

Student Voice through Yarning

Rationale

The voices of students can often be under-represented in efforts to understand the progress and success of education initiatives aimed at improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

This resource provides an overview of the importance of drawing on student voices and provides guidance on how this can be facilitated in a culturally appropriate manner through yarning.

There is no single ‘best’ way or approach to yarning, as each Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community may have their own cultural principles, protocols and practices. As such, it is important to consult the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities for their advice (Martin, 2008) on designing, facilitating, and interpreting yarns. Below are general guidelines on yarning informed by the literature on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander research methods. This should be adapted to the cultural principles, protocols and practices set out by local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

People working with schools can seek the assistance of the [NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.](#) (NSW AECG) within their area for clarification on culturally appropriate practices.

Instructions for use

The information provided here is not intended for formal research or evaluation purposes. Formal research and evaluations require ethics and NSW State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) approval.

Appropriate ethics processes are required for any research or evaluation (formal or informal) where people are providing information. In NSW Public Schools, the principal of a school can provide advice on research/evaluation ethics. Use this resource in consultation with your local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Evidence base

Student voice is well known in the literature internationally (see [International Journal of Student Voice](#)) and in Australia (see [Australian Council for Student Voice](#) and [NSW Department of Education](#)). This resource aims to connect this literature with Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing. As a brief overview of Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing, Burgess and colleagues (2023) describe this as: first, the sharing of oneself to build trust (ways of being), which then allows opportunities for deep listening (ways of knowing), and relationship building (ways of doing) to follow. Martin-Mirraboopa (2003) describe Aboriginal ways as connecting with deep relatedness between people and ideas which is achieved by honouring and enacting respectful relationships. It is a holistic and personal experience that underpins knowledge-making, notions of truth, and moral being. These elements are interwoven and cannot be separated (Amazan et al, 2024). Rather than a data collection exercise, yarning is relating and knowing each other respectfully.

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Background and context

In Australia, there are two key ethical guidelines for conducting research with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

- [Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders](#) (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2018)
- [AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research](#) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2020)

These guidelines emphasise the need for culturally safe research that embeds the principles of self-determination and values of cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility (AIATSIS, 2020; NHMRC, 2018).

Yarning is a way of communicating that provides a culturally secure space for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people to tell their stories (Geia et al., 2013). It can be a process for finding consensus about a topic and informing shared decision making. The data collected throughout the process can be used to facilitate culturally appropriate and respectful research that upholds the principles and values of ethical research.

The [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007](#) (NHMRC, 2018 update) has further information on ethical considerations for research. Of relevance is Chapter 4.2 on Children and young people, and Chapter 4.7 on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Additionally, the [Re-imagining Evaluation Framework](#) (University of Newcastle, 2023) details six principles to guide culturally responsive evaluation for the NSW Department of Education. These principles will be referenced throughout this resource.

Student voice

Why is student voice important?

Seeking and incorporating Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students' perspectives on schooling, teaching, and the curriculum in culturally inclusive spaces is crucial for school planning and delivery. It can strengthen student engagement and sense of belonging at school – factors which contribute to the success and achievement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2022).

“Educators think that we know what education is and should be. Because we have lived longer and have a fuller history to look back upon, we certainly know more about the world as it has been thus far. But we do not know more than students living at the dawn of the 21st century about what it means to be a student in the modern world and what it might mean to be an adult in the future.” (Cook-Sather 2002, p. 12).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students highlight the need for their culture to be represented and respected at school and for them to experience recognition of their Aboriginality in safe environments (Donovan, 2015).

Ways of engaging with student voice

There are various methods used for engaging with student voice, including methods from Western traditions: surveys, interviews, and focus groups, as well as yarning from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander traditions, ways of being, knowing, and doing. Yarning is founded on deep listening, reciprocity and respect; it matters not only who speaks but also who does not, to whom and when (Burgess et al., 2023). These methods are discussed below.

Surveys

The use of surveys to enable student voice is restrictive in that it's a one-way dialogue and there is no option to further explain an answer. We must also be mindful that the method of writing and/or typing may exclude some students from sharing their thoughts. For further advice on conducting surveys, please see the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation's (CESE) 'Data collection and analysis for evaluation – Reference guide for teachers' (hereon referred to as 'Reference guide').

Interviews and focus groups

Interviews stem from Western traditions of inquiry and can set up a power imbalance. Sometimes an interview seeks to ask questions to gain information; rather than seeking to listen and understand the person or situation (Martin, 2008). The current need is to share information in more culturally inclusive ways, interviews are least suitable for this purpose.

Focus groups also stem from Western traditions of inquiry where power imbalances can still exist, and the focus is still on gaining information. For further advice on conducting focus groups and interviews, please see CESE's [Reference guide](#).

Yarning

Yarning is a method of knowledge exchange that embodies the oral traditions of storytelling in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Dean, 2010). Yarning involves collaborative conversation between participants, where participants are equally valued and respected (Donovan, 2015). Yarning involves a more personal approach of getting to know the stories and lives of contributors, rather than questioning them. This enables those who are inquiring to share information with participants and explore topics as they arise, based around comfortable conversation and connection, rather than questioning. Yarning is a preferred method for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (and their families) as it “allows for a relaxed and familiar communication process” (Fredericks et al., 2011). In creating this space for open and candid conversations, participants may share information that would not have emerged through other methods of enabling student voice (e.g., surveys, interviews, and focus groups).

A practical guide to yarning

There is no single 'best' way or approach to yarning as each Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community may have their own cultural principles, protocols, and practices. As such, it is important to consult the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities for their advice (Martin, 2008) on designing, facilitating, and interpreting yarns. Below are general guidelines on yarning informed by the literature on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander research methods. This should be adapted to the cultural principles, protocols, and practices set out by local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

Who is yarning?

