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Stories from an Indigenous perspective in the reading resources mix, and the role they play in literacy success for Indigenous Australian students

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Margaret Cossey is a non Indigenous Australian. She has been a special needs literacy teacher in both government and Catholic schools. For the last fifteen years she has been involved in the development of the processes and protocols and the resulting stories, lesson notes, AV materials and the publishing company that has become Indij Readers Ltd.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional Custodians of the land we are on today, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and their Elders past and present. I thank them for taking care of this land for thousands of years.

The circumstances in all aspects of life, that prevail for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today, do not need more explanation.

In this presentation, I will discuss shared experiences with Indigenous people in Indigenous communities in Australia over the last 15 years, the understandings we came to together, the all-important role we believe functional literacy plays in addressing disadvantage and disempowerment, and how this can be achieved. I will outline what Indij Readers has done and is doing in Indigenous communities, in this regard.

Most people here today would know that most children, and I think it’s about 65 per cent, learn to read effectively, no matter what process, system or teaching is in place. We also know that about 30 per cent of all students in schools across Australia experience varying degrees of difficulty in acquiring appropriate literacy skills. Often these are minor
and quickly addressed, others require more careful attention. Difficulties occur for myriad reasons, including illness at critical times, regular absenteeism, poor or unhelpful teaching, lack of motivation or engagement in the formal learning process, lack of understanding of the special needs of some students by teachers and family issues.

Indigenous students, particularly boys, are highly over-represented in this problematic cohort and the educational inequality stemming from this literacy delay in the early years of schooling can impact on every part of life thereafter.

We also know that students who can read age and grade appropriate material usually have better school attendance, blossom in other academic areas, have higher self esteem, are less likely to have interactions with the police, are less likely to miss school with minor ailments and are a cohesive element in home and community. It is therefore in our best interests to ensure that all children achieve functional literacy sooner rather than later.

This issue as it relates to Indigenous kids, has been the main focus of my attention for the last 15 years.

What I’m going to speak to you about today is the reasoning behind the approach I have taken to address this issue through the company Indij Readers. I have to preface this by saying I’m not a world authority on anything. I taught children to read and write for about 20 years. I chose to teach those who had difficulty with literacy, and especially those with behaviour issues, so there were a few Indigenous kids over the years.

My teaching experience has been in government schools, Catholic schools K–10 and some experience with kids in and out of detention.

I am a Reading Recovery teacher, a Spalding teacher, in fact nearly every literacy intervention program that has been devised in the last couple of decades, I’ve done it, got it and got the T-shirt.

Every literacy system has good ideas but quite frankly, I believe the most important factor in the whole process, is that you enjoy being with your
students, that they know you actually like being with them, especially if they are regularly in trouble in the system, and that as far as their literacy learning is concerned, you stay firmly tuned into what they say, what they do and don’t do, observe their literacy behaviours to see what they know, where they’re at and what they need to progress to the next stage. This does presuppose that you have a reasonably solid understanding of the process of acquisition of literacy skills.

And it’s safe to say, it’s a universal understanding, that good literacy skills are fundamental to success for anyone living at this time – as Dr Paul Brock says, a human right, the inalienable right of every child.

I’m convinced that story is what can link the emerging literacy learner, whatever age, to functional literacy skills.

In my experience, students with special needs as well as those in and out of detention need you to establish some rapport, some warmth with them. That can sometimes take a while, but during that time, if story and meaning are at the centre of the teaching process, the learning has a good chance of starting. Story also has to have relevance to them, has to be within their reach or their experience.

That’s not to say that phonics, grammatical features, conventions of print, spelling etc aren’t important, but they’re the housekeeping. We all have to get across all those skills to be effective readers and writers but they are not the centrepiece. I have never yet met anyone who learnt to read and write just to be hot at phonics.

