

Selecting and evaluating resources

An overview — with a new introduction and minor adaptations — of *A Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies*, published by Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne, in 1995.

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Introduction

When developing school-based resources or selecting texts or materials, teachers should carefully evaluate their educational value for embedding Indigenous perspectives. In particular, it is essential that the materials selected are sensitive and adequate in their treatment of Aboriginal aspects and Torres Strait Islander aspects of the subject matter.

In general, sound evaluation techniques recognise:

- cultural diversity of Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia
- that some materials are site-specific and may not be suitable for use in other states
- that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people should be consulted about the appropriateness of including culturally sensitive issues or potentially distressing content in curriculum materials
- that Aboriginal viewpoints and Torres Strait Islander viewpoints are reflected.

A number of guidelines are available to help teachers to evaluate resources. Two that have particular value are:

- *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies*, developed and published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra in May 2000
- *A Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies*, published by Curriculum Corporation, Melbourne, in 1995.



A Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies (outline)

The resource guide provides an excellent checklist for teachers. Despite its earlier publication date, it can be seen as applying the broad framework of the AIATSIS guidelines specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts. The evaluation criteria suggest questions to ask, things to look for and action to take when evaluating resources.

Five key evaluation criteria are recommended:

1. authenticity
2. balanced nature of the presentation
3. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation
4. accuracy and support
5. exclusion of content of a secret or sacred nature.

1. Authenticity

Before the 1980s, much material contained stereotyped and very generalised information. There are now many resources which have been written by, or in consultation with, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. These resources often contain information about particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, thus illustrating the diversity and complexity of both cultures.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Is the material up to date?	Date of publication.	As a general rule, do not use material published before 1980. Check if the publication is a reprint of an earlier edition.
Is the material accurate?	Many books indicate that Aboriginal people from some areas no longer exist, e.g. "Truganini was the last Tasmanian Aborigine"; "the Jugara people died out"; "The Kalkadoons were killed in battle". One book cites Yagan, a noted Western Australian man, as being from Victoria. Such statements are not only inaccurate, but offensive.	Consult with Aboriginal Studies consultants, and/or local communities.
Does the material perpetuate the concept of <i>terra nullius</i> ?	Statements such as "a vast and empty land" and "explorers discovering vast tracts of unused land" ignore prior occupancy.	Do not use.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Does the material ignore or misrepresent Aboriginal resistance to European occupation of the land?	Aboriginal people are seldom portrayed as defenders of the land to which they belong, but rather as treacherous, murderous, etc.	It is best not to use this kind of material with students; use material that presents a balanced view.
Does the material over-generalise?	Statements such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the men played didgeridoos”; • “Aboriginal people hunted kangaroos with spears”; • “Torres Strait Islanders cultivated certain vegetables”; and • “Aborigines were nomadic” do not apply to all groups.	Avoid using resources that contain sweeping generalisations and which ignore the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
Is the number and diversity of both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal languages and cultures ignored?	Passages which refer to “the Aboriginal language” are misleading. References should refer to particular languages, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Kamilaroi language • the Western Arnernte language • the Kurna language. 	Explain to students that such descriptions do not apply to all groups. Locate and use recent publications that clearly distinguish between groups. Apply caution when using resources that do not specify groups (see above). If unsure of information, consult with experts or local community.
Are illustrations and photographs positive and accurate portrayals of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and relevant to the text?	Some illustrations depict Aboriginal people as caricatures, or Europeanised with dark skins, such as the sketches of French naturalist Peron. Some photographs and illustrations are intrusive, demeaning and show negative stereotypes. In some instances, illustrations do not relate directly to the text.	Use resources which portray Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people positively, unless such portrayals are to be used as examples of racist and stereotyped reports. Ensure that illustrations and photographs relate to the text.
Are photographs accompanied by captions which name the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person*, or group, and indicate where they come from?	Many photographs do not dignify the person or group with a name and location.	Make students aware of the courtesy of identifying people and groups portrayed. If photographs are of local people or groups, local community members may be able to assist with identification.

* Be aware that in some areas it is not appropriate to use the name or photograph of a deceased person. Consult with the local community.

