

Middle Class White Girl Share Indigenous Culture?

Just across Port Phillip Bay from here to Williamstown, on a paddock on the foreshore, sits a huge rock that was quarried from the volcanic strewn fields of Keilor. It is called Famine Rock, or 'the big spud' to locals.

And in the middle of the rock, a brass plaque, a dedication to the Boonwurrung and Woi Wurrung people, whose lands extended around an arc of land either side of the bay. I acknowledge them as our first people and pay my respects.

It is also a memorial to the 4,000 Irish Orphan Girls who were landed in Australia during the 1850's because of Un Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger that saw hundreds of thousands of Irish people dispossessed or die of starvation. Not that I have a "Famine girl" as an ancestor but it's my mob, the Celts, so I honour them as well.

For me, performance has always been about developing a love language and literature in children.. As Maurice Saxby, the doyen of Australian Children's Literature says, 'if you teach children to read you "Give them Wings " to soar'.

So, I begin this talk practically with a definition of the four resources model that is employed to teach children to read. I'm at the tail end of a research project with Ballarat University, where I've been telling stories to Graduate students about literacy.

For the project and to explain the four resources model I took the guise of laid back Nigel. The drought had knocked this farmer around and his youngest boy was struggling to learn to read.

As he explained:

"You have to understand with the Four Resources Model, each component is absolutely necessary for students to become skilled readers.

Number 1 is the code breaker practice. I'll never forget the day Tom asked me a question while we were sitting at a petrol station.

"Hey Dad, does that say "Car Wash?"

For the first time Tom seemed to realise that letters had sounds and were code for spoken language, words he already knew and had heard he could recognise as he learnt knew the code.

"Yes, that's it" I said

This was a turning point for Tom

Once Tom got that, I knew which practice to focus on if he couldn't read things.

His mother and I both realised Tom had suffered because of the drought. Whereas with his older siblings we'd taught them the alphabet and read to them continuously we were always too dog tired with Tom. So we started an intensive catch up session matching the alphabet with the sounds

"Ants on the apple; a a a" We had sight words stuck to everything, we taught him the patterns in words, sentence structure and we saw that little boy come on in leaps in bounds.

No 2 resource in learning to read is the text participant practise. Where the reader participates in constructing meaning. We bought and borrowed lots of books for Tom in areas that he had an interest in. For example we bought him a book on the solar system and because he had watched plenty of documentaries and had his own telescope he was able to decipher and put together all the components of quite difficult text and images that supported it. He was now starting to construct meaning from his reading.

Now 3 in the model is the Text user practise. We exposed Tom to all sorts of different texts used for different purposes. Railway timetables, menus in restaurants, the football fixture in the newspaper. At school he actively took part of discussion around different forms of text and would you believe in Year 7 he played the lead in the school play of Bugsy Malone. This little non-reader was now participating with so much text that a whole lengthy script didn't even faze him. I was incredibly proud of him taking that on.

And the final resource in this model, number 4 is the text analysis practise. This is quite a sophisticated approach and I realised that Tom was now starting to get the idea that texts are not neutral, that they have built into them the writers point of view, assumptions and biases.

Indigenous people know only too well that history is written by the dominant culture, until of course SBS's The First Australian and the other developments in indigenous literature

I saw the penny drop with my son around the time that discussions about a local wind farm were in full swing. We'd received two pamphlets in the letter box, one supporting the farm and one against it.

He saw how either side had skewed the facts for their own purpose. It was such a lesson to Tom and opened his eyes to the need to consider the authors intent. His final year essay on the media's look at the Tampa incident was truly insightful. He'd come a long way my little fella.

So that's how Nigel explained the four resources model and when I learnt that there are words to explain the raison d'etre supporting my storytelling and why and how I share indigenous culture.

I've always wanted to be inclusive of all peoples and provide stories that support the four resources model for all children. Ambitious I know

But let's go back a bit, because the storytelling journey leads me to the life changing experience of working in the Northern Territory as the Children's Librarian in the Darwin Library.