Many of the understandings that underpin the way I’ve approached storytelling with our Indigenous authors have been developed out of the experience of being a Reading Recovery teacher. If they teach you nothing else about literacy, good Reading Recovery tutors certainly teach you to be forensic in your observations of the literacy behaviours of your students.

What I also learnt was that, if the new story selected for that day’s lesson was about a topic or concept familiar to the student, then the book orientation was a breeze, the running record on the book the next day
was often up over the 95 per cent accuracy rate and the child and I were both happy little vegemites.

If the reverse was the case, the lesson that day was stressful for both the student and myself. Over time I realised that everything seemed to hinge around story selection.

Most kids do well in the Reading Recovery environment, they usually progress well and move back into the middle of the literacy range in their class inside the 20 weeks of tutoring. But for some, it doesn’t always go so well and I started to think that one of the factors could be that for those students there weren’t enough published stories within their life and cultural experience. And this was certainly the case with the Indigenous students I taught in the Reading Recovery program.

I’d like to tell you I had an epiphany and it all fell into place. Not so. It took a while and other people have gradually become involved and eventually the circumstances arose in the early ’90s to actually explore the idea of facilitating first time authors in Indigenous communities to make contemporary stories. That’s how this project started and at the first communities, Lake Cargelligo and Murrin Bridge, we talked together, about the idea of making contemporary stories from an Indigenous perspective. The question we talked around was, “do we think this is a good idea and if so, will we have a go at it together?” That was 1993. It wasn’t just a cold call. I live in Cootamundra in south west NSW and was teaching at Sacred Heart Central School there. St Francis Xavier School at Lake Cargelligo is also in our diocese, so going out to that school and talking this idea over with the AEAs was straightforward. We’d all attended diocesan conferences together so we were slightly known to each other and we had things in common. For me, from the beginning of this project, that’s always been fundamentally important, to have some links, some connections, so that Indigenous people can have confidence that it’s safe to engage in the work and with me, and that it will be a good thing to be involved in.

I’d been told by a lecturer of mine at CSU that the world already had enough stories for Aboriginal kids by middle-aged, middle-class white women, so I had to be very clear that was not what I would be doing.
What I knew I could do, was be the facilitator for others to make stories. From my experience teaching children – both little ones and older kids – I had an idea of the sorts of stories that worked and engaged them. I was fairly confident I could support first time authors to make such stories.

In those early days I was also very aware of the perception in many Aboriginal communities that most white fullas turn up long enough to get their PhD and then piss off, never to be seen again. Black fullas call them seagulls, they fly in, grab the food and fly out.

I recently read a quote by a black activist who said, “if you’ve come to help us, bugger off, but if part of your liberation is working with us, then join us.”

I think it comes down to friendship and common interest and that takes time. The common interest is that we all want all kids to learn to read and write well, do as well at school as they can, get the training to get the job they will enjoy doing, and have a happy and productive life.

The central factor to help make that happen, the protocol that took place and still takes place today, is that we all spend time getting to know each other. There’s no rushing. The old Aunties call it, ‘being on Koori time, sista’, and together we decide if it’s a good idea to work up some stories in that community at that time. It’s much easier now because we’ve got stories from other communities to show. The Elders and community decide if they would like to be a part of Indij Readers. We haven’t had a knock back yet.

By visiting communities one at a time for a long time, asking people what they thought of the idea of making stories in this way, and getting to know Indigenous parents, children, Elders, hearing stories, making friends, and I guess, living life together, making memories together, stories emerged that eventually became our first series of books. The model was collaborative, both Indigenous and non Indigenous participants. Ownership of the process and the final product was inclusive and we all wanted the same things, contemporary Indigenous stories represented in the mix of reading resources available, and everyone reading and having school success.
Two stories came out of that initial experience, those two AEAs at St Francis Xavier were our first authors, Aunty Joy Kelly’s story of the Min Min and Aunty Sharon Thorpe’s story of the Emu Egg.

