



# **Embedding First Nations Perspectives in Dance Education**

## **Insights from First Nations Artists**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Ausdance VIC acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, learn, and dance. We honour the Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples.

We extend our sincere thanks to the First Nations artists who contributed their time, knowledge and lived experiences to the 2025 Inspire: Dance Teacher Professional Development Program:

- Amelia Jean O’Leary, a proud Gamilaroi Yinarr woman.
- Luke Currie-Richardson, a proud descendant of the Kuku Yalanji, Djabugay, Mununjali, Butchulla, and Meriam peoples.
- Joel Bray, a proud Wiradjuri dancer and performance-maker.

Your generous contributions are deeply valued and provide critical guidance for non-Indigenous educators striving to teach with respect, integrity and authenticity.



## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource was developed as part of the *2025 Inspire: Dance Teacher Professional Development Program*, in collaboration with participating First Nations artists.

It aims to support dance educators in:

- Deepening their understanding of Indigenous peoples views
- Engaging meaningfully with First Nations artists
- Embedding First Nations perspectives within school-based dance and arts programs in culturally respectful ways

Important Note: First Nations cultures are diverse and deeply connected to Country, language and community. This resource reflects the views of individual artists and is not representative of all First Nations peoples. Educators are encouraged to build ongoing, place-based relationships with local Indigenous communities and cultural advisors.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATORS

***Listen deeply:*** Approach this work with humility and a willingness to learn.

***Build relationships:*** Engage with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in meaningful, reciprocal ways.

***Create safe spaces:*** Ensure cultural safety for students, artists and community members.

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

These questions were posed to the contributing artists. Their responses may help guide your thinking and practice.

Is it appropriate for teachers to contact a First Nations artist directly, or should they go through a local body such as the Aboriginal Land Council or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Group?

**AJL:** It depends on why they are contacting First Nations artists. If it's for cultural reasons, I'd go through the local council of that land to get the appropriate artists. If they're seeking contemporary dance classes with First Nations artists I think it's fine to contact them directly.

**LCR:** It's appropriate for teachers to contact First Nations artists directly. In fact, I encourage educators to use all available avenues to connect with Indigenous peoples and creatives. Building those relationships is key to genuine engagement.

That said, any exchange of cultural knowledge or educational input should be properly compensated. When artists share cultural insight, they're drawing on a lifetime of lived experience and responsibility. If they were from any other background, their contribution would be recognised as consultancy, so pay them accordingly, as you would any other professional.

How can schools ensure that First Nations content is embedded in meaningful and respectful ways, rather than as a tokenistic gesture?

**LCR:** The first step is undertaking cultural safety training and this helps build a deeper understanding of First Nations existence on this continent, both before and after colonisation.

From there, schools need to set clear, whole-of-school goals around the kind of culture they want to nurture. Do you want to keep telling a one-sided version of history, or are you ready to be honest and acknowledge the darker chapters of European colonisation in Australia?

It also means actively investing in and celebrating key dates like NAIDOC Week, Mabo Day, National Sorry Day, and others not as token gestures, but as core parts of your school culture. And finally, critically reflect on the 26th of January and ask

whether your school acknowledges or challenges that date, and what message that sends to your students and community.

Embedding respect and visibility can also be done in everyday school practices:

- Use local language where appropriate and with permission, include it on signage, classroom labels, assemblies, and newsletters.
- Display a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country at all school entrances and in every classroom.
- Incorporate First Nations themes into House names and colours.
- Update email signatures to include an Acknowledgement of Country, e.g. “I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work...”
- Use First Nations artwork (with permission) in school branding, uniforms, and learning materials.
- Build daily or weekly rituals that honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being, like starting the week with a shared reflection or cultural story.

These steps, while small on their own, create an environment where respect isn’t just taught, it’s lived.

**AJL:** I think it’s important not to try to interpret First Nations culture, but to actually understand and respect First Nations values and ways. For example, instead of trying to copy our art, it’s better to ask: how can we, as non–First Nations people, take better care of this land? How can we show respect to this land and the values of the land we stand on? I think then, naturally, the kids will develop a more authentic relationship with First Nations arts and culture.

**What kinds of cultural themes or stories would you like students to explore through dance? Are there particular narratives you feel are important for young people to learn about?**

**AJL:** I feel it’s important for students to have respect for, and an understanding of, the land they are on. Having someone from that land come and share stories about it is one way to support this. I also think it’s important for students to build their own connection to the land and to storytelling, embedding the importance of taking care of Country, how to care for it, and why we respect this land and its Traditional Peoples.

I believe it’s helpful for students to know who they are, where they are from, and to share their own cultures. Cross-cultural sharing is a beautiful way to connect deeply with First Nations culture, by highlighting how important it is to know your

own story and where you come from. When students describe what their land is like and what their cultural dance is like, I think it shows how important culture is, and how we value it in Australia.

**LCR:** To be honest, unless being taught by cultural leaders, I don't want them exploring any cultural themes or stories through dance at all. Only if they have a knowledge holder with them, they should be exploring these sort of themes or styles.

**What should teachers keep in mind when working within First Nations cultural spaces or with First Nations content?**

**LCR:** Teachers working within First Nations cultural spaces need to remember they are not the experts they are guests in that space. It's important to approach with humility, respect, and a willingness to listen and learn.

You should never speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples, and you should not share stories, knowledge, or cultural content without the appropriate permissions. This means ensuring that permission comes from the right community or cultural group. For example, don't ask a local Aboriginal person in Victoria to approve the use of a story or artwork from the Northern Territory. Respect the boundaries of cultural ownership.

Also, do your homework. Know the context of the content you're working with. Every First Nations community has distinct languages, protocols, and artistic expressions. Lumping everything together under generic terms like "Aboriginal dance" or "Indigenous art" is not only inaccurate and slack it's disrespectful. Wherever possible, name the specific Nation, language group, or community to properly honour and represent the cultural source.

Ultimately this is about accountability, accuracy, and cultural integrity

**AJL:** I think teachers should be interested in and engaged with what First Nations people share. Participating in the class alongside students shows respect and helps students understand how important it is to learn from First Nations voices.

I also think teachers should create space for First Nations content to be shared authentically. This includes providing the facilitator with a clear schedule, a supportive environment, and the space to share without interruption or distraction.

From an artist's perspective, what makes a school-based collaboration feel genuine, respectful and impactful?

**AJL:** It's important to offer the appropriate time and space for a First Nations artist to authentically share their practice, and for teachers to be genuinely interested in and supportive of the artist. The aim should not be to interpret culture, but to show respect and understanding for how First Nations arts and culture continue to grow.

Yes, we have ancient culture and values, but we are also modern Blak fellas. Both experiences are valid. Not all First Nations peoples will have the same cultural experience.

**LCR:** On going relationships and investments into that artist and their community, but also from that artist to that school as well.

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR EDUCATORS

These questions were posed to the contributing artists. Their responses may help guide your thinking and practice.

1. What steps can I take to ensure my arts program is culturally safe, inclusive and respectful of First Nations perspectives?
2. How is my school supporting ongoing relationships with local Indigenous communities or artists?
3. What further learning or consultation do I (or my school) need to undertake?
4. Am I actively making space for First Nations voices, perspectives and stories in my teaching?

## MOVING FORWARD

Embedding First Nations perspectives in dance education is a lifelong learning journey. It requires commitment, openness and respect. By listening to and learning from First Nations artists and communities, educators can create inclusive and enriching experiences for all students—fostering deeper understanding, empathy and connection through the power of dance.