Embedding Aboriginal cultural knowledge through community engagement

Community engagement: A best practice model

The New South Wales Quality Teaching model identifies the need for the elements of *deep knowledge* (key concepts and their relationship) and also for the recognition of *cultural knowledge* (knowledge content from diverse socio-cultural contexts).

In Bemel-Gardoo, the intersection of these elements involves identifying key Aboriginal cultural knowledge concepts. To identify and embed these key concepts, school teams needed to access Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders, recognised specialists and custodians who could provide such knowledge. Many teachers were unsure how to go about this.

The stages for community engagement, consultation and collaboration adopted in the Bemel-Gardoo project are described below. This approach offers a best practice model for community engagement in the development of Aboriginal curriculum content in local contexts for all students in all key learning areas.

A process for community engagement, consultation and collaboration in the development and delivery of Bemel-Gardoo units of work

**Stage 1: Clarifying the focus**

Effective design of units of work begins by asking the four crucial questions of the Quality Teaching model:

- What do you want students to learn?
- What will students do or produce (to demonstrate understanding)?
- How well do you expect them to do it?
- Why does this learning matter (to the student, to the wider world)?

An additional, fifth question is central to Bemel-Gardoo:

- Who will provide answers to these questions? The community? Cultural knowledge holders? Teachers? AEOs? Students?

While the initial focus of a unit of work may be identified by school teams, answers to the four Quality Teaching questions are best found through consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders.
Stage 2: Unit design: Building Aboriginal content (cultural knowledge) through genuine partnerships

The aim in the first and second stages is to ensure that specialists of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in the Aboriginal community are engaged as partners in learning. The following questions provide a focus for initial planning:

- What areas of cultural knowledge will be explored and embedded?
- Who in the Aboriginal community has the specialist knowledge to share with students?
- What will be suitable recompense for the person’s time, knowledge and involvement?
- How will the knowledge holder be involved in the development, teaching and evaluation of the unit?
- How can other Aboriginal people and organisations be engaged to assist?
- What protocols need to be considered to foster Aboriginal community engagement and embed Aboriginal cultural knowledge across curriculum?

Units of work are then developed over several meetings involving the teacher, the AEO and the cultural knowledge holder. Answers to the four Quality Teaching questions are developed in the process.

Stage 3: Implementation: Delivery of units of work and related assessment tasks

The third phase involves specialists of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in unit delivery, in conjunction with the schools’ teachers and AEOs wherever possible.

The unit of work developed collaboratively is best delivered collaboratively, involving (at a minimum) the cultural knowledge holder, the teacher and the AEO, with further involvement of community members as required.

Recognising background knowledge and problematic knowledge

It is important to recognise that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, teachers and parents bring prior learning and experiences (background knowledge), preconceived ideas and, sometimes, misconceptions to any educational task (problematic knowledge). In the context of Bemel-Gordo, preconceptions are to be drawn out and discussed in an open manner, recognising the problematic nature of this knowledge. It is important to build a supportive environment in which people can ask questions and discuss ideas. It is vital that Aboriginal communities are involved at each and every stage of unit design, implementation, assessment and evaluation.

Stage 4: Assessment, evaluation, reflection and celebration

Like the development and delivery of the unit of work, assessment of student learning outcomes is best done collaboratively. A method of recording team members’ reflections (such as, video, audio, journal) is decided upon, and evidence of the unit’s effectiveness is gathered via team discussion, pre- and post-coding comparison using the Quality Teaching elements coding scales (see page 120), reflective comments (including students’ comments), and student work samples.
Essential considerations in the process of embedding cultural knowledge

While all school teams approached the project with great enthusiasm and commitment, participants agreed that embedding in-depth Aboriginal cultural knowledge was not as easy as they initially thought it would be. A number of factors that had to be taken into account are discussed below.

Planning

It was considered essential that school teams develop a planned approach to embedding Aboriginal cultural knowledge, through considerations such as:
- selection of staff to be involved – their commitment and availability
- executive commitment to the project
- the timeframe for embedding cultural content
- creating the school community profile
- identifying appropriate Aboriginal cultural knowledge and specialists in the community, and determining where this knowledge fit into the science and technology curriculum
- availability of resources
- sharing the learning obtained through the process (students, teachers, AEOs, cultural knowledge holders, community).

