

Sharing knowledge about sacred sites and ceremonies

Because of their sensitive and sacred nature, most ceremonies practised in Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islander communities cannot be discussed fully in this paper. However, there are protocols that exist in communities for transferring information about these ceremonies. Although Indigenous communities may share some information about a certain ceremony, this may only provide a basic level of understanding about it (*outside knowledge*) that may be shared in a broad context outside of the family and community context. This shared information will generally not include the private and sacred details (*inside knowledge*) understood by the family and community who practise the ceremony.

Within a classroom context, information shared about Aboriginal ceremonies or Torres Strait Islander ceremonies should be brief and involve a general explanation of the various ceremonies practised, without giving details of any particular ceremony. When it is beneficial to discuss a specific ceremony in a learning context, it is necessary that a local Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander person explain the knowledge themselves, or be present when the information is being discussed in the classroom.

Students should also be aware that visiting sacred sites involved in ceremonial practices is generally unacceptable, even if the site is not currently being used by Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander people. In some areas, such visits are conducted by local Indigenous people; however, this may occur through commercial and business venues and may not be accepted by all members of the local community. It is important to consult with the families of the local school community on these issues, and respect the decisions made by the parents. Over time, positions about the access to sacred sites and even the viewing of ceremonies may change within a community. Regular contact and consultation with the community will ensure an understanding of these changing practices and the required protocols.

Following community protocols is culturally and spiritually significant to Indigenous people. Breaches to the protocols of accessing sacred sites may cause considerable harm to the Aboriginal communities or Torres Strait Islander communities involved. For example, many Aboriginal people believe that ancestral spirits still guard these sacred areas; these spirits protect the sites and have the power to harm any person that disturbs, destroys or disrespects them. Many people have become

PROTOCOL INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES



ill from visiting sacred sites without appropriate permission or understanding of the area. There are some sites, however, that are not viewed as sacred. These may be visited with the discretion, approval and guidance of significant members of the local Aboriginal community or Torres Strait Islander community.

Regardless of the approach taken for teaching about ceremonies and sacred sites, it is important to consider the sensitive nature of the information being discussed, particularly if Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students are present in the class.

