

# How to work with First Nations artists in the classroom



## **Educator Guide**

## **Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design**

First published by National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) in November 2022. Written by Thomas Readett and Alise Hardy. Edited by Donnalyn Xu. Cover illustration by Claudia Chinyere Akole.

**This resource is free to download and print by educators and students, and has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.**

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## How to use this guide

This guide gives educators information on the rights of their students as artists. The recommendations provided in this guide come from the Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design (**the Code**) published by the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA). Read NAVA's guide '**How to' use the Code of Practice in the Classroom** for more information about the Code in Education.

Further information is provided via a link when text is **in bold**.

While this guide has been designed for secondary school educators, students, curriculum and syllabus, the information can be applied to all levels of school education.

Use it while preparing a unit of learning and refer to it for specific ideas when lesson planning.

The information provided in this guide is not legal advice. If legal advice is required, you can contact **Arts Law** or **Copyright Agency**.

## About the Code of Practice

NAVA's Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design (**the Code**) sets out equitable, ethical and self-reflective standards for the professional Australian contemporary arts sector.

The Code covers good practice guidelines for the interactions between artists, arts workers and organisations (like galleries, arts centres and schools).

## Learning with the Code

Learning about the Code at school means students will become professional artists with careers that are successful and sustainable, and arts workers that ensure artists are treated equitably, acknowledged correctly and paid fairly.

The Code can be used as a starting point to explore all aspects of what it means to be a contemporary visual artist, craftsperson, designer or arts worker in Australia.

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## Topics in this guide

- **Cultural safety**
- **Finding a First Nations artist**
- **Types of engagement**
- **Mutual respect**
- **Create an agreement**
- **Case Study**

## The Code says...

'All children and young people deserve to have their creative contributions acknowledged'  
**Education and Workshops in Code of Practice, 2022**

## A note on language used in this guide

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and First Nations peoples are used interchangeably throughout this guide to refer to the many people who come from over 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.

## Introduction

Learning directly from First Nations artists is the only authentic way to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture in the Visual Arts classroom. This is because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the lived experience of being this countries' First peoples and the effects of colonialism to Country.

This resource has been developed to support schools in truth-telling and to provide educators with practical advice about what to consider before, during and after engagement with First Nations artists in the Visual Arts classroom.

## What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art is contemporary, meaningful and an opportunity to learn about our Histories and Cultures. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists create work about or in response to Country.

'Country' is a term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands on which we exist, and the sky, oceans, rivers and everything in between. The term is all-encompassing, referencing big ideas that underpin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, such as law, family, identity, spirituality and artistic practice.

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There are a lot of misconceptions about Aboriginal artists. A lot of these beliefs derive from western-origin stereotypes, such as the incorrect notion that 'every Aboriginal artist works with dots'. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists create work about and in response to all kinds of issues and ideas. In fact, regardless of what an artwork is about or what medium is used, any work that is made by First Nations artists is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art.

## What is truth-telling and why is it important?

In Australia, we are all learning and teaching on Country and, as educators, we have an obligation to teach the history of Country and its peoples in an authentic and honest way. **Reconciliation Australia** says that truth-telling is central to reconciliation and that 'telling the truth about our history not only brings to light colonial conflict and dispossession, but also acknowledges the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures'.

First Nations people have lived on Country for more than 65,000 years prior to the first known European contact in 1606. During this expansive time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's culture, art and trade thrived. They sustained their communities and cared for their Country. Beginning with the arrival

of 11 foreign ships on the Country of the Eora peoples on 26 January 1788, the effects of colonisation have been devastating to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives, culture and Country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still navigating this continuing and dark history.

Truth-telling in the Visual Arts classroom is to authentically engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and teach the true history and culture Country. To support truth-telling, you can research First Nations artists in your community & explore your local galleries, collections and resources. You can also prioritise Aboriginal artists in your teaching of Australian art and across all themes or topics. Doing this will ensure students are able to access a diverse range of artists that are representative of the Australian's rich culture and long history.

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## Cultural safety is essential

A culturally safe space is an environment that views diversity as a strength and a form of empowerment. It is made up of values such as listening, building relationships and respectful collaborative practices.

It is important to make sure your school and classroom is a culturally safe space before engaging with First Nations artists. Engaging in pre-learning for students and educators on teaching and learning First Nations histories, cultures and local communities will help strengthen your school's cultural awareness.

Following are some simple yet effective tips for pre-learning, with additional **recommendations for cultural safety** in the Code of Practice.

## Acknowledge differences between nations, languages and artforms

Keeping with the diversity of more than 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations that Australia exists on, there is no 'one-size-fits-all approach' to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Like any other business or individual, First Nations artists will have their own way of considering requests and making decisions that can

be influenced by their obligation to cultural protocols, Elders and community members, and to represent culture in the right way.