Protocols

It was considered crucial that participants understood general protocols to be followed in working with the local Aboriginal community to develop the science and technology units of study with Aboriginal cultural content.

The document Working with Aboriginal communities: A guide to community consultation and protocols (NSWBS, 2001) was suggested to schools as a guide to developing the appropriate protocols for working with local Aboriginal communities and cultural knowledge holders (this document is available online – see references). The document helped schools determine appropriate procedures and strategies and to build these into the process and timeframes of their projects.

Aspects to be considered included:
- introductory processes – who is going to assist with the formal introductions of the project and introduce teachers to the Aboriginal community?
- elders in the community – who needs to be informed and involved as traditional elders in the community?
- cultural specialists in the community – who has the specialist knowledge required to teach this topic, and are they willing to be involved as a cultural teacher?
- nation and clan groups with authentication of cultural knowledge – who has the authority to teach specialist knowledge, ‘on country’ and/or ‘off country’, as required?
- cross-protocol issues of working between the school protocols and Aboriginal community protocols – is each group of stakeholders aware of the necessary protocols required to work with the other (school staff for working within the Aboriginal community, and the Aboriginal community for working in the school environment)?
Timeframe

Each school project needed a proposed timeframe and planned timeline for identifying:
- learning opportunities and goals
- stakeholder commitments
- time constraints on the school and the community
- assessment scheduling.

The timeline needed to be both realistic and flexible.

Resources

A resource analysis should be incorporated into the unit of study where possible, as a tool to help teaching staff assess the appropriateness of resources selected for use and to train students in analysing resources for cultural bias. A template with the criteria to be used to record the analysis was provided. The academic partner (see page 133 for discussion of this role) provided pre-service Aboriginal teacher associates who played a crucial role in supporting each school team’s resource analysis and collection.

School teams were asked to consider:
- the resources required to deliver the unit – staff, availability of libraries, other equipment
- the cost and availability of resources, and any funding restrictions
- cultural knowledge restrictions – who can teach specific cultural knowledges?
- the specialist skills and knowledge required to prepare resources – who has the necessary skills and knowledge?
- library resources – is there a requirement for an analysis of books, kits, etc. for cultural bias and appropriate level usage with students?

Stakeholders

Schools must identify:
- who will be the stakeholders in the project, for both unit development and for unit delivery
- their roles
- their availability and contact details.

Cultural knowledge holders

School teams had to determine, with assistance from regional Aboriginal community liaison officers (ACLOs) and AEOs (employed by the NSW Department of Education):
- What cultural knowledge will be required in teaching the unit of work?
- Who holds this cultural knowledge?
- Are they able and prepared to share that knowledge?
- What will be a suitable recompense for their time, knowledge and involvement?

Pre- and post-coding

Pre- and post-coding carried out by schools involved in the project provided valuable evidence of:
- the ideological and curriculum shifts required to embed Aboriginal content
- improvements in mapping and monitoring of learning outcomes
- raised expectations for students’ learning outcomes.

The post-coding also set the benchmark for future development and delivery of similar units.


**Conclusion**

Paying attention to the growing knowledge base, problem solving and learning through reflection, cultivating networks of interaction and enlarging the world view are all part and parcel of increasing capacity and changing (Fullan, 2005).

Fullan’s assertion encapsulates the intention and approach of the Bemel-Gardoo project, which may be thought of as an acknowledgement of the need for multiple ways of knowing and an ongoing challenge to curriculum and pedagogic practice in current educational contexts. The schools involved in the project have sought to do as Fullan suggests:

* broaden their knowledge base
* problem-solve and learn through reflection
* cultivate networks built around the common purpose of embedding Aboriginal cultural knowledge in curriculum content and thus enlarge their worldview
* embrace change
* build capacity in all participants.

