Incorporating and engaging Aboriginal perspectives in the teaching of Literature and Art.

Being aware of the beliefs and practices of other cultures enables a student to not only tolerate, but truly appreciate other cultures and develop their own personal belief systems that build strong individuals who are conscientious global citizens (Graziano, 2004, p. 42). For Australian students, being authentically engaged in Aboriginal histories and cultures, particularly in Secondary English and Visual Arts is incredibly important for their development and maturity in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. For these skills to develop holistically, students should be encouraged to not only learn about Aboriginal cultures and histories, but learn through Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogy. Through effectively incorporating and engaging Aboriginal perspectives in the teaching of Literature and Art, teachers can enable students to improve their proficiency in communication and connection to their own person and spirituality as well as become genuinely interested in the lessons to promote lifelong learning. At the centre of many Aboriginal pedagogical beliefs is the process of storytelling and the concept of community, or even more broadly kanyini (connectedness and responsibility to all things). Students (regardless of Aboriginal identification) who are provided with the correct tools to share their thoughts, imaginings and beliefs through storying and the narrative structure (that both the current Visual Arts and English syllabus in NSW facilitate) are empowered (Archibald, 2008, p. 3). Storying and incorporating the Aboriginal community in students’ learning are two concepts of Aboriginal concepts that can easily be integrated into both the English and Visual Arts classrooms. This essay will analyse the appropriateness of using storying and community links in teaching Literature and Art in New South Wales secondary classrooms, and as a pre-service English and Visual Arts teacher, I will be exploring these issues reflectively, and make recommendations as to how to authentically incorporate these perspectives into pedagogy and practice.

Belinda Coniglio 2012
At the centre of Aboriginal learning and knowing is storying. The process of storying dates back to the beginning of Aboriginal peoples, and is a main method of maintaining Aboriginal cultures. Storying in Australian Aboriginal cultures is expressed through oral stories, dance and artworks. Every element of these expressions (such as one symbol in an intricate body art design) tells a story. Just as in Western mediums, the audience is considered in the creation of the text, and therefore the intended audience draws the most meaning (Graziano, 2004, p. 42). This does not, however, rule out a rich understanding or interpretation for non-Aboriginal ‘readers,’ or even Aboriginal people from a different Country. Students may actually interact more holistically with these texts without knowing the context (Maras, 2001). Art teachers should consider this when selecting and providing artworks for study in Art History and Criticism. For non-Aboriginal teachers (such as myself) it can be daunting to attempt to interpret an Aboriginal artwork in order to teach it. Logically, this does not make sense, as for every artwork, an artist engages with highly personal and cultural significances (Maras, 2001). There is no way to ‘correctly’ interpret every symbolic relevance or meaning in an artwork, therefore it is interesting that there is this anxiety towards interpreting Aboriginal art. It is particularly important to include Aboriginal artworks in the Visual Arts classroom as they contain unique perspectives and approaches to art making that students may not encounter elsewhere. When viewing artworks, students draw links between what they interpret and their own lives and being (Maras, 2001).

Including Aboriginal case studies in History and Criticism can enhance non-Aboriginal students’ abilities to empathise with and understand Aboriginality in a more tangible way, and therefore enhance their interpersonal relationship with Aboriginal people, and people of other cultures. In this way, storying can be seen as the basis of theory in Visual Arts education. In Art Historical and Critical studies, students interpret artworks in various frames in order to piece together a holistic understanding of a piece or body of work. This
requires students to read and interpret use of symbols, colours, textures and mediums in order to understand artworks in a way that resonates with them as the audience. Concurrently, in Practice, students use their own system of understanding and communication to create artworks that are sensitive and conceptually rich. Aboriginal students are typically motivated in learning through “obligation, responsibility and spiritual commitment” (Morgan and Slade, 1998, p.9). Considering the concept of Kanyini (which will be discussed in more depth later), teachers should encourage students to see Practice in Visual Arts as the opportunity for students to connect with their spiritual selves, and fulfil the obligation and responsibility to their spirit. As a Visual Arts teacher, it is important for me to acknowledge that the Visual Arts classroom truly has the potential to encourage and empower all students to explore all aspects of their selves through creativity. For Aboriginal students, it is a clear opportunity for them to thoroughly meditate on their cultures, beliefs and expressions, working towards understanding themselves and their place in the world (intra-personal skills), as well as communicating these to others in a way that is thoughtful and candid (inter-personal skills). To facilitate this, I should focus on setting up the parameters for students to achieve, such as including area studies in my programming about identity and cultures.

