

Decolonising a Library: Our Experience

What decisions need to be made when ensuring the books in your school's library reflect current knowledge and do not perpetuate stereotypes and racism?

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Why Did We Decolonise Our Library?

Our college has embarked on a journey of discovery about Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories.¹ As part of this journey, we completed a Reconciliation Action Plan that detailed our current and future actions to further practical reconciliation.²

One aspect of this was to have information in our library that reflected current factual knowledge and did not perpetuate stereotypes and racism. Information management is an ongoing process. Libraries need to continually revisit and re-evaluate their current collection so it reflects modern understandings, not historical biases.

With expert support from Dr Aleryk Fricker of Deakin University, we spent about 50 hours between us in total across a year decolonising a large library in our P-12 school of 1300 students. Guidelines from several Queensland organisations were useful for modernising our library collection.³

We learned so much about ourselves and about Indigenous culture, history and representation that we wanted to share our story so others might consider decolonising their library as well.

What Did We Look At?

We conducted a keyword search on our school's library database (Concord Infiniti). We searched for broad terms such as 'Aboriginal' and 'aborigines' and then used the results to come up with less common search terms, such as 'Indigenous'. We filtered the search to only include non-fiction resources. From this we removed 475 books for inspection: 182 junior non-fiction, 254 non-fiction, thirty-three primary teacher resource and six teacher reference books.

How Did We Classify?

Using the classifying process outlined in the Queensland guideline documents, we determined whether to remove books after inspection based on the following criteria:

- perpetuating falsehoods such as Terra nullius, the lack of Indigenous resistance to occupation, and stereotyping
- racist connotations
- were the books sufficiently representative of Indigenous perspectives and experiences?
 - We did not enforce this criterion strictly because it was difficult for us to decide what the appropriate level of representativeness should be for an individual book. For example, if a book was about the colonial experiences of colonisers, we wouldn't consider it unrepresentative of Indigenous perspectives because that wasn't the purpose of the book. We decided that as long as our whole library collection was representative this would be sufficient.

The following helped us to determine if a book contained inappropriate material.

- Authorship—if it was authored or consulted by an Indigenous author we approved it. We discovered a concerning number of books, even recent publications, did not have any Indigenous representation in their author group, nor was Indigenous consultation sought.
- Date—the older the book, the more likely it was to have inappropriate material. From roughly 2015 onwards we found the standard of resources rose.
- We would usually skim-read a whole book, but we discovered that often reading one passage that contained the editorial stance of the book would indicate how likely it was to be approved.

There were three outcomes after inspecting a book:

- keep the book
- include a disclaimer about any section with a primary source that had inappropriate material
- remove the book from our library collection and replace it with a new, more accurate or more representative resource.

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- 1 The authors would like to thank Dr Aleryk Fricker for his expertise, Daniel Williams for his assistance with our search, and our Principal Ms Josie Crisara for supporting us and providing time to complete this task.
- 2 'What Is a Rap?' Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education, <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/raps/what-is-a-rap>.
- 3 'Selecting and Evaluating Resources: An Overview,' Queensland Studies Authority, December 2007, https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/approach2/indigenous_g008_0712.pdf; Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 'Resources: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge,' www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/about/k-12-policies/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-perspectives/resources.
- 4 The quotations in this section are not referenced because we do not wish to impact any publishers negatively.

What Happened?

Of the 475 books inspected, sixty-seven were removed and seven had disclaimers added to primary sources within them. Sixteen per cent of the resources were removed or amended. We categorised the books that were removed (Fig. 1).

What Are Some Examples of Text from Books that Were Removed?⁴

The most common reason for removal was factually incorrect information in the book. Some called Indigenous Australians 'nomads' without qualification, stating they had 'no permanent home'. Some books had not incorporated the scholarship of Gammage and Pascoe, with one suggesting the Indigenous person 'kills only for food'.⁵ Others incorrectly stated that Indigenous people were cut off after an initial wave of migration and were 'left isolated'. A common issue was the now-debunked claim that Indigenous Australians during the custodianship period were 'merely' hunter-gatherers. Some of the commentary on this point was very dismissive, with the suggestion that 'there was very little impetus for progress' and 'Aboriginal society was simple'. A final point of contention was the date of original migration to Australia. As Fricker pointed out, we may never know the exact date, but we did remove books that suggested it was only 20,000 years ago.

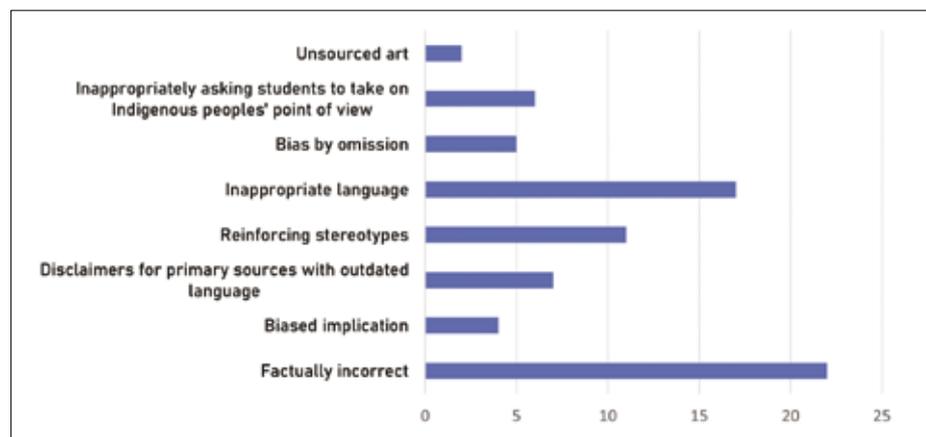
Some material required close reading, such as a book that claimed, on the topic of early

relations between colonists and Indigenous people, that 'plans for closer relations became unstuck when Bennelong escaped'. Strangely there was no suggestion in this book that plans for closer relations may have become unstuck when colonisers kidnapped an original inhabitant. Passages like this were one of the many factors making the inspections difficult—we often had to infer the author's intent, and had to weigh up how capable young readers would be of understanding author bias.