Community consultation and participation were vital components of the project and building the capacity in all stakeholders was paramount. This collaboration ensured that all work was viewed through an Aboriginal frame. Bemel-Gardoo endeavoured to look at science and technology content from an Aboriginal rather than a Eurocentric perspective.

**Perspective and content**

The semantic distinction between the terms ‘perspective’ and ‘content’ became a much debated topic in the project planning group (which included the support team members and a representative teacher and AEA). It was determined that the demand for content evident in each New South Wales 7–10 syllabus Aboriginal and Indigenous cross-curriculum content statement was more explicit than the oft-stated need for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives.

Although the terms ‘perspectives’ and ‘content’ are often used interchangeably, it became clear that while Eurocentric perspectives on Eurocentric curriculum content and Eurocentric
perspectives on Aboriginal content were a feature of existing curricula in New South Wales, the reverse (Aboriginal perspectives on Eurocentric content) was certainly not – although Aboriginal people are occasionally asked to provide this. Furthermore, and crucially, Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginal content were even less represented. The objective of the Bemel-Gardoo project is to have Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginal cultural content; in this way we will be able to best represent the diversity of Aboriginal cultural perspectives in local communities and across Australia.

In embracing the Quality Teaching elements of cultural knowledge and problematic knowledge, the Bemel-Gardoo project moves beyond the call for Aboriginal perspectives to the more explicit demand for Aboriginal content.

In line with Newmann, Lopez & Bryk’s (1998) authentic pedagogy research and its subsequent iterations in Australia, the Bemel-Gardoo project utilises the New South Wales Quality Teaching framework (Ladwig & Gore, 2003) as a planning and reflective tool – giving particular focus to the elements of problematic knowledge and cultural knowledge, two elements that are under-represented in classrooms (Ladwig & Gore, 2004) and are known to enhance student outcomes. However, while these two elements are seen as central in Bemel-Gardoo, the question of key concepts and their relationship – the focus of the element of deep knowledge – remains equally central in Bemel-Gardoo, as do the model’s other elements, depending on context and purpose.

If Aboriginal communities involved in the project are to have input into providing answers to the four Quality Teaching questions (see page 122), teachers and AEoOs must facilitate community involvement and clarify what processes will be in place for consultation, involvement and feedback.

It is paramount to the project that Aboriginal content not be seen as additional or ‘bolted-on’, but rather as the spine of the content for a unit or task. The explicit quality criteria for student demonstration of understanding of this content may also be best developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities, in conjunction with the content. The four questions may therefore be directed to Aboriginal communities in relation to the selection, embedding, teaching and assessment of Aboriginal content.

The answers to the Quality Teaching questions provide a framework for building units of work and assessment tasks with embedded Aboriginal content, developed and delivered in collaboration with Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders and communities.

While the ten schools involved in the initial Bemel-Gardoo project in 2007 were committed to embedding the Aboriginal content in their units of work, degrees of success in terms of the four crucial questions varied. Those who opened their school and learning community to an authentic and sustainable partnership with Aboriginal knowledge custodians reported high degrees of success. Schools that struggled to connect with community found the project difficult. Schools that did not engage community or Aboriginal knowledge custodians remained at the stage of bolting Aboriginal perspectives onto the curriculum as a seeming afterthought, rather than building the unit on the foundation of Aboriginal knowledges.

**Project outcomes**

The key outcomes achieved by the Bemel-Gardoo project were:

