



Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition. Source: https://www.patrickdodson.com.au/joint_select_committee_on_constitutional_recognition_-_interim_report

A framework for learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Geography classroom

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Introduction

In my case, teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' issues is one of the more difficult things I do as an educator. I find this to be the case because I am a non-aboriginal person and I continue to learn how to approach these discussions in the classroom.

It is difficult to navigate the issues of past from the present. I am rarely confident in the most appropriate language to use – Aboriginal, Indigenous or First Nations peoples and in what context. I have to continually work on detaching opinion from identity.

On what basis can we suggest rectification of past injustices and make suggestions on current strategies? Is it valid for me to do this if I have no direct experience? How do I balance and encourage the voice of our students and the voice of Aboriginal Australians?

The Framework

Answers to these questions bring me back to one of my roles as a teacher in building awareness, knowledge and understanding. I am going to suggest a three prong strategy on how to address teaching and learning in the area of First Nations people.

1. Perspective through awareness

My deficient understanding of First Nations people in Australia is due to my lack of awareness. My minimal awareness of Aboriginal issues has come from my lack of formal education concerning Aboriginal peoples, though I had some experience as a child visiting Aboriginal communities in western NSW.

More formally, I completed a Masters in Nonformal Education in Asia and the Pacific focussing on First Nations peoples but sadly Aboriginal Australia was not part of the research focus. I worked in a school which had a program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, had many discussions with a friend who worked in a school in Lajamanu for four years, helped facilitate an educational program for an NRL club for their young players many of whom were Aboriginal and had the opportunity for a decade to be part of an Aboriginal outreach program on the coastal and Atherton tableland areas of Far North Queensland.

I still feel my awareness is inadequate and I believe is shaped by a colonial perspective. I have come to challenge this perspective I have developed through my education. In my view, when teaching in this area I felt the need to address my awareness and perspectives on the issues prior to actually facilitating student learning so as to assure I was balanced and responsible in my approach.

2. Story-telling as the basis for knowledge

The next step for me was to challenge my perspective by building a knowledge base to improve my understanding of the issues. I soon found out that reading articles and books on the issues only touch the surface. There were so many perspectives and often discussions were sometimes emotive and occasionally views expressed that were not well informed. I soon discovered that the best way to get knowledge is through the process of story-telling with Aboriginal people.

There are two reasons for this. One, the information is authentically gathered, and the other is that story telling is at the core of Aboriginal community culture.

Story-telling became for me story-showing where I built up my knowledge of the issues by listening and observing. As a non-Aboriginal person living and working in suburbs with limited exposure to Aboriginal people I was not getting the whole story.

I sought to seek out Aboriginal people, to hear their voice and backed this up by engaging with indigenous authors and researchers.

3. Understanding through engagement

Despite a reasonable effort my understanding of the issues from the perspective of the Aboriginal community is woefully limited. The breakthrough to my improved understanding happened in 2018. I decided to make a submission to the *Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition* relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples which was published in November 2018.

I engaged with a cause, though when I started, I had a lot of learning to do.

My submission was Number 400 of almost 500 submissions. I found the process very challenging and rewarding. As I engaged with the process, I improved my awareness and knowledge, and my understanding was gradually improving.

There were also a series of public hearings throughout the country and one occurred in the holidays on the Friday 5 October 2018 at the Aboriginal Centre for Excellence at Redfern. I attended. I sat at the back and learnt more there than I could have learnt from books, articles and research papers but still short of direct experience. It was a bi-partisan committee made of up Joint Chairs Patrick Dobson, Julian Leeser and the committee members in attendance were Lindy Turney, Linda McGowan.

My local member and Joint Chair Julian Lesser noted my presence and asked if I wished to make a public comment based on my submission. I took up the offer and made some comments. The following comments I made appeared in the Report in the section on Truth-telling in Schools.

The Committee acknowledges that for some submitters, learning more accurate history improved their understanding. For example, Mr Martin Pluss told the Committee:

I must admit, from my personal perspective, I thought they [dreamtime stories] were not real when I was a schoolkid in my education. I found that Port Phillip Bay has a depth of 30 metres below sea level. For 60,000 years stories have been told, and there is geological and archaeological evidence now that when the Dreamtime stories of that area of Victoria were told they were talking about a valley that existed there. That's been passed down through Dreamtime stories through the years. For me, that was significant for the basis of truth-telling. As a non-Indigenous person, that enables me to understand the legitimacy and the background behind how the voice can be authentic.⁵⁵

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

Inspired and consistent with my advocacy for local geography, I started to investigate and meet First Nations people in the Hornsby Shire where I live and teach. According to the 2016 census data there are 49 males and 49 female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Hornsby compared to 107, 368 and 108, 809 males and females in NSW and 322, 171 and 326, 996 respectively in Australia.