Between us, that is, the aunties and I, we worked out other things like, the stories would be written the way they were told, natural language, which included Aboriginal English. We would support teachers with lesson notes, cultural notes and activity sheets for each book. We knew that was very important, so that non Indigenous teachers could take on our materials with confidence. The Aboriginal English and the activity sheets weren’t so popular at first, in some quarters with education hierarchies. Nevertheless we persevered and for the most part we have very supportive and helpful relationships with most education department offices. The good part about it all is that, all the people who work for all the education service providers in Australia really do have the same hope, that all the kids will learn to read and write well.

It wasn’t long before everyone involved, knew that the model developed to do this work was solid, very labour intensive, but solid. After that, all that was needed was total commitment to see it all through to publication, no matter what. The details of incorporating a company, raising substantial funds, building a business model that was sustainable, working extensive hours for years, arguing with people who held entrenched positions and trying to convince them to think outside the square, ad nauseam, well all I can say is, you don’t have to be mad, but it certainly helps.

So Indij Readers has been set up as a not-for-commercial-profit publishing company. We approach corporations, philanthropic organisations and government departments, both federal and state in all states, for funding support. We have been fortunate to have developed long-term strategic partnerships with some very supportive corporations including Clayton Utz, Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation and Westpac. We have DGR and ITEC status and all our profits support ongoing development, literacy initiatives and capacity-building initiatives in Indigenous communities. We pay each author and illustrator a fee in lieu of royalty. They always own the copyright of their story or art, and they sign a contract with us which allows us to print and publish their stories.
There are two of us managing the development and business operations of Indij Readers and we have a majority Indigenous Board.

What sustains everyone involved in Indij Readers is that when we go to a new community, everyone loves the stories, and there’s pride in them, that they are the contemporary experience from an Indigenous perspective.

Indij Readers has been developed on that premise, story and meaning are at the centre. Our aim is to develop the kind of texts that are effective in engaging literacy learners, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, especially those little fullas and big fullas who don’t always find it plain sailing. Our texts are written with a clear purpose: that the books will be read by students learning to read. The wider audience is envisaged as Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers and those who want to find out more about Indigenous Australia or just enjoy a good story. All texts share a common purpose: to describe life as it is or has been lived by Indigenous Australians. Importantly, all texts are authentic in that the way they are written supports the purpose of the text: to entertain, inform or recount and not as part of a levelled reading scheme. We know stories should often make us smile and sometimes make us laugh out loud. It’s also okay if they make us think a bit. One of the things that especially the Aunties and I hope Indigenous kids think about, is that their stories belong and take their rightful place in the mix of resources that they and all their peers use, when they are learning to read and write. Their stories and their art are a part of the literature that everyone experiences. There can be many other agendas for texts as well, and you will notice with our stories, there is certainly no shortage of agendas.

Because they are classroom reading resources we have accompanying teachers’ guides. We use an explicit teaching model and we encourage teachers to use the guides with discernment, as they see fit, for their own particular students.

How effective have we been so far? Well we don’t know. What we do know is anecdotal. Teachers phoning in and saying they and their students are enjoying the stories and lessons, wanting to know when
there will be more. Since we incorporated the company and started selling our materials we’ve penetrated about 12 per cent of the target market, that is literacy classrooms in Australian schools. We’re not sure how good that is in business terms but we’re still in business so that’s a good sign.

In late 2004 we decided to apply new thinking to the development model. Up till then our stories were developed mostly with first-time authors and illustrators. I would spend extended lengths of time working in a community through the steps of each book. Families and usually much of the community were also included in the process. The focus was on the experience for each of our contributors, and the community, the confidence-building and the further career opportunities this might lead to.

The art or photography for each story was also an intensive process where the artist and I or the photographer and I worked very closely together. Art specifications were written and even if the artist was in another state, which is often the case, during the time the art was being made, it was usually very regular extensive phone calls to support the process.

