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Appropriate Terminology, Representations and Protocols of Acknowledgement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

The terminology, representations and protocols provided in this document have been endorsed by the University.

This document is adapted from 'Using the right words: appropriate terminology for Indigenous Australia studies' 1996 in Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre-Service Teacher Education, School of Education, University of New South Wales in association with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

Introduction

The following guide is recommended for use by students enrolled in courses at the University, and for staff. It clarifies appropriate language and the naming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, societies and histories.

This document recognises that English as the dominant language in Australia is a vehicle for the expression of discrimination and prejudice, as cultural values and attitudes are reflected in the structures and meanings of the language we use. This means that language cannot be regarded as a neutral or unproblematic medium and can cause or reflect discrimination due to its intricate links with society and culture.

When using language in a University context it is always important to understand its historical context and the ways in which it informs discourses of power. This document is not just about 'correct' and 'incorrect' language, it is also about knowing the power of the language you use in a University setting.

Acknowledgement of Country, Lands and Waters

This is a demonstration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocol and gives respect to the local land owners. An acknowledgement of country is provided for public and important events; for example the opening of a building or a student presentation.

The following wording and statement is appropriate for acknowledging Kaurna lands.

We acknowledge the Kaurna people – the traditional owners of the lands and waters where the city of Adelaide has been built.

Tarndanyunga Kaurna Yerta

This is an expression of respect and we view any acknowledgement as a significant and symbolic marker of cultural protocol.

Identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Official government identification determines that Indigenous Australian people are people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and are accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which they live, or have lived (AIATSIS, 2012).

Note that this official identification is not always satisfactory for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cannot be satisfactory for many members of the Stolen Generations who may not be able to demonstrate connection to a 'community' and therefore acceptance by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of that community. It is also important to note that identification as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person is not determined by skin colour.

Appropriate Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Writing

Written assessments (e.g. assignments, Power Point presentations for seminars etc.) will need to include the appropriate terminology when making reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. With this in mind, the use of pronouns such as 'the', 'they', 'them', 'their' and 'those' cannot be used as substitutes. The use of pronouns is a writing practice that objectifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and creates a social distance between you as a student and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, societies and histories.

In your research you will encounter texts that use inappropriate language, naming and styles of representation. The teaching team for this topic recommends you to use the styles offered in this document. The terms 'we' and 'us' also need to be interrogated within essays. Ensure you are aware of who is included and excluded within these collective terms. It may be necessary at times in essays to quote material that uses inappropriate and offensive representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. The use of quotes of this nature is acceptable but it is important that these representations are noted within a historical context and are critiqued appropriately.

Appropriate Terminology for naming and representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, cultures, societies and histories

The recognition and appropriate representation of Indigenous Australia is fundamental to social justice. It is important that the appropriate descriptors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be capitalised as this conveys respect. In addition, the 'more appropriate' terms will stress the humanity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The use of terms that stereotype and homogenise fail to recognise the social, linguistic and cultural diversity of Indigenous Australia. Australia, before the invasion, was comprised of nation states and 200-300 autonomous languages that are usually referred to as 'nations' or 'language groups'. The nations of Indigenous Australia are as separate as the nations of Europe or Africa.

Historic and Current Classifications of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

In the past, Australian governments classified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples according to skin colour and parentage using inappropriate terms. The assumption was that any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with any 'European' blood was more intelligent and therefore acceptable as a member of Australian society. Less appropriate terms create false divisions between Indigenous Australian peoples of different areas. It is critical that these terms are not used to refer to or to attempt to classify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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Use of terms such as 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'full-blood' are not appropriate and have historically been used to oppress Aboriginal peoples according to a racialised system of blood quantum.

At the heart of the continued practice of classifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the issue of 'authenticity' – the idea that the 'real' Aboriginal people live in Arnhem Land or the Central Desert and that only 'traditional' Aboriginal peoples and cultures are 'really Aboriginal'. Caution should be used with terms such as 'rural', 'isolated' and 'remote'. These words should refer to geographical location and access to services only.

It is important to recognise that Indigenous Australian peoples have much more in common than the wide use of classificatory terms such as 'urban' and 'traditional' would suggest. For example, most Aboriginal people who are classified as 'urban' have close links to 'traditional' country.

Language Names

Colonisation has seen the renaming of peoples, places and natural features all over Australia. For example, the word 'Aboriginal' is an imposed name. Aboriginal language terms for Aboriginal peoples such as 'Koori', 'Murri', 'Nyoongah' are appropriate for areas where these language terms apply. Local names identify language groups and communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for example 'Gamilaroy' (NSW) or 'Pitjantjatjara' (SA).

Note that the Aboriginal language term 'Nunga' is used in general reference to Aboriginal peoples who reside in and around the area of Adelaide. Many Aboriginal South Australians prefer people not to presume the right to use the word 'Nunga'. Use the most appropriate term when known and when you do not know consult with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. For example, use 'Uluru' (Pitjantjatjara) instead of 'Ayers Rock'.