Through my research my engagement moved to another level. I noted that a Hornsby Area Residents for Reconciliation had made a submission to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry. So, I followed them up.

This led me to discover the Hornsby Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee of Hornsby Council. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be an observer at a couple of their meetings.

Soon I met local Aboriginal academic and other Aboriginal community members. Two of us discussed our respective involvement as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal local community members on the local community radio station Triple H 100.1 FM's Streetbeat program. Specifically, we outlined our submissions to the parliamentary inquiry. Over time we facilitated guest speakers at schools.

Also, the local academic(s), myself and other community members made submissions to Hornsby Council concerning their First Nation peoples initiatives in the Shire. These included decisions on appropriate wording of Welcome /Acknowledgment of Country in Hornsby Meetings, the addition of Aboriginal signage in locations throughout the shire and other plans in place to build awareness and knowledge in the local community.

It was in the process of story-telling with local Indigenous community members and elders that I have been able to build my students' awareness and knowledge of the issues affecting the local Aboriginal community and some of the broader national discussion points. My next step is to build understanding through engagement for the students themselves as I have benefited from this myself. My starting point will be to encourage students to address their local council on indigenous initiatives.

What follows is a series of activities to build awareness knowledge an understanding of the Constitutional Recognition discussion that is been carried out in the local, regional and national community.



Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People tabled its final report (2018). Source: https://www.patrickdodson.com.au/joint_select_committee

Activities based on Constitutional Recognition

Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – <https://www.aph.gov.au/constitutionalrecognition>

Activity 1

This activity is based on the submissions to Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Former_Committees/Constitutional_Recognition_2018/ConstRecognition/Submissions

On 19 March 2018, the Parliament agreed that a Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to examine matters relating to constitutional change, including the proposal for the establishment of a First Nations Voice.

The Committee also considered the proposals for truth-telling and agreement making arising from the

Statement from the Heart, as well as other proposals for constitutional change and recognition.

By far the majority of the submissions were made by individuals and I would encourage you to look at these individual names and selectively see the trends, there are submissions from academics to members of the general public. There does not seem to be representation of student voices and perhaps this is something we could work on for the classroom.

At the very least this activity is designed to develop an awareness of the different perspectives of groups that made submissions. Table 1 provides a summary of a selection of submissions.

Table 1 Joint Select Committee Public Submissions

Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples	
Number 5 Public Affairs Commission (PAC) of the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA)	Number 200 Richmond Branch of the Australian Labor Party (Victorian Branch)
Number 79 Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research (WEHI)	Number 206 Technical Advisers: Regional Dialogues and Uluru First Nations Constitutional Convention
Number 80 Students of the University of Melbourne Law School	Number 214 Collingwood Country Women's Association
Number 99 Trinity College, the University of Melbourne	Number 215 EcoFeminist Fridays
Number 100 World Vision	Number 224 Cape York Institute
Number 104 Animals Defenders Office	Number 257 Humanist Society of Victoria Inc
Number 107 Goulburn Broken Catchment Authority	Number 270 Val Gleeson, Wangaratta Historical Society
Number 118 Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists	Number 289 Centre for Comparative Constitutional Studies
Number 119 Catholic Education Office Ballarat	Number 292 National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
Number 120 Balmain Tigers Australian Football Club	Number 301 NSW Reconciliation Council
Number 121 Maurice Blackburn Lawyers	Number 310 Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
Number 131 Uniting Church in Australia Assembly & Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress	Number 328 Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group
Number 135 The Indigenous Settler Relations Collaboration, University of Melbourne	Number 338 Indigenous Peoples Organisation
Number 147 Australian Republican Movement	Number 343 Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec)
Number 172 Uphold & Recognise	Number 345 Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA)
Number 198 Bass Coast South Gippsland Reconciliation Group	Number 355 Business Council of Australia
	Number 356 Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory
	Number 361 Boroondara Reconciliation Network

Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition Relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Number 363 Kimberley Land Council and KRED Enterprises	Number 413 Shepparton Region Reconciliation Group (SRRG)
Number 373 National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)	Number 415 Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA)
Number 377 UNICEF Australia	Number 417 NSW Council for Civil Liberties
Number 378 Apmer Aharreng-arenykenh Agknanenty Aboriginal Corporation	Number 419 Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council
Number 378 CASSE Australia	Number 423 Uphold & Recognise and PM Glynn Institute, Australian Catholic University
Number 380 KALACC	Number 428 Hornsby Area Residents for Reconciliation
Number 382 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Number 444 Sydney Students for an Indigenous Voice
Number 383 Shire of Wyndham East Kimberley	Number 460 Torres Shire Council
Number 384 Caritas Australia	Number 461 Torres Strait Regional Authority
Number 385 Maroondah Movement for Reconciliation Inc	Number 467 Reconciliation Tasmania
Number 386 NSW Aboriginal Land Council	Number 470 Catholic Justice & Peace Commission of the Archdiocese of Brisbane
Number 389 Reconciliation WA	Number 473 Mosman Reconciliation
Number 394 Australian Human Rights Commission	Number 474 Womens' Reconciliation Network
Number 396 Australian Local Government Association	Number 475 Reconciliation South Australia
Number 407 Australian Indigenous Governance Institute	Number 476 Reconciliation NSW
	Number 478 Sunshine Coast Reconciliation Group

Tasks

- Group the submissions into themes such as health organisations, legal bodies, local community groups, reconciliation collectives, Aboriginal organisations, government bodies, church organisations, higher education etc. Also, if you go through the original link you can also group together submissions by academics which are easily identifiable by their titles in the submission. As a starting point I would get the students to highlight related groups of submissions in Table 1. This can then be organised by a class discussion or a mind map on the white board or through a suitable digital platform.
- The next step is for the students to identify five groups of submissions on which they would be prepared to undertake further research. They should justify their choice by answering the following questions.
 - Why do these groups stand out above the other groups?
 - What groups did not make submission? Suggest reasons why?
 - Are there any individual submissions that would be worthy of inclusion but do not fall into the grouping?
- Following this break the class into five groups and allocate a thematic group of submissions for them to research. In the group work they need to do the following research and divide the responsibilities among each group member. Use Table 2 as a framework for the groups to follow.
 - Research the background of the constitutional recognition movement through the development of a timeline thought to most recently with the Statement of the Heart.
 - Identify the perspective presented by the group of submissions. For example, are they are supportive or not of constitutional recognition?
 - Highlight the basics of their argument and possible suggested strategies.
 - Select two specific submissions and evaluate how effective the submission was in supporting their viewpoints. As a group come to a conclusion if they are supportive or not of the submission's conclusions.

Table 2: Group Theme

e.g., Reconciliation groups' submission, government groups' submission Aboriginal community groups' submission ...	
Background research	
Identified perspective	
Basis of argument	
Evaluation of two submissions	

Activity 2: Media and Constitutional Recognition

There are a number of perspectives presented in the media. It is important for the students to make informed judgments based on an evaluation of what they read in the media.

Consider the following six articles. They have been selected from six different sources and exclude the media articles which are behind paywall. If teachers have access to such articles it would worthwhile bringing them into the list and provide a pdf in order to get all perspectives. Ask each student to fill in the following table for each article in relation to the related constitutional recognition article.

Article 1: An Indigenous 'Voice' must be enshrined in our Constitution. Here's why – <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/general/indigenous-voice-must-be-enshrined-our-constitution-heres-why>

Article 2: Indigenous constitutional referendum 'unlikely' before the next election, Minister says – <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-12/ken-wyatt-says-constitutional-recognition-referendum-unlikely/12350320>

Article 3: There are many ways to achieve Indigenous recognition in the constitution – we must find one we can agree on – <https://theconversation.com/there-are-many-ways-to-achieve-indigenous-recognition-in-the-constitution-we-must-find-one-we-can-agree-on-142163>