**'It is good practice to ensure public art works, opening events, gatherings and websites include an Acknowledgement of Country or Welcome to Country led by an Elder from the Country on which the event or gathering is held.'**

**First Nations, Code of Practice**

Some people misunderstand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art to be "dot painting". However, the diversity of artists also speaks to the diversity of styles and mediums that are thriving across the country. "Dot painting" is from the **Western Desert art movement**. This misinformation is an impact of colonialism that continues to impact First Nations' communities in relation to their art and cultural expression.

**'Cultural expression' refers to the culture of First Nations people, whose styles and expressions have originated from traditions, practices and knowledges of ancestors, country and family. Cultural expression is real, living and maintained in many forms across the country.'**

**First Nations, Code of Practice**

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## Understand the historical, cultural and political issues

Organisations, including schools, should understand the longstanding historical, cultural and political issues at play for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the arts and culture sector. These issues include Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), associated rights in the arts, access to culture and heritage, and engagements based on respect.

Acknowledging the negative and ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations peoples is a central component of cultural safety (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Different issues impact First Nations groups across the country in different ways and to varying degrees. Therefore, before engaging with First Nations artists, educators and students will need to learn about First Nations issues prior to engaging with an artist or community. The **First Nations section** of the Code of Practice is a useful starting point for engaging with these issues.

## Ask an artist what language or terminology they prefer

It is important to be respectful of how artists and their community refer to themselves, and use appropriate language. Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, there are many different preferences and protocols about terminology.

**'It is good practice to use a community's actual name, or language name (of which there may be alternative spellings), whenever possible and appropriate, according to the advice of the relevant community'.**

**First Nations**, Code of Practice

**Reconciliation Australia provides guidance** on demonstrating inclusive and respectful language and says that any advice or guidelines should always be used alongside guidance from the First Nations artists that you are working with.

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## Understand and avoid appropriation and tokenism.

**'All parties must ensure that Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) principles are upheld for any use or adaptation of First Nations cultural heritage.'**

Education and Workshops,  
Code of Practice

Tokenism and cultural appropriation create unsafe spaces and learning cultures. The practices distort the prevalence and representation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's cultural expression and cause harm by denying First Nations peoples the right to **self-determination**.

Tokenism is making a 'token' gesture through actions that give an outward appearance of equity, without meaningful investment in long-term and ongoing structural change. This can look like deliberately commissioning an artist during NAIDOC week, but failing to include First Nations artists during the rest of the year's learning.

Cultural appropriation refers to the act of using cultural customs, traditions, language, or art from a culture that is not your own. This can include using, replicating, reproducing and interpreting material and concepts from another culture in your own work.

**'Underpinning cultural appropriation is the assumption that cultural practices and traditions 'don't belong to anyone', which can be compared to the colonial sense of entitlement to appropriate land.'**

Racial Equity and Representation,  
Code of Practice

## Follow the Code of Practice recommendations for organisations.

The Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design includes a **section about First Nations issues**. It gives good practice recommendations and advice for organisations and individuals, including non-First Nations artists. It also outlines key issues, legal requirements, recommended processes and agreements.

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## Finding an artist to work with

We are very lucky in Australia to have an incredible number of First Nations artists working across multiple disciplines. This makes it easy to find artists to work with!

**'...undertake research about the artist, their community and style of work'.**

**First Nations, Code of Practice**

A great place to start when looking for an artist is to reach out to local galleries, artist run initiatives (ARIs), First Nations Art Centres and tertiary art schools. Your local council may also have relationships with First Nations artists who work with schools or community groups, and can often be helpful if a project requires funding.

**'Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs) and First Nations Art Centres are incubators for some of the most exciting, adventurous and responsive art in our communities'**

**Artist Self Organisation,**  
Code of Practice

Peak body organisations for visual artists can also be a useful resource. The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) can provide guidance and recommendations for finding and contacting First Nations artists in your area. Additionally, state and territory organisations like **Guildhouse** (SA), **Desart** (NT, SA, WA), **Artsource** (WA), **Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre** (ACT) and **Craft** (Vic).

Most artists keep a portfolio of works either on their websites or social media profiles – or both! You can find First Nations artists by exploring social media profiles of First Nations Art Centres, ARIs, galleries and peak body organisations. By finding and following First Nations artists, you can view and select artists on their previous work.

Once you find an artist you like, don't be afraid to reach out with questions about the types of projects they would consider, timelines, logistics and quotes.



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## Types of engagement

It is important to build a relationship with your artist, make them feel welcome and give them as much creative freedom as possible! For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, creative freedom is strongly tied to the concept of 'self-determination' - meaning 'the right to own and control Indigenous cultural and intellectual property' (Dr. Terri Janke cited in **Code of Practice**, 2023).