From the life of a sheltered Catholic school girl brought up in suburban Melbourne, to studies at the very homogenous, Anglo Celtic Ballarat University; then to Darwin and surrounds, it was like a foreign country to me.

But as I was forming my repertoire and gaining understanding of my craft, before I could even give name to the four resources model I was collecting stories that acknowledged our first nations and would provide support material that could be used in code breaking and text participant learning.

I gathered the rhymes and songs and nursery stories that sat alongside this tropical climate, its land and people. Children would construct meaning from identifying words they had heard.. B for boomerang, c for coolamon and d for deadly.

Many aboriginal communities would visit the library when they came to Darwin for an excursion. So I talked and listened and questioned and was able to arrange my material to see what worked, what resonated. My string trick about the lizard and the snake became the rainbow snake and the owl action story became Mook Mook, the Jawoyn name for the big eyed night creature, a nickname that had been given to my niece when her parents worked in Katherine

Little chants became like prayers when I shared them with indigenous communities.
Here is the land, (touching the ground)
here is the sky. (reaching to the sky)
Here are my friends (acknowledge the audience)
and here am I.(Crossing your hands on your heart)

I looked for alphabet books with Australian animals, myths and legends about the kangaroo, the koala and Tiddalik the frog and more.

And I wondered about the dreaming and my own spirituality.

When we finished with the stories, out came the paper and crayons and children would lie out flat on the library floor and draw. Usually little white children would draw, a house, a tree, the sun but aboriginal children would draw landscapes, but interestingly, always a birds eye view, a topographical map of the land.

Well I never knew people could have that ability.

But I wondered how I could cater for this amazing spatial aptitude and employ it a part of the learning process? I still wonder how or if the school curriculum supports our indigenous students different perspective on life..

When I traveled in the territory, I was privy to some of Australia's most spectacular landscapes; and I came to understand the feeling of sacredness of land. A gorge, a waterfall, a sheltered creek bank, sheer cliff faces that reached to the sky demanding as much respect as the mightiest of cathedrals.

Joseph Campbell the great mythologist says that, "Myths and legends..... are like shards of pottery in an archeological dig, frameworks for our life's".

The basic theme of all mythology.... 'there is an invisible plane supporting the visible one.'

I started to sense this in the territory. But what was this all encompassing framework that lay across the land and yet I knew nothing of?

But then overseas traveled beckoned and I headed off.

Returning after a year I headed back to Ballarat to study and became involved with the Australian Storytelling Guild where I met my good friend and mentor Nell Bell who started sharing big picture stuff with me.

"Myths must be kept alive."

"The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment of the world"

Nell had grown up with aboriginal neighbours at Artarmon, in North Shore Sydney, (she maintains in those days it was not posh, it was bush with creeks and unmade roads) and Nell had a wealth of new indigenous stories to share with me, stories of the stars and the plants and people I'd never heard about. It was always implicit with Nell that it was our role to try and respectfully present material from across the continuum of story knowledge. Also, Nell as an elder always linked us to indigenous tellers.. I kept asking questions.

I then had the notion that I might write my own aboriginal myth.

Wakakirri, the flower that appears when a cyclones approaching. I had heard about a real flower that blossomed in the Territory to indicate a cyclone was approaching and I loved the notion. When I presented it somewhere, a white woman, a children's literature expert came down on me like a ton of bricks. I asked my mum what she thought.

It's like making up a new parable from the Bible, you can't do it.

Okay, I get it.

So then of course I realised there were protocols involved when sharing indigenous material and I would need to investigate and abide by them.

ALIA, the Australian Library guidelines remind us that 'there is information that is restricted, that our children can not learn about, there is information that is restricted even to adults, there is information that is of a secret or sacred nature, that many people have no knowledge of or access to. That knowledge is only there for certain people to have access to.' (Gularrwuy Yunupingu, 1986)

As I storyteller I accept that, it is the way it has always been. I've always known some stories are sacred or some are private, personal.