Archibald (2008) discusses “storywork pedagogy” as a positive learning experience for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. She states that by getting students to re-tell a story they have heard, they are not only retelling, but exploring their understanding (p. 133). In Secondary English, storying is currently used and is a key part of the NSW Syllabus in Stages 4 – 6. Throughout their learning in English, students are continually encouraged to “create” narratives (in written, spoken, and visual forms) in response to studied texts (Board of Studies, 2010). By applying knowledge and understanding of studied texts in new, created contexts, students are empowered to share what they have learnt in a non-threatening, and often enjoyable way. In classrooms with Aboriginal students, visual representation activities
and assessments could ensure that each student is given an equal opportunity to explore what they have learnt. Creating a visual, symbolic representation of the studied text can be a platform to discuss the themes, values and literary discourses evident. This activity would also appeal greatly to non-Aboriginal students who identify with visual-spatial learning (Gardener & Hatch, 1989), and prompt quality class discussion. Teachers would need to ensure that a comprehensive criteria is set before attempting to assess this type of task, as it can become extremely subjective, particularly if aesthetic appeal overshadows the integrity, sensitivity and consideration in the students’ selection and choice of layout and design of symbols in the students’ representation. Students who do not identify or feel comfortable with visual intelligence could also find this task overwhelming. It is incredibly important to ensure that all learning through the storywork pedagogy is scaffolded, in this instance particularly for such students. It may also be appropriate to design a task such as this so that students have different options and choice in how they wish to be assessed, such as allowing a role play for students who are kinaesthetic learners, or those who prefer to work in groups (students who identify with interpersonal intelligence). Allowing Western pedagogies (such as Gardener’s Multiple Intelligence theory) to compliment Aboriginal pedagogy ensures that all students have access to a myriad of learning opportunities, ensuring that there is more chance of them feeling connected and interested in the lesson.

Although storying is definitely a valid pedagogy in the learning and assessment of understanding themes and values in texts, it is hard to apply it to critically analysing literary forms and features, which is cornerstone to the NSW English syllabus. Storywork pedagogy does encourage students to draw meaning, however it does not divulge into how meaning is created. This is a major problem as, for students to be successful in later stages of English (particularly in stage 6), they must “[through their response to and composition of texts] identify, practise and develop an understanding of the ways... language forms and structures...
are used for meaning” (Board of Studies, 2010, p. 14). An essential concept for English students in this stage is that, just as in Aboriginal stories and artworks, every aspect of the text is there for a reason; every word choice, choices in tense and sentence structure shape the meaning and provide the reader with ‘clues’ for interpretation. As Aboriginal students would be well aware, there is a very clear theme or meaning of the text, however to get to that meaning, we must also explore what pathway that the composer took for us as the audience to reach meaning and understanding. For my students, I explain that the themes and values that we can identify answer the “what” of texts, however to satisfy the syllabus they must also explore the “how” and “why,” that is, identify and critically analyse the techniques and devices used, and why the composer chose those particular techniques in order for us to understand. Students must be able to critically read and interpret texts applying knowledge of techniques and literary devices. In this sense, storywork pedagogy does not lend itself to either of these outcomes as it does not rely on “mastering the content” of the text, nor on displaying an understanding of the contextual concerns of the text (Archibald, 2008, p.134).

The Aboriginal concept of Kanyini is the principle of connectedness through caring and responsibility of all things. Kanyini is composed of several elements; tjukurrpa (knowledge), ngura (place), walytja (kinship) and kurunpa (spirit or soul) (Lathan, 2007). I believe that this perspective of Aboriginality is one that should be shared in NSW classrooms as it not only encapsulates such a strong moral integrity, but also relates to both my personal education philosophies, and Western educational theory. For secondary students to be successful, lifelong learners, they must be (or at least, be working towards being) aware of their true self. In Brofenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory, students who understand their macrosystem (that is the encompassing layer that expresses laws and values that have a flowing influence throughout the other systems), and acknowledge its impact on their life, are more resilient and open to learning (Brofenbrenner, 1986). Having a strong relationship
throughout the micro-, meso- and exosystems encourage the students’ overall wellbeing and impacts positively on their attitudes towards learning, encouraging them to become interested, engaged and independent. As well as this, the maintenance of healthy social interaction, as according to Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, will enable growth in students’ cognitive development (Gallagher, 1998). Vygotsky believed that social interaction will lead to positive ongoing changes in a child's thought and behaviour (Berk, 1994, p. 24). Both of these Western educational theories, and the concept of the Aboriginal perspective of Kanyini, incorporate the importance of community involvement and interest in Aboriginal students, and the teaching of Aboriginal histories and cultures in NSW schools.

