Whale Dreaming: an approach to 'Teaching in an Aboriginal Way'

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Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which the workshop was first delivered. I pay my respects to the Elders; past, present and emerging. I acknowledge and wish to celebrate that arts are the essential media for expressing relationships of family and community, culture, history and country.

Background and Context

This year as everyone has experienced is a year of unexpected change, from how to deal with students affected by extended, serious bushfires, then to the many impacts arising from COVID-19. Change is also happening in our curricula that will have lasting effects. Over the last few years, there has been a revolution with inclusion of learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, under the umbrella of Cross Curriculum Priorities. Acknowledging that Australia's First Nation peoples' history and culture is to ensure 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum of each of the learning areas' and ensure 'all students ... engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2020). The following workshop description offers a way to enact a topic through a First Nations perspective for the Primary or Middle Years Drama classroom.

This workshop description is not about how to survive in lockdown, but rather how to celebrate the annual migration of whales that occurs each winter as right and humpback whales swim up the eastern Australian coast with their young to warm tropical waters. As it travels along the east coast of Australia on its annual migration, the whale has featured prominently in traditional Aboriginal story, song and rock art. Beached whales provided a reason for local Aboriginal nations to gather together to share large feasts. In contemporary times, the whale continues to be important to many Aboriginal groups along the coastal regions. Moving up and down the coast, the whale does not belong to one particular group, but to all (Duncan, n.d.). Whales have captured mankind's imagination over centuries in many cultures from Dreaming Stories to 'Moby Dick'. Whales offer a rich topic to explore not only through Indigenous perspectives, but the history of the exploitation and near extinction during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries and through the consideration of the impacts of climate change and plastics in the ocean. I see this lesson plan as the first in a more comprehensive unit on whales.

This workshop was designed and presented for third year pre-service teachers taking an elective in primary drama. This workshop takes place over three hours and has been inspired by the chapter 'Singing your own Songlines: Approaches to Indigenous drama' by Anne Marshall from 'Drama Journeys' edited by Mary Mooney and Jennifer Nicholls (2004). This chapter offers a very detailed approach, advice and strategies as Anne Marshall explains, for teaching 'in the Aboriginal way'.

To begin, Anne Marshall defines 'Songlines' as 'the term (that) encapsulates the close connectedness of people, events, social and religious belief, environment and movement through the land: and a mapping of identity and country using the visual and performing arts' (Mooney & Nicholls, 2004, p.56).

Here are a few of the important aspects that I have endeavoured to incorporate into this workshop from her lists of strategies:

- Storytelling is connected to synaesthesia in both the creating and the interpretation of meaning
- Sharing personal stories by listening and telling
- Building 'community' in the classroom
- Valuing identity and family
- Using visual and narrative iconography
- Representing the land and all living organisms, not just people, as being important to the drama
- The drama work is collaborative, building multi-layered messages
- Practicing different genres of narrative. (Mooney & Nicholls, 2004, pp. 62 4).

In brackets after each activity there are captions showing the connection to Anne Marshall's strategies for teaching in an Aboriginal way.

Workshop Outline

Setting the Context

As Indigenous culture is essentially about connection to land and community through culture, the following is a suggested way to approach this. Everything in Indigenous culture also works on many symbolic levels and layers.

1. Walking the Space: Participants are encouraged to take off their shoes and be more connected to the ground. Choose a place in the space where you would like to stand, and for a minute think about the places that have meaning for you. Then go for a walk around the space and imaginatively assign a spot in the room for each of the places that have meaning. Choose up to 3 places. (For example, three places that have special meaning for me are the small clump of Antarctic Beeches in Lamington National Park, these are very ancient trees about 2,000 years old behind the Gold Coast; Stradbroke Island, near Brisbane; and the Georges River near Lorne, Victoria.)

Then walk that journey again, making sure you travel to the same places in the same way. Stop at each of the places for a short time and remember the place clearly.

Walk the same journey again, adding a symbolic gesture or movement for each of the places where you stopped.

Then on a sheet of paper draw the journey finding symbols for each place and then share the story of your places with a partner.