In some settings, yarning can be guided by a **facilitator** (same as a focus group). Usually, the facilitator is someone who is respected for their wisdom and/or ability to guide community (Donovan, 2015). In other settings there may not be a nominated facilitator, the yarn can just develop and flow. It all comes down to respect and humility. Cultural sensitivity of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander histories and sacred knowledge can arise in the yarn, so having a respected community member present is important in some situations. The facilitator introduces discussion topics, supports open discussion, and clarifies comments through comfortable conversation, connection, and active listening.

Like interviews in structure, there can be two individuals having a yarn. And like focus groups in structure, there can be a group of people having a yarn, usually known as a yarning circle (Donovan, 2015). For an example of a yarning circle for a classroom activity, please see [Mills and colleagues' \(2013\) article](#).

Preparing for a yarn

A discussion guide could be used to start the structure of the conversation; however, it is important to allow the conversation to divert as directed by the participants.

Time is important, there may be more than one yarning session required to understand people's experiences more fully.

Yarning with students should take place in culturally safe spaces. Do not assume that school settings are the best places for this.

When meeting participants for the first time, you should share some of your personal background (where you are from, family affiliations etc.) as this is the preferred way of introducing oneself for most Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People (Geia et al., 2013; Martin, 2008; Shay, 2021).

Facilitating a yarn

When facilitating a yarn, the following should be considered:

1. Explain and make the group aware 'this is a safe space'.
2. Everyone's opinion is valued but may differ.
3. Create a sense of comfort and connection. Give participants a chance to get to know each other.
4. Give opportunity for everybody to speak.
5. Listen intently and consider your responses carefully, ensure your input adds value to the conversation (i.e. avoid bragging or excessive commentary), especially when talking with Elders.
6. Always show Elders the respect by allowing room for them to contribute and share their experience through the yarn.
7. Always use plain English in respectful and humble ways. Don't correct students who are using Aboriginal English.

Collecting data from yarning

Collaborate with participants to determine how they would like yarns to be documented or recorded (see [Principle 6 – Empowering Change from the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework](#)). Always, check in with the cultural principles, protocols, and practices set out by local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities as notetaking/recording may be considered intrusive (Martin, 2008). Below are some ways to collect data from yarning and considerations for each method, as informed by the literature.

1. Storyboarding/taking notes (yourself or by having someone else scribe)

Storyboarding/taking notes involves collaborating with participants to document (through written text, drawings etc.) what is discussed about the topic. Having someone else to scribe can keep you connected with the yarning. It may be difficult to note take what is said word-for-word, so jot the

main ideas down and revisit the notes as soon as you can after the yarn is over. Share your notes and reflections with participants so they can validate them before you settle on anything.

2. Audio and/or video recording (for use in formal research and evaluation only)

This method involves audio and/or video recording the yarning session and then transcribing the recordings for analysis. Be mindful that this method may compromise self-determination (AIATSIS, 2020) if participants (i) lack control over when yarning is recorded and (ii) do not have the opportunity to review their transcribed data and correct inaccuracies due to time and resource constraints (Shay, 2021).

The most important aspect of collecting data from yarning is to ensure self-determination. This can be done in the following ways:

- a) Tell participants when a yarn is being recorded. Turn off the recorder if requested by participants (Martin, 2008).
- b) When the participant says something of interest during the yarning session, you can immediately ask the participant whether they want that response to be documented. This reflects the rights of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as owners of their information.
- c) You can immediately and regularly ask participants to cross-check the documented data during the yarning session to ensure that the data accurately represents their responses (Shay, 2021).

You will see that notetaking/recording requires careful planning and processes to collaborate; practice is required to do this well.

Interpreting yarning data

Consider how to interpret data from yarning sessions and critically reflect on what theories, frameworks, and methods are most appropriate for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Martin (2008) states that it is not enough to use just culturally appropriate research *methods* (e.g., *yarning*). She emphasises that we also need to be mindful of and critically consider the broader theories and frameworks that we use to interpret data. The same data can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the theories and frameworks used (Martin, 2008). Often, theories and

frameworks are based on Western ways of being, knowing, and doing, and they are rarely explicitly referred to (thereby making them invisible and unquestioned). It is problematic when such frameworks are uncritically applied to understanding the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Martin, 2008).

Shay (2021) recommends interpreting data with participants during the yarning session as this can make participants more engaged and involved in the research process. This involves reviewing the storyboard/notes with participants to identify recurring comments or ideas. Here, participants can also identify what ideas are particularly important to them or bring up any ideas that they missed. Importantly, the findings and insights must make sense to the participants (Martin, 2008).

General advice on interpreting interview and focus group data applies to yarning also. However, the perspective differs – yarning involves collaboration and sharing. You must check-in with participants on your approach and findings as they develop (see [Principle 5 – Responsibility and Credibility from the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework](#)).

For further advice on data analysis, please see CESE’s [Reference guide](#) and/or this more formal [guide](#), and connect with participants.

Sharing the findings

Findings should be shared with participants and key stakeholders (e.g., students, communities) in a culturally safe, respectful, and relevant way (Martin, 2008; see also [Principle 5 – Responsibility and Credibility from the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework](#)). This requires setting sufficient time aside to share findings back, tailoring the delivery of findings to the needs of the audience, and talking the “true word” (i.e., not just being honest but also doing what you say you will do; Martin, 2008). Some examples are provided below:

- Sharing findings to students using an infographic with key findings and quotes may be more appropriate than a detailed written report.
- Talking through the findings with stakeholders rather than just emailing it to them (e.g., coffee catch-up with community), especially for sensitive findings or topics.
- Allowing stakeholders the time and space to provide further feedback on the findings and/or processes, to strengthen relationships and inform future work.

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