More Appropriate

Naming

- Indigenous Australian people(s)
- Aboriginal people(s)
- Aboriginal person
- Torres Strait Islander people(s)
- Torres Strait Islander person
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Communities

Less Appropriate

Naming

- Aborigines
- Aboriginal(s) and Torres Strait Islander(s) as a noun and as a plural
- The Aborigines

More Appropriate

Language Names for People and Places

- Murri – Qld, north west NSW
- Goori – South East Qld and Northern NSW
- Nyoongah – Perth, WA
- Koori – NSW
- Koorie – Vic
- Yolngu – Arnhem Land NT
- Anangu – Central Australia
- Palawah – Tasmania
- Nunga (not always an appropriate term – SA)
- Ngarrindjeri – SA – River Murray Lakes, Coorong people
- Torres Strait Island Peoples e.g. Murray Island Peoples, Mer Island Peoples.
- Indigenous nations
- Complex and diverse societies
- Efficient resource managers
- Indigenous Australian society
- Uluru

Less Appropriate

Language Names for People and Places

- Part-aborigine', 'full-blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'quadroon', 'octoroon', 'mulatto', 'hybrid'
- Traditional
- Contemporary
- Modern
- Urban
- Rural
- Isolated or remote Aboriginal people/Torres Strait Islander people
- Ayers Rock

Representing Social and Cultural Practices

Historical studies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples using anthropological terms such as 'band', 'clan' and 'tribe' to convey characteristics of social groupings are inappropriate. The less appropriate terms imply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are not as 'advanced' as European societies. The terms are based on the 'progress' model (from 'lower' to 'higher' (Western) forms of social organisation) of history grounded in the ideas of evolutionary science

Representing Governance Structures

Elders are men and women in Aboriginal communities who are respected for wisdom and knowledge of culture and law. Female and male Elders have higher levels of knowledge for the maintenance of cultural and social order.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not, and do not have chiefs, kings and queens. The introduction of 'kings' or 'queens' was a colonial strategy to raise up individuals for the authorities to deal with and create hierarchies similar to those found in colonial culture. Colonial governments imposed foreign governance structures on Indigenous Australian societies. It was a way of honouring individual status, but there was usually an element of mockery e.g. In such names as 'King Billy' or 'Queen Gooseberry'.

Representing Belief Systems

Popular use of the term 'Dreamtime' to refer to the period of creation is inappropriate. In terms of Indigenous belief systems, 'Spirituality' or 'Spiritual beliefs' is more appropriate. Indigenous Australian spirituality is localised by definition and is a way of life; connectedness and belonging.

It is important to recognise that many Indigenous people are religious in terms of mainstream religions and often combine these beliefs with Indigenous spirituality. Terms such as 'myth' or 'story' convey the impression that knowledge from the Dreaming is not true, trivial, happened in the distant past or are fairy tales. The Dreaming is often referred to in Aboriginal languages specific to particular areas of country, terms such as 'Tjuku' and 'Wapa' for example in Pitjantjatjara refer to the 'Dreaming'.

Representing Land Usage

The rotational or cyclical occupation of land by Aboriginal peoples was inaccurately portrayed as being 'nomadic' rather than the expression of an intimate knowledge of and ability to harvest the land. It was and is based on not staying in one place and exhausting all resources but moving around the territory at particular times when food resources became available. The crucial concept is 'belonging to the land'. It is offensive to Aboriginal peoples to refer to terms such as 'hunter-gatherer', 'nomadic' and 'walkabout'.

Nomadism has been associated with lack of land tenure or anchorage in land and this has been coupled with the idea that Aboriginal peoples did not really occupy the land but only roamed over it. The extension of the 'doctrine of terra nullius' was based on this kind of distinction. Issues of land, rights to land and land ownership remains 'unsettled business' for the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

More Appropriate

Representing Social and Cultural Practices

- Aboriginal nation(s)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities
- Language group(s)
- Culture group(s)
- Aboriginal countries
- Seasonal occupation
- Rotational/cyclical occupation
- Looking after the country/the land
- Elders
- The Dreaming
- The Dreamings
- Spirituality
- Spiritual beliefs
- Creation/Dreaming Stories
- Teachings from the Dreaming/s

Less Appropriate

Representing Social and Cultural Practices

- Primitive
- Simple
- Native
- Prehistoric
- Stone age
- Totemic
- Hunter-gatherer
- Tribe
- Horde
- Band
- Clan
- Moiety
- Nomadic, nomads, nomadism
- Chiefs
- Kings
- Queens
- Dreamtime
- Religion
- Myths
- Folklore
- Legends

Representing History

'Pre-history' is a term used by some archaeologists and historians to denote the time period before European recorded history. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a long and valid history prior to the invasion. A history that tells Australia was founded in 1770 or 1788 denies a respectful place for Indigenous Australians.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in Australia long before Captain Cook arrived hence it was impossible for Cook to be the first person to 'discover' Australia. The use of the word 'discovery' is not value-neutral and works to discount and disregard Indigenous knowledge systems.

Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied and colonised. Describing Australia as a 'settled', a 'settler society' and as 'post-colonial' ignores the reality of Indigenous peoples' lands being stolen and that the effects of colonisation continue. A more inclusive history views Australia from our own shores rather than the shores of England.



More Appropriate

Representing History

- Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history
- Pre-invasion history
- Invasion history
- Invasion
- Colonisation
- Occupation
- Captain Cook was the first Englishman to map the east coast of 'New Holland'
- '.... Since the beginning of the Dreaming/s
- 'Since the beginning of the Dreaming/s' reflects the belief of many Indigenous Australians that they have always been in Australia, from the beginning of time, and came from the land.
- 'Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth were the first European men to cross the Blue Mountains'

Less Appropriate

Representing History

- Pre-history
- Settler society
- Post-colonial
- Settlement
- Settled
- Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia
- Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth were the first men to cross the Blue Mountains.
- 'Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for 40,000 years'. *Forty thousand years puts a limit on the occupation of Australian and thus tends to lend support to migration theories and anthropological assumptions. Many Indigenous Australians see this sort of measurement and quantifying as inappropriate.*

References and Further Resources

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