(Visual Narratives combined with Oral Storytelling, developing a sense of country)

2. Telling the story of who you are: (Family and kinship is also a very important part of First Nation people's lives). In pairs, each tells briefly the story of who they are, their family history. (Try to tell it in first person and present tense)

A short time can be spent with class members sharing family stories: How many generations do you know about? Where do families come from? etc.

(Building community and trust, personal story telling, valuing identity and family)

3. Whale Encounters: In small groups, tell any stories or experiences that have connections with whales. Then make a freeze frame, which may include some movement that represents a moment from one of these stories.

Documentary videos of whales could be shown here, to build understanding, especially for those who know little about whales.

(Oral storytelling, may be gaining knowledge about whales)

4. Role on the Wall: In groups of five, draw a large whale on a large sheet of paper and on the outside of the whale, note biological description and information and on the inside write cultural and historical information from a Western perspective. What is/was valued about the whale in the past and in the present and why? What has not been valued? Why are they still hunted?

(Establishing a variety of perspectives, knowledge and understandings of whales)

5. Physical Warm-up: Group Movement. Stand with awareness of being grounded, of the whole of the foot on the floor, the knees a little bent. Building a sense of community: When the group feels ready, walk together around the room and get faster until running and then slowing to walking and together come to a stop. This may need a few attempts to build the sense of togetherness.

6. Image Making of Natural Environments:

Making these environments are preparation for the creation story that is to follow.

Mountains: The whole group runs into the centre of the room from the edge of the room to create a mountain range with their bodies. Then very slowly they erode away as the mountains are worn away. Explain that most Australian mountains are low and undulating as they are so ancient. (A percussion instrument can be used as an accompaniment.)

Rivers: The group scatter themselves through the main part of the room, to represent rocks in a river. The other half move as though they were the water rushing around and over rocks. (Music or percussion to accompany.)

Waterholes: The group who have just been water, then create the outside edge of a water hole. The other half gradually come in the 'water hole' and make a picture of the plants and animals that could be found at a water hole. Bring it to life with the sounds and movements. This may be a more focussed soundscape of 'dawn at the waterhole or creek' or a 'picture postcard with a soundscape'. (It is a useful way to encourage students/ participants to think more about Australian animals and birds and environment. I find that often urban or city students have not had much experience of the Australian bush).

The Ocean Edge: The half who were the plants and animals create rocks and cliffs at the ocean edge and the other half create the waves that crash onto those cliffs. (Build to a crescendo and then the waves slowly lose their energy and become calm.)

(Building belief and understanding of the landscape, of country, the idea of the land being created)

7. Whale Dreamtime story: Toorongong, the Whale and Baiyami

The Dreaming story below is read to the group. Each group of about 5 or 6 participants is assigned a small section of the story to find a way of expressing it through movement and sound. Also, the class is asked to consider the role of the narrator. Is there one voice or many or is the narration shared? Is there one narrator who sits outside the action or is the narration from within the performing group? Also, the use of percussion, is it by the performers or by one percussionist? Ideally, there should be a variety of materials such as pieces of cloth and rostra boxes that could be chosen by the groups to enhance the work. Here is a suggested break down of the group work:

Group 1. Freeze Frame + sound Group 2. Movement + sound Group 3. Movement + sound Group 4. Movement + sound Group 5. Movement + sound.

Then the story is retold with the groups with the added movement and sound and narration. The sound may be from percussion instruments including clap sticks. (Storytelling through the senses, collaborative story telling about living things)

Then each group is given a large piece of paper, to recreate the story through symbols and then shared with the whole group.

(Visual narrative)

Then the class returns to the 'Whale on the Wall' and Indigenous perspectives and new understandings are added and there is a discussion about what is revealed. (Personal, cultural and historical understanding of whales)

8. Reflection and Discussion of the whole lesson and approaches.



Here is the Dreaming story to be explored.

Toorongong, the Whale and Baiyami

Creation Dreamtime story of the Darkinjung, Gamilaroi Nations, Australia as told by Aboriginal Elder of the Darkinjung tribe, Kevin 'Gavi' Duncan. I understand that is important when telling and exploring Dreaming Stories that whose story it is, and where it comes from, is acknowledged.