Many stereotypes were reinforced in the books removed. For instance, it was implied that all Indigenous people share the same language and that all use boomerangs. Stereotypical Indigenous poverty was referenced in a fictional statement from an Indigenous young person stating: 'My home in the city is not fancy but it's the best we've got'. Students reading such books were assumed to be non-Indigenous.

There were many instances of language that was racist, Eurocentric or otherwise biased. Mentions of 'simple shelters', 'Indigenous wars' and the description of an African-American person being 'a huge Negro' were problematic. One book claimed Indigenous people were 'not fierce warriors like the Maoris' while another said that 'Indigenous people are hostile and savage'. Indigenous people were described as 'dark-skinned natives' in one book and considered 'not very friendly' in another. We were puzzled by

Figure 1. Reasons for removal of library material.



the claim that 'Dreamtime is an alchemical, hermetic, Jungian type of psychological process' but, given the author was neither Indigenous nor claimed any Indigenous knowledge or relationships in the book, we felt confident in removing it. We could have removed many more books if we had strictly applied the criteria about resources needing to explore the richness and variety of First Nations life.

Finally, we removed texts that inappropriately attempted to put learners in the position of Indigenous people. We accept that perspective-taking exercises can be an effective way to develop student empathy and understanding, but to ask young adolescents, with very little knowledge, to pretend they know what it was like for Indigenous people during times of hardship is dangerous. We felt that students would incorrectly think they understood the depth of Indigenous sentiment by taking part in activities such as these. Arguably, such perspective-taking activities could also remove the historical agency of people who experienced such events first-hand.

What Did We Learn?

We need to first acknowledge the huge debt of gratitude to Dr Fricker, who helped us throughout this process. Not only did we learn a lot about Indigenous history from him, but we also learned to spot ambiguities, misunderstandings and biases in texts that we hadn't previously considered. To be able to complete this task we had to further our knowledge of Indigenous history and representation.

We were somewhat naïve before completing this process, and were shocked at how biased some publications were. It was surprising to see just how recently the publishing world has begun to incorporate Indigenous voices in their resources. We also discovered how Indigenous perspectives were excluded from school curricula in the past, especially those of the twentieth century.

Our critical literacy skills have been enhanced. We now look more actively for

bias in resources, and think more deeply about how certain illustrations, captions, titles and text could be misinterpreted, especially those for young learners with underdeveloped critical literacy skills. Even spending so long on a project to 'decolonise' has helped us to see the benefits of such an approach in many other areas.⁶ We most certainly felt that the time spent on this process not only improved our library, but also our own knowledge.

Our understanding of history was challenged. We learned first-hand that history is not simply a record of 'what happened' but is instead shaped by those who write and publish it.

How Was Our Process Limited?

It was impossible to conduct the process with complete fidelity because reading all 475 books closely would have taken too long. We recognise that some inappropriate texts either did not meet our search criteria or we did not correctly assess those we skimmed over. Often, we relied on indexes and content pages; when these didn't exist, it was harder to correctly inspect the book. We also struggled in situations where a high-quality resource was removed due to a small but significant feature.

What Challenges Did We Face?

We had to vastly improve our ability to identify historical bias. Some of us were history-trained, which helped, but we all needed to upskill in this area. Time constraints, as ever, were a problem, which is why this task took a year.

Some might think this process is censorship. We feel instead that we were doing justice to historical truth by removing resources that were factually incorrect or biased. We also felt that schoolchildren probably do not have the cognitive capability to read certain texts while at the same time interpreting them within the more ignorant historical context in which they were written. The safe bet in these situations was to remove the resource.

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5 Bill Gammage, 'The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia,' *The Conversation*, 8 December 2011, <https://theconversation.com/the-biggest-estate-on-earth-how-aborigines-made-australia-3787>; Bruce Pascoe, 'A Real History of Aboriginal Australians, the First Agriculturalists,' TED, https://www.ted.com/talks/bruce_pascoe_a_real_history_of_aboriginal_australians_the_first_agriculturalists.

6 Mary Frances O'Dowd and Robyn Heckenberg, 'Explainer: What Is Decolonisation?' *The Conversation*, 23 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-decolonisation-131455>.

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Many decisions we made were in a 'grey area'. The discussions we had to arrive at a consensus were fulfilling and educational. Often, we would contact Dr Fricker or do some just-in-time research to find out more about a contentious topic. We wondered whether we should apply the guidelines more strictly to books that were not borrowed often anyway. Perhaps the biggest grey area was what to do about the large number of books that, while not containing anything explicitly biased, were nonetheless biased by omission or being unrepresentative. We feel this issue is unresolved.

Some Recommendations

We suggest highlighting the importance of the project to school leadership so that time can be allocated to it. Having a subject matter expert on hand is invaluable. If this isn't possible, the project can still be undertaken but more independent learning might be needed by those taking part.

We learned more as we went, so we recommend having a list of criteria for removal that your group updates. You may find you need to go back to some earlier books to make sure they still pass these updated criteria.

We also recommend you think about what other areas of your library collection could benefit from a similar investigation, such as resources concerning gender, sexuality and race.

We think this process would be a valuable learning activity for History students. Give students some time to look at resources and decide for themselves whether they are appropriate. Supported by a set of guidelines, student help could increase the speed of the process as well.

We have found the process incredibly enriching for ourselves and our library collection. We highly recommend it to all. Decolonising a library is an act of practical reconciliation. The time is now!



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