to stereotype and mock First Nations peoples, it is not appropriate for non-Indigenous students to use this language. To develop your understanding of Aboriginal English, follow the links in [Resources](#).

- When devising: First Nations characters should speak standard Australian English. Students should not adopt an accent or speak in Aboriginal English.
- When performing playscripts: If Aboriginal English is used, read it exactly as is in your normal accent. Explore what Aboriginal English is and where the different words have come from/what they mean. Approach as you would Shakespearean English.
- The dialogue in some plays includes derogatory words, including ones your students may not be familiar with, like 'half-caste'. Discuss the context and history of these words, why they are hurtful, and why they are not appropriate to use outside the play.

*"Language is concepts, language is paradigms, language is everything."*

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*"When people have their own languages taken away from them, essentially what they're having taken away from them is their ability to tell their stories."*

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PUBLIC  
PERFORMANCES  
OF DEvised  
& SCRIPTED  
WORKS

**Q:** Can we perform First Nations plays for the public?

**A:** Yes, with caution, sensitivity, and respect.

Remember that the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group differentiate between students publicly performing subject-related productions of works they have developed as part of their coursework studies and whole school productions that are disconnected from Drama and Theatre Studies education outcomes (see [casting First Nations roles](#) to remind yourself of the difference)

- If you are planning to present a public production of a published work, you must apply for performance rights via the usual processes.
- Before you begin work on your production, consider contacting your local community (via their website) to let them know what you are doing. Invite them to be involved in your rehearsal process and/or to attend a performance.
- Before each performance, include an announcement and/or a program note from you as the teacher so that you can explain to your audience the rationale for having students perform this work and educate them about the different permissions and protocols for presenting this work in educational vs professional contexts.
- Begin a public performance with the actors breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to the audience, out of role, to introduce themselves, their backgrounds, and the character they will play. This encourages the audience to think critically about the casting of non-Indigenous students in First Nations roles. Furthermore, with the audience left in no doubt that the performers are playing First Nations characters, the actors can comfortably focus all their attention on playing for truth.
- If derogatory language is used in the performance, include an introduction/warning to explain why the words are being used and to emphasise that they are not acceptable for use outside the world of the play.

*“Have students introduce themselves, say where they’re from and then say, ‘I will be playing Anne, the role of a 34-year-old Aboriginal woman’ ...  
‘I will be playing the old Aboriginal man.’”*

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*“So it’s set up and then we would kind of know who you’re playing and you don’t need to do anything else.  
We will believe - we will go on that journey with you.”*

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DEFINING  
CONTEMPORARY  
INDIGENOUS  
THEATRE

**Q:** What are the conventions of Contemporary Indigenous Theatre as a performance style?

**A:** Would you mind rephrasing the question?

This question gave rise to interesting discussion among Advisory Group participants, some of whom were uncomfortable about the implications of being asked to talk about their art practice in this way.

- We began this resource with a discussion about the power of language and how the language we choose is an expression of our views and values. But language isn't just shaped by our world view; it also shapes the way we see the world. When we require people to speak – and therefore to think – about themselves in particular ways, language itself can become a form of colonisation.

For example, in many Western philosophical traditions, knowledge is divided into discrete categories. In The Arts, we differentiate between music, dance, and drama; we categorise expressive skills as distinct from dramatic elements and other theatrical conventions. Expecting all artists to speak about their work in terms of its performance style and theatrical conventions imposes Western ideas about art and artmaking which may be incompatible with their own ways of knowing, being, and art-making. In this sense, it may be experienced as a form of colonisation.

*“The whole idea of storytelling in today’s age, it’s such a White thing... Where it actually comes from in Indigenous storytelling is, like, you tell a story but that story is for country, for stars, for animals, for land. ... You sing the country: You don’t separate song, dance, acting. It’s all in one and it’s a part of your everyday life. Like, it’s not ‘let’s go to the theatre this weekend,’ you know?”*

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There was also some ambivalence about each of the individual terms ‘Indigenous Theatre,’ ‘performance style,’ and ‘conventions.’

- In talking about Contemporary *Indigenous* Theatre, we fail to distinguish between Nations and the distinctive traditions that might inform the work of contemporary Indigenous artists from different Nations.

*“The big buzz is ‘what is the Aboriginal convention? what is Aboriginal dramaturgy? what is Aboriginal writing?’ ... But then you’ve got an Aboriginal going, ‘Which mob? Which mob you were talking about here?’”*

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- Defining Contemporary Indigenous Theatre as a particular *performance style* places limitations on the kinds of stories contemporary First Nations theatre makers are supposed to tell and how they are supposed to tell them. For example, if a romantic comedy set in New York City is written by a First Nations playwright, does it qualify as Contemporary Indigenous Theatre? What about a Shakespeare play performed by a cast of First Nations actors?

*“If Aboriginal actors do Shakespeare, is it an Aboriginal play?”*

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- When we define a performance style by its *conventions*, we tend to emphasise the ‘what’ and ‘how’ over the ‘why.’ This might inadvertently lead to the oversimplification and misrepresentation of First Nations arts practices. For example, students might talk about ‘symbolic use of costume and makeup’ without understanding that, in the specific context of Contemporary Indigenous Theatre, the convention originated as a creative response to protocols prohibiting the use of sacred costumes and body paint outside of ritual spaces.

