Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives

When planning a course of study teachers should identify ways to strengthen students’ appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives by encouraging engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander:

- frameworks of knowledge and ways of learning
- contributions to Australian society and cultures
- ways of life and social contexts.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives section of the QCAA website has a collection of resources to help teachers engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and peoples www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/577.html.

The QCAA’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Handbook (available from http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/8848-teaching.html) includes information about:

- establishing a supportive school and classroom environment
- consulting and collaborating with local Indigenous communities
- dealing with sensitive issues
- selecting appropriate resources and texts
- removing barriers to student success and engagement.

References to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in Drama are available in the references list, a teaching and learning resource for Drama 2013 available at www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/20325-teaching.html

Specific advice for Drama

The advice provided in this resource is developed specifically for the Drama Senior Syllabus 2013 to suggest ways to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into your school’s teaching and learning program for Drama.

The syllabus rationale explains that Drama gives students the opportunity to, “imagine and explore beliefs, feelings and relationships across many situations and contexts” (p.1). This focus for teaching and learning opens opportunities for students to encounter the perspectives of the world’s oldest continuing cultures: Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Performance and arts are viewed as an interrelated aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples’ culture. They are a form of self-expression, a response to the world that conveys meaning and has a spiritual purpose and are used as ways to pass on stories that explain creation, spirituality and beliefs.

Connecting with and building respectful, reciprocal relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, is essential when planning learning experiences that incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives. The initial activity (p.3) provides advice on forming connections with community members.
Initial reading

When planning for teaching and learning, it is important for teachers to engage with the following resources to build cultural knowledge and help them develop authentic, meaningful learning experiences for students. Resources for initial reading are included in the Drama 2013 Reference materials www.qsa.qld.edu.au/20325-teaching.html

Resource 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Guidelines for Drama/Theatre Education


The Drama Australia Guidelines prioritise access to and participation in learning that seeks to take the broader context of Indigenous educational perspectives and redefine their relevance in the study of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre in Australia for drama educators.

The Guidelines give comprehensive information and advice on a range of topics and considerations for developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in teaching and learning.

- Implications for Drama educators
- Contemporary Indigenous performance practices
- Traditional versus contemporary practice
- Drama and the diversity of Indigenous lifestyles
- Teaching contemporary Indigenous theatre
- Cultural and cross-cultural experiences
- Connecting with local Indigenous knowledges
- Points to remember with drama/theatre related consultations with local Indigenous communities
- Terminology: The power of language (defining language groups, defining historical experiences, appropriate use of language and accepted terminology)
- Annotated resource list of Aboriginal performing arts companies, books and articles.

Resource 2: “Stepping stones to Australian Indigenous drama” in Dramatexts: Creative practice for senior drama students


The chapter, “Stepping stones to Australian Indigenous drama” outlines some common features in Australian Indigenous style; suggestions for incorporating dramatic forms such as storytelling, playscripts, dance theatre and theatre for young people; an interview with Wesley Enoch; and extracts with classroom activities from Windmill Baby by David Milroy and Up the Ladder by Roger Bennett.
Initial activity: Building relationships with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

Establishing a close relationship with appropriate representatives from your local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community as cultural consultants can help teachers to:

- understand and comply with cultural heritage protocols
- build knowledge of contexts, languages and pronunciation
- show appropriate respect for sites, artefacts and objects
- initiate appropriate Acknowledgment of Country and Welcome to Country ceremonies.

Information and advice about connecting with local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community members is available from:

- Building relationships with local communities [www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/3035.html](http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/3035.html) under Resources

Teachers can also consult with community resources which may include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at your school and their extended families
- school Indigenous counsellor/s
- resources available through schooling sector offices
- Native title claim documents for your area
- a clan group centre
- Indigenous units in your local council or local university campus/es
- Indigenous arts companies
- Indigenous community health centres.

Planning teaching and learning for Drama 2013

Drama 2013 is designed around the three dimensions of Forming, Presenting and Responding, and includes core subject matter: Purpose, context and text; Dramatic forms and styles; and Dramatic languages.

While teachers may choose to develop units of work that focus on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander drama/theatre, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives can be embedded in teaching and learning for Forming, Presenting and Responding in a variety of ways. Some broad ideas include:

- selecting work from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artists, or work based on Indigenous themes, as pre-texts for a process drama
- creating collage or documentary drama using significant documents such as Kevin Rudd’s Sorry Speech
• creating applied theatre or verbatim theatre experiences with your local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community
• studying work by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artist or company while exploring a particular form/style
• selecting a performance of a play by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander artist as an opportunity for teaching, learning and assessing the objectives for the Responding dimension.

