

# Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guest speakers

Endorsed by the Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools (EATSIPS) reference group, Education Queensland.

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Teachers embedding Aboriginal perspectives and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their curriculum will, at times, need to engage Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people have the cultural knowledge and the skills to impart specific knowledge in the classroom.

Indigenous education workers in schools, districts and dioceses around Queensland can help you connect with appropriate people within your local Indigenous community. Indigenous education workers will assist you to follow the right protocols and practices for inviting cultural teachers into your classroom. These experienced workers have many roles across Queensland, including community education counsellors, teacher aides, support staff, partnerships officers, liaison officers and many others. These Indigenous education workers will provide you with a wealth of experience valuable for understanding the local community and recognising appropriate cultural and community teachers.

The following information is a guide for teachers to identify their own school and curriculum needs for employing a cultural teacher or community speaker within the class.

## The initial approach

Arrangements should be made well in advance to allow your guest to consider your proposal. It is important that the proposal is negotiated with the cultural or community teacher and not imposed on them. Appropriate engagement of Indigenous community members within schools as guest speakers and cultural teachers can be very beneficial. It is best to involve the guest speaker before, during and after the unit of work or course of study. Knowledge gained from contact with the Indigenous community in discussing concepts can often influence the decisions made when planning the unit.



If the cultural teacher or community speaker has worked with you previously, a relationship will exist and negotiations can proceed quickly. However, when making contact with an unknown cultural teacher or community speaker, it is culturally appropriate and courteous to make an initial face-to-face visit. This can be arranged through your Indigenous education worker contact (school/regional/district/diocese). A phone call or email might assist in setting this up.

On the next visit, outline the intended unit plan and community involvement clearly and succinctly. Ask for suggestions to improve it. Be sure to address matters such as transport, meals, payment for materials provided and remuneration. Cultural teachers and community speakers who are parents or grandparents of children in the school may request remuneration, even though there is a close family/friend connection. Some may have a set rate of pay and others may need help deciding on a pay rate. Seek advice from your local Indigenous education worker in the first instance. Be flexible and try to accommodate personal commitments where practical.

## In the school or other setting

Before the cultural teacher's or community speaker's presentation, you should start by giving an Acknowledgment of Country and follow with an agreed introduction to the community visitor.

The cultural teacher or community speaker commands the same respect and courtesy as any other teacher. Ensure that the teaching or demonstrating environment is comfortable and appropriate to the content being taught. In preparing students for the visit, appropriate questions should be planned and shared with the cultural teacher/s. Many Aboriginal cultural teachers and Torres Strait Islander cultural teachers prefer to work with small groups; however, the group size should be the decision of the guest. Teachers are reminded to remain within a comfortable distance from the activities to ensure support is acknowledged and that the interactions are positive.

The cultural teacher or community speaker may bring along a friend or relative for company or assistance. This should be encouraged as it helps relax the person during the visit, particularly if this is their first time in the school. Many cultural teachers and community teachers have a preference for working outside of the school. There may be additional benefits to learning within the community, but there will be extra logistical aspects. Some Elders who invariably have much accumulated wisdom and life experience prefer to remain in their home or community settings. They can often explain connections to "Country" and the environment by showing specific sites and sharing stories of the land, making the shared understanding between the Elder, students and you a relaxed but effective learning experience.

Great benefit is gained from providing students the opportunity to learn from the experiences of visiting Elders and significant people in the context of their community and local area. Where possible, you should involve an Indigenous education worker to accompany the class on such excursions. Education workers can provide advice on preferred behaviour and protocols for the visit,

and following this advice will increase the likelihood of a welcomed visit next time.

## After the teaching session

To demonstrate an appreciation of the knowledge that was shared, students should be invited to thank the cultural teacher or community speaker. A thankyou card and/or a gift after the session may be presented.

Do not allow students to rush away after a session, leaving the cultural teacher or community speaker alone. It is polite to help gather up materials and equipment and see the visitor off the school grounds. If a follow-up session is required, make the arrangements immediately, and make contact to confirm their commitment a few days before the next visit.

If the cultural teacher was involved with an assessment item, it is often important for this person to be invited back to the school for the public sharing of the assessment. The community speaker or cultural teacher may enjoy visiting an exhibition, public expo or drama performance that showcases learning and knowledge gained through the shared experiences of building the unit of study.

## Ethics and protocol

The following should be considered when establishing and maintaining relationships with Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities:

- Aboriginal social and cultural conventions are different from Torres Strait Islander social and cultural conventions and should be respected and observed. Discuss with your regional Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education worker contacts for appropriate protocol and guidelines for working with different communities.
- It is important to remember that the information you gather from Aboriginal people and/or Torres Strait Islander people are *their* stories and lives. This information must be treated with respect and is not open to generalised interpretation.
- Always ensure that the person/s you talk with understand how materials will be shared and used. Intellectual property rights and transfer of this knowledge should be respected in educational settings. Ensure that the guest is aware of your intentions, and has given permission for any recordings or use of materials.
- Be aware that asking sensitive questions can raise painful memories. Try to gauge reactions and body language. Remember that events from the past may be history for you, but can remain living memories for others.
- Although it is always best to negotiate an oral teaching commitment in person, many cultural teachers will appreciate a summary of the main

questions and issues, dates and time in writing. This aids communication and helps eliminate misunderstandings.

Involving and engaging Indigenous people within the classroom context has benefits for both the local Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities and the school. Students' learning experiences are enhanced by an understanding of Indigenous knowledges and, over time, positive relationships between the community and the school will be fostered. Such shared activities and experiences that can change negative perceptions of schools as institutions.