**'Artists may develop and deliver their own work, deliver an established learning program or workshop developed by others, or develop a learning program to be delivered by others'.**

**Education and Workshops,**  
Code of Practice.

Some common examples how artists' engage with schools are:

### One-off workshop

An artist facilitates a workshop, within a brief timeframe (i.e. one hour, one school lesson or one day) and usually with a defined outcome.

### School-based residency

An artist is based at a school for an agreed period of time, ranging in length anywhere from one school term to one school year. A residency in a school may include the artist occupying a studio space (when not directly engaging with students), skills-based workshops with a defined outcome, artist talks, professional development facilitation and substantial acquisitive work created in collaboration with students.

### Collaborative public art

An artist is engaged to create a public work of art for the school. The work may be developed in consultation with the school's community and created by the artist, or developed and created in collaboration with students.

For more information about artists' engagement in schools, see the **Education and Workshops section** of the Code of Practice.

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## Mutual respect and trust

When considering approaching an artist or developing a proposal, it is essential to understand why you wish to engage with an artist, their artwork or community. An artist will already have a portfolio of work either online or in galleries, and it is the responsibility of the school to research and engage an artist with a style that is appropriate for the school's aesthetic vision and values. Asking an Aboriginal artist to "add some dots" or work in a different style is culturally inappropriate.

Engagement with artists and local communities should feature:

- clear and respectful communication
- enough time for requests to be considered and negotiated
- prior and informed consent provided by the artist
- clear understanding of the intentions of each party

Ideally, educators and students will connect with the local custodians of where their school resides and form relationships that encourage their involvement in projects.

## Create an agreement

Lots of artists like working to a brief and will likely work to an outcome that everyone is happy with. However, once an agreement has been signed or payment made, changing the project makes things difficult for the artist. When you begin working with an artist it is important to listen to the artist and understand what they are proposing. It is also essential that you have a fair understanding about what type of project the school wants (for example a mural, series of workshops or artist talks).

It is important that clear agreements with First Nations artists are created, negotiated, and understood by all parties to properly address ICIP and artist rights. Engagement and agreements with artists should also reference the artists own protocols, and should use the Australia Council for the Arts' **Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts** as a framework.

The Education and Workshops section of the Code of Practice includes a **detailed description** of what should be captured in an agreement.

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## How much should the school pay an artist?

When you pay an artist, you are paying for the value adding that their work brings to learning, creativity and wellbeing. However, you are also paying a business that requires different types of administration. Understanding this is important because, just like all businesses, artists have different ways of working and will quote differently depending on varying factors and those of the project or commission.

Artists should be paid for their skill, time it takes to create the work, the work itself, materials, equipment, administration, research and development time, meetings and related engagements (i.e. talks or events) and licensing of any images used of the work.

Becoming familiar with the **payment standards** in the Code of Practice will help you to understand the scope of your budget, the types of fees that should be paid to an artist and what fees should be cited in any agreement between an artist and your school.

## Case Study – School Mural Commission

This good practice case study has been written by artist Thomas Readett.

In 2021, I was engaged by teacher Lisa Zappia to create a new mural for West Lakes Shore Primary School on Kurna Yarta in South Australia.

The school I was incredibly respectful of myself as an artist and professional from the very beginning of my engagement with them.

Upon being engaged, I did a site visit to a 'measure and quote' of the wall. The school accepted my budget for the project and we proceeded.

The school also put their trust in me to create something new for their school that the school community would actively engage with and enjoy. This was the best part of the project for me as an artist – having the creative freedom to make decisions about composition and choice of colour.

To develop the mural, the school asked that I come in for a lesson to work with students and run a workshop on idea generation. From this session I was able to take home student's ideas, rough drawings and writing to use as inspiration to design the composition for the mural. I don't always work like this but some schools specifically ask that their students contribute to the design.

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This contribution could be as simple as student developed colour palettes or subject matter. As an artist I enjoy this step of the process and it makes sense this is the first step as part of the project brief.

Students wanted the animals that their school buildings were named after to be represented in the mural. Using these ideas as inspiration I began putting together a composition that featured a turtle, seastar, pelican, dolphin, seahorse and octopus. This was great for me, as an animal lover!

I also engaged an artistic collaborator, Wulli Wulli and Guwa (Koa) artist Shane Kooka, to include some design work referencing meeting places, thinking about how the students gather for class or for recess!

Respect is also an important aspect of the work I do as an Aboriginal artist – I respect the Country and culture of the land I work on. I work across different Aboriginal nations and I always seek approval and connection from the local language groups. Even as an Aboriginal man it is the respectful thing to do.

I incorporated this interaction into the mural too. The colours I chose referenced my Country and created a dialogue between my Ngarrindjeri coastline and the Kurna coast at West Lakes.

With the final design in hand, the school enthusiastically confirmed the design and I installed the mural.

Below: Mural by artists Thomas Readett and Shane Kooka at West Lakes Shore Primary School in Kurna Yarta. Photo by Renee Readett Creative, 2022.