- schools implemented units of work and ‘rich tasks’ in science and technology K–10 which embed Aboriginal cross-curriculum content as the spine of the unit and task
• teachers and AEOs worked with academic partners and consultants in collaboratively
developing units and tasks in science and technology
• there was improved engagement of Aboriginal students in science and technology K–10
• understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge improved for
all students
• links to local Aboriginal communities and tertiary institutions were fostered
• there was greater understanding of the potential of the New South Wales Quality
Teaching model to design, ‘tune’, implement and reflect on units and tasks embedding
Aboriginal content.
One conclusion which has emerged from the project, supported by comments from all
stakeholders, is that awareness after an initial attempt at embedding cultural knowledge (a
Bemel-Gardoo project in a school) informs any further attempts – the ‘post’ becomes the
‘pre’ of the next iteration. This cyclical learning approach is built into the project through the
use of the Quality Teaching model as an interrogative spine. Some comments from schools
throughout the process are in the box on pages 145–52.
Schools involved in the Bemel-Gardoo project were contacted two to three years later to
reflect on the experience. Their comments on the impact of Bemel-Gardoo are anecdotally
powerful. The ongoing collateral outcomes of schools’ involvement clearly include:
• increased communication with, support from, and sustained relationship with the schools’
Aboriginal parents and community
• greater understanding and therefore greater respect for Aboriginal cultural knowledge in
the school community, including students, teachers, executive and parents
• increased involvement of Aboriginal parents in schools’ curriculum, life and events, with
Indigenous parents ‘on board’ and feeling their culture is valued
• teachers’ increased willingness to be involved in Aboriginal education initiatives
• more thought going into Aboriginal education programs and integration into the everyday
curriculum
• increased morale among Indigenous students, with flow-on effects to improved learning
outcomes
• increased capacity in all stakeholders: teacher and executive confidence, many Aboriginal
participants moving on to AEO roles, increased university take-up
• improved relationship between Aboriginal staff members and other staff
• increased and deliberate planning for coding of cultural knowledge and problematic
knowledge in schools’ pedagogy, while retaining the rigour of explicit teaching and high
expectations.
The key to all this is the power of common purpose focused on curriculum content, the respect
for Aboriginal cultural knowledge coming from increased understanding, and the building of
cultural competencies in all participants, flowing on to students in all schools. Schools were
left feeling they could articulate the positive outcomes achieved when Aboriginal cultural
knowledge, New South Wales schools curricula and the New South Wales Quality Teaching
model were woven together jointly by schools and Aboriginal communities, enlivened by the
common purpose of embedding Aboriginal cultural content in curriculum.
The most powerful outcomes of Bemel-Gardoo have perhaps been the hardest to
quantify, although centrally reflecting the spirit of the New South Wales values statements.
These complementary outcomes include the building of sustained relationships based on
trust and integrity and enhanced communication and collaboration between schools and
their communities, in terms of curriculum development, supporting student learning, and the building of common goals and purposes.

The enthusiasm and collective focus of all stakeholders involved in the Bemel-Gardoo project and process has resulted in profound outcomes for all participants and for the students of the schools involved. Participants’ commitment has been demonstrated through their sustained willingness to engage with the complexities of crucial cultural protocols, to recognise the problematic nature of knowledge, to confront challenges to their own paradigms and to embrace the need for continued and purposeful dialogue and collaboration with schools’ Aboriginal communities.

While it may seem initially daunting and complex, the sustained embedding of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in curriculum is possible when a planned process is followed involving specialists of specific Aboriginal cultural knowledge at each stage.

### Participants’ experience of the Bemel-Gardoo project

Stakeholders involved in the implementation of the units were asked to keep a reflective journal to assess the progress of the team’s work, training sessions and unit delivery. This was used to develop a guide on the strengths and barriers of the project, which was then used in building a stronger process for the following year.

Here are some of the comments that emerged from reflection journals and project workshop evaluations.

#### General comments
- Very inspiring speaker (from La Perouse community)
- Spoke to community members and parents and was very glad that I was invited to attend.
- We want children to be engaged and what better way than having family involvement and community knowledge shared in the classroom.
- Deeper understanding of the Indigenous family connections. Felt sad about ‘lost generation’ but knowledge is power and we need to talk.
- Essential to develop a real understanding of the protocols involved in working with Aboriginal communities – this often develops through working on projects and getting to know the local Aboriginal community.

#### Comments about strengths
- Having AEA so involved in the local community meant that people came to meetings (ie. rang everyone). Everyone wanted to be involved and have some part of the process.
- Improved communication.
- Avenues have been opened for ongoing communication between school, teachers, students and local Aboriginal community.
- Inspirational speakers and workshops.
- Awareness of kinship and issues associated with Aboriginal family structure and learning styles.