It is all labour intensive and was the fundamental reason we all have enduring friendships. The intensity and the ‘overcoming all obstacles’ approach, got the company up and running, but to remain viable there had to be a new model. That approach took a long time to think through, but eventually we decided if communities had a writers’ kit, with elegant, friendly, subtle software, that supported the process of story-making for AEAAs, teachers and communities, and using our Indij Readers stories as templates, using the ideas we developed to begin with, then that might be the way forward.

Throughout 2005 we raised the funds to research and begin development on a Community Writers’ Kit and the work began in early 2006. We developed financial and site partnerships for each of the communities where the work was to take place.
The overall idea was that Indigenous communities (and later other communities as well) could develop and desk-top publish their own local stories for their own classrooms at the local school level. Given what I’d observed in communities where we’d worked, it was obvious that subject familiarity is a hook for children to enjoy the process of learning the basic skills of reading and writing. We think a critical mass of stories about the local footy team, the neighbourhood, the well-known community members, the school swimming carnival etc, will support them and their teachers as they negotiate the other skills and concepts of reading and writing. We’re sure that subject familiarity helps students negotiate those skills to reading success.

We canvassed opinions from Indigenous and non Indigenous literacy consultants, teachers and academics and we were encouraged and assured that the Writers’ Kit is pedagogically sound and an important project to complete and publish.

We approached Dr Robyn Ewing, of the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney to advise on and evaluate the process of development. Her research assistant for this work is Kathleen Rushton who is one of the writers of the Indij Readers’ teachers guides.

Throughout 2006 we worked on all the aspects the writers’ kit. The work took place in two sites in Melbourne, then in Dareton in far south west NSW, at Mt Druitt in western Sydney and recently in Katherine in the Northern Territory.

The research is finished, and we now move on to production and piloting. From trial and error and hours and hours of discussion and ideas, we know fairly clearly what will be required for this to be a successful initiative. We will build the kit specifically for Aboriginal Education Assistants, as they are the glue between the school and the community in most places. The kit will be adaptable for other settings, and other ethnicities. I can see teachers using this kit with say, Year Six students to make stories for the Year Ones and Twos. What lovely symmetry that will be! All the housekeeping skills those older kids have to perfect, not to mention the purpose of the work, so that they publish stories for younger children. Literacy teachers in this room have heard
all this before and will know there’s nothing new under the sun, eh! Just a new form. Training will have to come with the kit and we have worked out plans to roll that out across Australia. No one involved has had a moment’s doubt about our ability to do this, or been daunted by the scope of the plan. We firmly believe this will impact positively and amazingly on Indigenous literacy levels right across Australia.

When produced, the Community Writers’ Kit will be virtual, which is of course the only possible way to proceed. We are fortunate to live at this time, in this place, that this is all possible. We do have a couple of little ideas up our sleeve to guarantee that this works, but I’ll have to keep them for another time and place until they’re well in place.

So now all we have to do is raise the funds for this production, trialling and training stage. A piece of cake, eh!

It is hoped that stories developed at the local level which have a universal resonance will be published by Indij Readers. These might be in the usual way or maybe online.

In conclusion, there are other ways of going about this type of work. This is just our approach. What will be interesting to observe is how Indij Readers grows and changes over the next few years. I’d like to finish by sharing a story with you from our latest series of books. These were launched in July this year at the Melbourne Museum. All our new authors and illustrators were in attendance with family members and we had a great celebration.

There is more information about Indij Readers on our website, and of course order forms to purchase books. I do hope if your school or university curriculum resource centre or community doesn’t have multiple copies of our materials, not just library copies, but in the mix of your mainstream reading resources, you might consider checking us out and hopefullyremedying that situation.
This story is called *Firewood and Rabbits* and the author is Ron Jackson, an Aboriginal education assistant at Coomealla High School in Dareton, which is very close to where the Darling River joins the Murray. This was one of our research sites last year, so I spent a few months living in Dareton, which was most enjoyable. This story is informative on many levels, and of course cuts across KLAs.