This story and artwork have been reproduced here with the permission of Kevin 'Gavi' Duncan, a Kamilaroi Aboriginal artist from the NSW Central Coast, and Senior Tourism Cultural Education Officer, Darkinjung Aboriginal Land Council. Gavi has also generously engaged with and responded to the workshop design saying, 'it is great having two nation groups telling our stories of the interconnection spirituality between people and our natural environment'.



Darkinjung Nation, NSW Central Coast.



(Above right): A pathway surrounded by the Rainbow Serpent (representing Umulliko) sits near the whale, the Central Coast and Darkinjung nation focus of the Umulliko's logo. The sun is the giver of life and accompanies the whale. Reproduced with permission of Kamilaroi Aboriginal artist Kevin 'Gavi' Duncan.

Group 1

Before the Earth was born the Mirrabooka, (the Milkyway) flowed across the night skyworld. Yarrai, the sunman was still asleep along with Gilli, the moonwoman. Baiyami lived in the far corner of the Mirrabooka along with Yhi, our Mother. The Earth was yet to be born. It lay still and silent in darkness, a lifeless ball. Baiyami's world existed as a pure state of spirituality where all the creatures and plants were born in the Morning Star, the star of life and soul. Amongst all the creatures of creation was Toorongong, the whale, Baiyami's favourite. Bayami spoke of his new creation. A promise of a new world in the Mirrabooka where Toorongong could live along with all creatures in harmony. Toorongong would spread the kinship system among all creatures. It was a new Dreaming.

Group 2

Baiyami prepared for his journey. He prepared his canoe and took Bundar, the kangaroo and Toorongong, the whale. They travelled the Mirrabooka in Baiyami's canoe until they reached the new world which was covered in darkness. As Baiyami descended upon the empty land he crushed the mountain of Yango. Suddenly a light appeared in the eastern sky. It was the birth of the Morning Star, the first light.

Group 3

Plants began to awaken along with strange creatures who slept in the darkness. Baiyami awoke Gurria, the great Serpent, who appeared in rainbow colours. He began to move across the lands releasing the waters within to fill the waterholes, rivers, oceans and billabongs. The spirit of Bundar, the kangaroo was released to the lands. Toorongong was in awe of Baiyami's creation. Baiyami's roaring voice of thunder echoed across the Mirrabooka.

Group 4

A warm glow appeared on the horizon. It was Yarrai, the sunman. During the evening another soft light appeared on the horizon. It was Gilli, the moonwoman. Baiyami welcomed them to the new world. The new world was born then Baiyami said to Toorongong, "This will be your Dreaming place. You shall reign over these lands and waters, my friend. Your kin will forever live in these sacred realms on Earth. Go and give what I have given to you, the kinship of life." Toorongong went into the lands taking with him the spirit of Baiyami.



Group 5

Baiyami ascended back to the Mirrabooka. During the dreamtime period Toorongong intermingled with other creatures, passing on the Laws of Baiyami. He later changed form from a bird of the land to live as he does today in the ocean as a whale. This was the birth of Toorongong on Earth.

Resources

- Percussion instruments, clap sticks
- Large sheets of paper, sheets of A4 and marker pens
- Music/CD: Blak Bangarra Dance Theatre

Other Useful Resources and References

- More information about Whale Dreaming stories. <u>http://www.worldtrans.org/creators/whale/mythintro.html</u>
- The children's picture book about Migaloo, a famous white whale. Wilson, Mark. (2015). *Migaloo, the White Whale*, Hachette Australia, Sydney.
- Dealing with plastic in the ocean, this is a charming animation that is suitable for younger Primary students: A Whale's Tale: Hope Works <u>https://youtu.be/xFPoIU5iiYQ</u>
- There are also fascinating and powerful stories of the Killer Whales of Twofold Bay, Eden, NSW and their relationship with the Aboriginal whalers and how that relationship was broken by white whalers. This story is documented at Eden's Killer Whale Museum and in texts. There is also a children's picture book telling this story. <u>http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2013/10/29/3879462.htm</u>

About the author

Helen Sandercoe has been a Drama/Theatre teacher for much of her life. Central to her practice is how to best develop expressive skills and create an aesthetic experience. Recently, she has been teaching the essentials of Drama for Primary and Secondary Pre-service teachers. There is nothing more exciting for Helen than when a whole class is involved in the creative process.



References

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