Article 4: Walk the talks – <https://nit.com.au/walk-the-talks/>

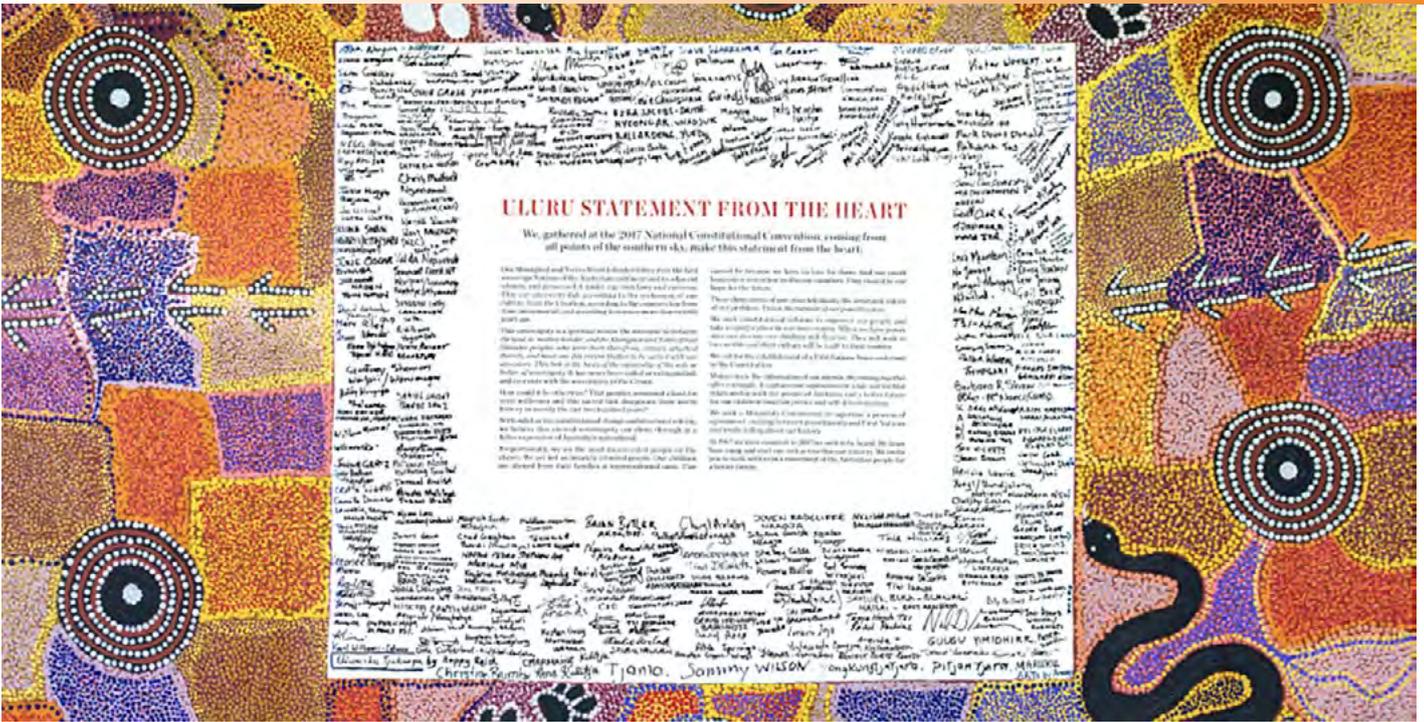
Article 5: A one-syllable change to the anthem is hardly something to celebrate – <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7072676/a-one-syllable-change-to-the-anthem-is-hardly-something-to-celebrate/>

Article 6: Aboriginal leaders are ANGRY that the Greens have chosen an indigenous senator who walked out of constitutional recognition talks – <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8465117/Aboriginal-Indigenous-leaders-ANGRY-Greens-Lidia-Thorpe-divisive-views-constitutional-recognition.html>

Table 3 Media Analysis of Constitutional Recognition

Article	Source	Title	Summary of main facts	Identify Perspectives	Alternate Perspectives
Article 1					
Article 2					
Article 3					
Article 4					
Article 5					
Article 6					

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES



Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) Source: <https://ulurustatement.org/>

Conclusion

From the perspective of a non-aboriginal person, who has worked in schools with limited exposure to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples experiences, I have discovered that stepping students through the awareness, knowledge and understanding framework is a worthwhile strategy, supplemented with a focus on authentic story-telling and local community engagement.

It is very difficult to walk in the shoes of other people let alone comment on their experiences from the outside looking in. The approach adopted here is to encourage our students to be more like a researcher building awareness, gathering information, sorting and classifying the ideas of people, and if possible, engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to gain authentic understanding.



Image source: Final report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition (2018) – https://1.wp.com/nacchocommunique.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/333v1021_page_1.jpg?ssl=1



Image Source: <https://nacchocommunique.com/2018/11/30/naccho-aboriginal-health-ulurustatement-statementfromtheheart-firstnationsvoice-final-report-of-the-joint-select-committee-on-constitutional-recognition/>