Teaching and learning for the Forming dimension

The Forming dimension is characterised by students making creative dramatic works. Working with the objectives for this dimension opens a wealth of opportunities for teaching and learning experiences that develop Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

It is essential to respect and follow cultural protocols when engaging with the local community and cultural knowledge to form drama. Building and maintaining reciprocal relationships with local community members may assist with information about, advice on and/or access to:

• specific cultural protocols
• information of a secret or sacred nature
• addressing sensitive historical or sociological issues
• incorporating elements of ritual such as smoke, didgeridoo or Indigenous language
• creating physical representations of token animals.

For further information, refer to Drama Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Guidelines for Drama/Theatre Education.

Teaching and learning for the Presenting dimension

The Presenting dimension is characterised by students planning and rehearsing performances to an audience.

Teachers are rightly sensitive about non-Indigenous students taking Indigenous roles when presenting playscripts in a school context. While supporting the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander actors to take those roles on the professional stage, Queensland Theatre Company artistic director and Indigenous playwright Wesley Enoch provides advice about teaching and learning experiences for Presenting in Drama classrooms.

When we go into the classroom, the priorities shift. The priorities are still political and cultural but they are [also] about students getting an insight and getting an understanding of the play, of the situation, of the social milieu. So for me personally, I look at my plays being done in schools as a fantastic way of the play getting into people’s hearts and understanding it.

The question I ask of teachers is, “Are the students prepared enough to understand the social context in which this is being written, the way it has been performed in the past, and the message it’s trying to get across to the audience?” These three things are really important for me, because that’s the intention of the writer, that they understand where the play comes from.

1 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, Queensland Studies Authority, Brisbane p.2.
2 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, p. 2.
Teaching and learning for the Responding dimension

The Responding dimension is characterised by students interpreting, analysing, reflecting and evaluating dramatic action from a position outside of, or after, the drama. The syllabus also requires that in assessment students respond to live or recorded live performance.4

Purpose, context and text are essential considerations when selecting performances and developing teaching and learning experiences for the Responding objectives.

Purpose

Purpose refers to the intent of the creator/s or interpreter/s of the dramatic action and meaning.5 When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, teachers could consider articulating and exploring various dramatic purposes.

- To empower, students could create different status relationships and highlight and/or challenge stereotypes.
- To chronicle or document, students could consider and explore ownership of the story and/or sensitive issues related to the story and its ownership.
- To challenge, students could examine the risks presented in the performance.
- To celebrate, students could consider and explore ownership of the ceremonial rights portrayed in the performance.

Context

Context refers to the real and/or imagined factors, beliefs and values that influence dramatic action and meaning.6 Across the range of contexts suggested in the syllabus, teachers and students aim to use appropriate terminology and language while considering the historical, political and sociological background of Indigenous drama and theatre. Information and advice in Drama Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Guidelines for Drama/Theatre Education and QSA’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Senior Syllabus 2009 could also be helpful.

Selecting texts

When selecting texts, including performances, for study in Drama, teachers consider the needs and interests of individuals and class groups, to determine which texts will best meet their students’ learning needs. The syllabus also requires that teachers provide opportunities for all students to consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives throughout the course of study.7

Selecting and evaluating resources www.qsa.qld.edu.au/3035.html under Guidelines, provides criteria for selecting appropriate texts for classroom use about Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their cultures.

While there is a valid place in the Drama classroom for texts with Indigenous themes written by any playwright, those playscripts written by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander playwrights would be most appropriately considered Indigenous texts.

4 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, p. 3.
5 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, p. 5.
6 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, p. 5.
7 Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, p. 6.
Dramatic forms and styles

The syllabus organises forms and styles into two categories according to their characteristic features.\(^8\)

Some examples of Australian Indigenous texts or companies whose work could be included in the two categories of forms and styles are provided below. Details are provided in the References list.

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<td>• The Cake Man by R Merritt</td>
<td>Physical theatre:</td>
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<td>• Up the Ladder by R Bennett</td>
<td>• various shows by Bangarra Dance Theatre</td>
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<td>• Black Medea by Wesley Enoch</td>
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<td>• Box the Pony by L Purcell &amp; S Rankin</td>
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\(^8\) Drama Senior Syllabus 2013, pp. 6-7.