As well, the ALIA guidelines also report that... 'For too long in the stories (and libraries)... 'we have been referred to and catalogued as 'savages' or 'primitive' while Western industrial peoples are referred to as advanced and complex. (Mick Dodson, 1993) .

Point noted, now I was developing my own critical reading skills

Joseph Wambugu Githhaiga, a Law Graduate from Western Australia's Murdoch University writes on, Intellectual Property Law and the Protection of Indigenous Folklore and Knowledge . He explains the intricate web of associations present in aboriginal folklore and mythology and he argues that to try and protect these intricacies with copyright laws is 'beyond the scope of western private property rights' 'Indigenous people regard intellectual and real property to be so intimately linked that no meaningful distinction can be made between the two. Indigenous designs... represent the title deeds of land ownership.'

I saw that with the children's drawings in the Northern Territory

In his suggested protocols for reform he states that 'artists, writers and performers should desist from unauthorised incorporation of indigenous heritage in their works. Instead they should support the artistic and cultural development of indigenous peoples and participate in public awareness campaigns to promote indigenous art and culture.'

Unauthorised incorporation, I would have to ask.

Support, is ongoing through the Guild and other personal contacts.

But as I'm uncovering this I'm still thinking about the four resources model and the components employed around the Text user and text analysis practise, the ones that describe how you need to read relevant directional material, construct meaning from

appropriate stories and become a reader that can critique material . If I wanted indigenous children to share in the power of reading I would have to bring people and places and the notion of their culture into being. Also, other students needed stories and content that expanded on their limited knowledge of Aboriginal Australia.

I found a story in the Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore and it was collected and researched by Phillip Beatty who works here at the Museum. It's called Napaltjara's story and when I first read it my heart was pounding. Here was a story from the Territory, told simply and powerfully about a woman returning to her campsite to find her family stolen away. It was collected amongst the Pintupi people as late as 1975, the woman had never seen white men before that,..... it was the year I did matric, that's not so long ago. I think Australians have to know this about our history. I want to share it, I tell it but I don't have artistic rights to it for the purpose of recording. But out in schools I'm about providing content for the four resources model to support indigenous learning and the wider communities understanding of Aboriginal History.

Still on the path, back in Victoria I dipped into the Victorian Grade Readers looking for stories to tell, the set of eight readers was standard issue in Victorian Schools for years. As I read through I realised that the books I had learnt to read with talked of black servants and black trackers. No names, ever.... I hated that. It was so disrespectful.

My stories, like Johnny Mullagh's, use traditional names. It was Unnarmin the cricketing legend that was buried with a sprig of wattle and a spray of blackberry. If ever there was a metaphor that could stand in for his life, the local wattle with the ever spreading blackberry.

Grace Bussell, a brave Australian Girl from the Readers, was accompanied by a black servant. Oh please. It's Sam Isaac Yebbles, he was the son of a Noongar Woman and a native American Indian who had jumped ship in Perth. So there you go. Grace and Sam had both saved people drowning off the WA coast, that is why they were BOTH awarded a "Life Saving Medal". Black servant!

And in the Lost Children of Daylesford the aboriginal trackers, Beembarmin and his mate Merrin Merrin known as Tommy Farmer and Tommy Hobson helped to look for the children. They were at the time of the story both farmers from near Mt Franklin, Lambargook to the Dja Drja Wurrung. For me it is a mark of respect.

That's another thing I thought I should respectfully share, The Aboriginal Language Map. I wanted to point out where the stories had come from and how I'd heard about them and to remind people there was once over 250 language groups, clans lived right across Australia.

I remember a Pub in Scotland where I told Napaltjaara's story. I pulled out my map. All over Scotland you see clan maps of Scotland, and as I opened it up I said, "You

reckon you have a clan map. Have a look at this. Terra Nullis?. There's over 250 clans.

In 2000 my sharing of indigenous culture became even more personal, when Aretha Eileen Anne Stewart was born. Her mum Donna Brown is from the Gambangirri People from around Nambucca Heads and her Dad, my brother Paul Stewart, well I always say we hail from Elwood, St Kilda.