At the same time, the ILBIJERRI Advisory Group recognised that, in order to be studied meaningfully in schools, it might be necessary to frame 'Contemporary Indigenous Theatre' as a 'performance style' with associated 'theatrical conventions.' Here is some advice for doing so:

- Teach first and foremost that Contemporary Indigenous Theatre is theatre made by First Nations artists, regardless of the form and style of their work. As with many other contemporary theatre forms, Contemporary Indigenous Theatre is otherwise eclectic in its influences and conventions.
- As with all other tensions discussed in this resource, when teaching Contemporary Indigenous Theatre, we suggest that you do so critically. Invite conversation around the limitations and dilemmas associated with applying a 'performance styles' approach when studying the work of contemporary artists who do not necessarily think about art-making in these terms.
- The ILBIJERRI Advisory Group recommends that teachers read Dr Anne Marshall's chapter 'Singing your own songlines: approaches to Indigenous drama' in Mooney and Nicholls' (2004) book, *Drama Journeys: Inside Drama Learning*. Written by Marshall, a First Nations education scholar, the chapter provides a nuanced exploration of contemporary First Nations theatre practices through a performance styles lens, including a discussion of how and why particular theatrical conventions are sometimes employed. It also includes activity suggestions that support students to apply some of these conventions as part of their own performance making practice.

*"[Anne Marshall] wrote an amazing chapter called Singing Your Own Song Lines... about how to really deeply engage... It's got really, really beautiful techniques and devices... [to] get kids exploring, kind of, Indigenous storytelling techniques in the classroom."*

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# RESOURCES



## Terminology

[Terminology Guide \(Narragunnawali\)](#)

[Aboriginal, Indigenous or First Nations? \(Common Ground\)](#)

## Aboriginal English

[Aboriginal English \(Diana Eades\)](#)

[Koorie English Online \(DET\)](#)

[Koorie English Teacher Guidance Package \(FUSE\)](#)

[Structure and Meaning in Australian Aboriginal English \(restricted access\)](#)

## Protocols for using First Nations content in the performing arts

[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guidelines for Drama/Theatre Education \(Drama Australia\)](#)

[Pathways & Protocols: A filmmaker's guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts \(Terri Janke, Screen Australia\)](#)

[Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts \(Australia Council\)](#)

## Contemporary Indigenous Theatre

[Indigenous Theatre and the stories of our history – are we ready to listen? \(Dione Joseph, Right Now\)](#)

[A brief history of Indigenous Australian Contemporary Theatre \(Maryrose Casey & Cathy Craigie, Australian Plays\)](#)

[Singing your own Songlines \(Anne Marshall\)](#)

[The deep archive: Wesley Enoch on contemporary Indigenous arts practice](#)

[BlakStage \(Australian Plays\)](#)

[ILBIJERRI Theatre Company](#)

[Bangarra Dance Theatre](#)

## **Advice, support & professional learning resources for teachers & schools**

[Koorie Education Resources \(VAEAI\)](#)

[Protocols for Koorie education in Victorian primary & secondary schools \(VAEAI\)](#)

[Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture \(Victorian Department of Education and Training\)](#)

[Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education](#)

[Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Victoria \(VCAA\)](#)

[Your Story](#)

## **First Nations arts & media**

[National Indigenous Television \(NITV\)](#)

[IndigenousX](#)

[IndigiTube](#)

[The Black Rising Magazine](#)

[ABC Indigenous Portal](#)

[Wunungu Awara: Animating Indigenous Knowledges \(Monash University\)](#)

## **Education links & teaching resources**

[Common Ground: Sharing First Nations cultures, histories and lived experiences](#)

[Reconciliation Australia: Share our Pride](#)

[Magabala Books \(Reading Australia\)](#)

[25 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity With Students \(NY Times\)](#)

[Creative Spirits \(Note: non-Indigenous content producer\)](#)

[Melbourne Dreaming app \(AIATSIS\)](#)

[Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies](#)

[Curriculum Resources \(Narragunnawali\)](#)

[Yulunga Traditional Indigenous Games \(SportAus\)](#)

## Selected readings for teachers

9 lessons Australia has failed to learn from Aboriginal people (Welcome to Country)

10 questions I get from non-Indigenous students (Amy Thunig, IndigenousX)

I have trust issues with the future. I fear the racism my children will have to face. (Jade Towney, IndigenousX)

I'm an Aboriginal father. I don't want my kids to see racist garbage in the media. (Luke Pearson, IndigenousX)

Uluru Statement from the Heart

Indigenous community 'sits with' anthem schoolgirl (NITV)

National anthem protest: 9yo refuses to stand because anthem is for 'white people of Australia' (ABC)

Political divisiveness happens every time Indigenous people are the topic of national debate (Natalie Cromb, NITV)

Taking control of your unconscious bias? (Dr Norma Montague, HSBC)

10 things you should know about white privilege (Luke Pearson, Sophie Verass, NITV)

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack (Peggy McIntosh, Genius)

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism (Dr Robin DiAngelo, The Good Men Project)

Uluru Statement calls for First Nations' voice in the constitution (Australian Human Rights Commission)

Teaching Kids About The Stolen Generations Was Always Going To Be A Tough Lesson (Rachael Jacobs, HuffPost)

'But I am not Aboriginal I don't know how to do this stuff!' (Amy Thunig, The Baby Academic)

The Unplugging sparks debate by casting non-aboriginal actors in indigenous roles (Kim Wheeler, CBC)

Cast more Indigenous actors in 'non-Indigenous' roles, says Deborah Mailman (David Knox, TV Tonight)

10 or so questions to ask yourself before making art about a group you don't belong to (Hanorah, CBC)

Friday essay: the remarkable yidaki (and no, it's not a 'didge') (Christine Judith Nicholls, The Conversation)

At the time of publication, all URLs (website addresses) were checked for accuracy. However, as material on the Internet can change without notice, some links may no longer work.

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# KEY CONTRIBUTORS

The background of the page is a complex, abstract geometric pattern composed of numerous overlapping triangles. The color palette is diverse, featuring deep blues, purples, and oranges, creating a vibrant, multi-toned effect. The triangles vary in size and orientation, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

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