2. *Balanced nature of the presentation*

Resources in Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies must value the diversity and complexity of both cultures.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Is there over-representation of men in the material?	Some books over-emphasise the importance of men's roles, particularly in ceremonies and food gathering.	Do not use. Find other resources that present a more balanced view of women and men.
Does the material trivialise women's roles in Aboriginal societies?	Statements and photographs that imply that the male tasks are more onerous, and trivialise the importance of women's roles, e.g. reference to food suppliers.	Do not use. Select materials that present both men's and women's roles.
Are stereotyping and racist connotations present?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text and graphics which indicate that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people were far more "backward" than another race of people. • Text which clearly demonstrates the bias of the author, e.g. "treacherous blacks" and "brave settlers". • References to intellectual and physical capabilities of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, e.g. "uneducable blacks" or "all blacks are good at sports and running". • The use of derogatory terms to describe Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. • Phrases which trivialise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander technology, e.g. "simple" weapons. • Negative connotations when referring to education, lifestyles, technology, transmission of information, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – "The Aborigines had no tradition of reading and writing"; – "The Aborigines did not grow crops or keep animals"; – "Life was a constant search for food". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not use the resource with students unless material presenting a more accurate view is also presented or is available for follow-up research by students. • Do not use unless materials countering these views are also presented. • Do not use unless materials countering these views are also presented. • Do not use the resource with students. If unsure, check with Aboriginal Studies consultants, reference groups or local community. • Locate resources that acknowledge the complexity and uniqueness of technology in Aboriginal societies and Torres Strait Islander societies. • Use resources that have positive content describing the often complex nature of aspects of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal lifestyles, education practices, and transmissions of information.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Does the resource exclude some readers by assuming a European background?	A text which suggests that all students' ancestors came from colder climates and that, unlike "us", Aboriginal people ate most things raw, assumes there are no Aboriginal students or Torres Strait Islander students in the class.	Use with caution.
Does the resource exclude Torres Strait Islander people?	Some materials do not mention Torres Strait Islander people at all, and some use an asterisk (*) and footnote to indicate that where the term "Aboriginal(s)" is used alone, it refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.	Use "Indigenous" as an inclusive term, or use "Torres Strait Islander" alternately with "Aboriginal" when discussing both groups of people, communities, students, societies, cultures, etc. Never use "ATSI", as Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people find this offensive. Provide students with a resource list specifically about Torres Strait Islanders, which will be used in conjunction with resources about Aboriginal people.
Does the resource emphasise the "exotic" to the exclusion of other cultural aspects?	Over-emphasis on mortuary and initiation rites, ceremonies, body ornamentation, etc.	Do not use as general resources. Seek a balanced presentation of cultural aspects.
Does the resource assume that all Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal people live in the past?	Phrases such as "Aboriginal artists used natural pigments" ignore contemporary artists. Many history texts have one page or chapter on Aboriginal people (sometimes ignoring Torres Strait Islander people altogether) pre-1788 with no further reference.	Locate recent publications that have a contemporary focus.

3. *Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation*

It is important that the resource recognises contemporary Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander input as an indication of the diversity of communities within both cultures and presents these as living, dynamic and changing.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Does the resource acknowledge Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation in the research, writing and presentation processes?	Names of Torres Strait Islander and/or Aboriginal people who helped in creating the resource. Specific references to Aboriginal groups and Torres Strait Islander groups which contributed to the material's development, e.g. Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, Aboriginal Medical Service.	Check acknowledgments.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Is the author Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?	Resources which clearly advise the reader of the author's identity and area of origin.	Read the jacket cover. The background information on it or within the book itself should indicate origins. This is one indicator of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander materials, but does not necessarily mean that the content is accurate. Books written by non-Indigenous authors may be used if other criteria are met. If unsure, do a little research.

4. Accuracy and support

Quite often, Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies materials used in schools, as well as for general use, are inaccurate. More accurate and well-informed material is now being produced, in which Aboriginal groups and Torres Strait Islander groups are involved in endorsing manuscripts before publication. However, support for materials may vary from community to community and state to state.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Is the material about your local area or state?	Supporting statements or endorsements by local, regional or state Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. Look for resources published by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Units.	Check recommended resource lists compiled by State and Territory Aboriginal Education Units. Obtain a resource list from your resource centre or education unit.
Has the material been endorsed by local, regional, state or territory Aboriginal education consultative groups?	Acknowledgments to show that the book has been endorsed by the relevant Aboriginal education consultative group.	
Has the material been endorsed by other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander groups?	A foreword, or other statement written by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or group.	
Is the material acceptable to the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community?	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community endorsement or involvement in development or production — indicated on jacket cover or within the publication.	Check with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community.

5. *Exclusion of content of a secret or sacred nature*

It can be quite distressing for some Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students to be exposed to material which contains photographs and texts that they should not see. Some anthropologists and others have also published photographs of events which belong to the participants only.

Questions to ask	What to look for	Action to take
Does the material present information about secret and/or sacred items, practices, sites, representations?	<p>Material presenting particular ceremonies and rites being performed, e.g. women's or men's initiation rites.</p> <p>Materials presenting specific sites, e.g. Dreaming sites of particular groups.</p> <p>Text detailing processes involved in Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal ceremonies and practices.</p> <p>Inclusion of photographs and names of deceased Torres Strait Islander and/or Aboriginal people.</p> <p>Photographs and textual detail or representations which are significant to specific Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander groups, e.g. in some areas it is not appropriate to view concentric circles.</p>	<p>Do not use without first discussing with local community.</p> <p>Consult with local Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islander people for examples that are appropriate for indiscriminate viewing.</p>