Encouraging strong relationships between the Aboriginal community and the school community has a profound impact on Aboriginal students. This is evident when considering Chris Sarra’s “Stronger Smarter” program. The program, which educates non-Aboriginal teachers in Aboriginal Education, and facilitates the relationship between school executives and teachers with Aboriginal groups in the local community, has had incredible results in terms of the maintenance of attendance, and vast improvement of retention rates in schools on the Central Coast of NSW (Sarra, 2011). Having students who are actually present in the classroom is step towards ensuring that Aboriginal students have the same educational opportunities as non-Aboriginal students. As a teacher it is essential to be aware of, resources such as Chris Sarra’s program; and be willing to approach Aboriginal groups in the community to discuss challenges, progresses and achievements in teaching Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Education. The Aboriginal community is also an incredible resource that can be the difference between ineffective teaching, and quality, authentic Aboriginal Education. In the secondary English context, a teacher could particularly utilise the Aboriginal community in studies of Australian literature and texts, where the Aboriginal perspective is often overlooked. A guest speaker could provide a great starting context for an
Australian text (such as the poetry of Gwen Harwood, *Plains of Promise* by Alexis Wright, etc) and present a new concept of Australian understanding and histories. The community could also be involved in the aforementioned representation tasks, with community members being involved in the teaching of visual representation to tell a story. In these ways, non-Aboriginal students are exposed to Aboriginal cultures in order to continue an awareness and embracement of Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal students’ beliefs and viewpoints are explored and respected. For all students, positive learning experiences are continued by the representation and inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the Aboriginal pedagogy of community learning.

In a sense, Kanyini can also be linked to encouraging students to feel responsibility over their own education, and to promote lifelong self-directed learning. When students have a feeling of ownership about their education, their academic achievements improve (Bahr and Pendergast, 2007, p. 48). In the classroom, setting collaborative learning tasks can both encourage this means, as well as incorporate another aspect of Aboriginal pedagogy: group learning (Morgan and Slade, 1998, p.8). By giving students roles within a group, or by facilitating jigsaw or other collaborative activities, Aboriginal students are given the opportunity to feel accountable for their own learning, as well as the learning, progress and success of their peers. This mimics a community setting where every member has a role that works interdependently with each other. As discussed earlier, Aboriginal students’ personal education philosophies generally include being “motivated by obligation, [and] responsibility,” however it is also noted that “knowledge [is] owned and exchanged” (Morgan and Slade, 1998, p.9). In jigsaw collaborative learning activities, students are asked to independently research or investigate one part of a larger topic, become an ‘expert’ on that topic, and then teach it to the other members of their group. Empowering students with this obligation and responsibility to learn and share gives them ownership over their education.
and produces conscientious learners who consider their peers in the learning process. In the Visual Arts classroom, these activities could easily be implemented by breaking the study of a particular artwork into the four frames, or into the four agencies of the art-world, and encouraging students to work together, with their own diverse worldviews, to piece together a thorough critical analysis. By using Western pedagogy in respect of Aboriginal perspectives, teachers can easily implement enriching classroom experiences for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

By creating engaging learning environments through Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies, teachers can benefit both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ experiences in the classroom and beyond. Community learning encourages non-Aboriginal students to engage in the unique perspectives of their Aboriginal community, and encourages a sense of partnership with them. This can of course be translated outside of the classroom as ties are strengthened and acceptance, and more importantly, respect is transpired. Through this, and by instilling a sense of responsibility through the concept of kanyini, students strengthen their interpersonal skills across cultures, and become more confident and contentious learners who take responsibility for their learning. This is important in terms of improving the attendance and retention rates of Aboriginal students and creating inclusive learning environments that cater to the needs of all students. As students begin to respond to the importance of active participation in classrooms that use collaborative learning, teamwork and interpersonal relationships and responsibilities will follow. Similarly, incorporating storywork pedagogies into the classroom encourages students to take ownership over their own personal beliefs, and be respectful of others’ ‘stories.’ Although some students may not feel comfortable with storying initially, through careful and thoughtful scaffolding that is inclusive of all learning styles, a teacher can ensure the involvement and positive outcomes of all learners. Certainly, there are challenges in creating a classroom environment that consistently incorporates
Aboriginal perspectives and pedagogies, however as I have explored, both storying and community learning have key links to Western pedagogies that I already employ in my practice. Therefore, it is simply a matter of being consciously aware of Aboriginal Education and its importance in secondary English and Visual Arts and infusing it throughout my teaching. I believe that this can be achieved by maintaining a relationship with the Aboriginal community and being open and honest with them about the concerns and successes in teaching Aboriginal students, and sharing authentic Aboriginal Education with non-Aboriginal students.
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