I had the great honour of driving Aretha home from hospital, along the Wurrundjeri Way, past Bunjil the eagle and over the West Gate Bridge to Newport. Here was even more reason to honour the stories of this land, foster learning through meaningful educational experiences. It made me even more resolute.

There's something that Bruce Pascoe said on the opening night of the First Australians that has stuck with me, "It's the longest-living civilisation on Earth,.....Said Bruce, a member of the Boonwurrung clan,..... "And if you can't learn something from a people that successful, then you're defying your own intelligence."

I've known of Bruce's work a long time and last year I asked him to be part of a podcast I created for ABC Ballarat, it was a literary walk around the town. Bruce's Book *Convincing Ground: Learning to fall in love with your country* had many important things to say but I talked to him about his writings on Eureka and the flag when we stopped on the tour outside where it hung in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery.

I quote his snippet about Aboriginal stories and lore

"The Southern Cross Constellation is meant to represent the unique Australian identity but for at least 60,000 years it represented the Bram bram bult brothers throwing spears at the giant emu, Tchingal, who killed the creator spirit Waang. Each star in the Constellation represents either protagonists in the battle or the spears they threw.

Sadly if that were a Tibetan or Balinese story Australians would have carvings of deities on their coffee tables or key rings. Our confusion, our inability to frankly examine the past, leads us to look to other countries for history and culture and quite often for spiritualism. Mired in the muddle we often seem confounded by what is happening in our country".

I remember sitting in a school staffroom between sessions when a teacher wandered in and we started to chat. He was a refugee from WW2 and he talked with passion about the indigenous spirit of Australia. He said, not long into the conversation, "I reckon all Australian children should be given a totem animal, to connect them to the environment so they become more aware of looking after it". There seemed to be some merit in that.

In Ballarat, where I've been collecting stories for years I'm always pestering the mob at the Aboriginal Coop and the Kirrit Barrett Cultural Centre for information. Over the years, sadly it has dawned on me that because of the dispossession of the Wathaurong, with the huge influx of gold seekers to their homelands the oral threads of their stories have weakened and often we are working from the same source material, anthropologist Aldo Massola's book, Bunjil's Cave.

I would like to help revive and preserve these stories as well.

It was heartening to read in the making of the series the First Australians.

Quoting from an article in the age newspaper ".....about a year into the project, Marcia Langton said to Rachel and me that if we deny all the knowledge of historians, then we will be doing the same thing as denying Aboriginal history, which has been done in schools. This is the story of black and white, and it should be told from both sides."

Here's the white girl side standing alongside so that we tell both sides of the story.

Feeling a little trepidacious about the topic for the paper and why I wanted to discuss various issues I googled "cultural appropriation" and I came across the writing of Dovie Thompson. I had heard from some Welsh storytelling friends that she was a masterful and wise storyteller from the Kiowa Apache and Lakota people. And at the same time I am presenting this she will be winging her away across the Pacific Ocean to New Zealand to talk about Finding Our Own Voices: Personal & Cultural Integrity in Storytelling.

It's great for me to have it so succinctly discussed by Dovie. She says

"For decades, the global storytelling community has struggled to examine the ethics of telling stories from other cultures. Who "owns" the stories? How do we respect our colleagues, their work and their cultures? How do we find our own stories and authentic voice?

It is a shared step in our ongoing explorations as unique voices in storytelling, representing our own cultures and backgrounds, in service to both the stories and our listeners. We must have 'respectful, provocative and open-ended conversation'.....go beyond the three R's of Reading, Remembering, and Recitation to a view that Dovie calls her Four R's: "Respect, Research, Responsibility and Restraint".

I think those words define my approach to storytelling and I thank Dovie for her clarity

Respect, Research, Responsibility and Restraint.

Here I stand in a long line of storytellers, stretching back, stretching forward.

I want to help share the stories of Australia with respect, responsibility and restraint.
As Aretha's indigenous grandmother Jan always says to me
"Anne E, you've got tell all the stories for all the kids."

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