

Unlocking our potential

Overview

At its core, my project 'Unlocking our potential' aims to do just that, for all stakeholders. The children's book and the teaching resource that I have developed are designed to educate the next generation of students, ensuring they become active contributors to reinventing our relationship with our traditional custodians, and with our environment.

My children's book, 'Letters to Jess' centers around an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous child who become friends, learning together about how climate change affects them. The story is set from a non-Indigenous child's perspective, and follows her learning journey as her new friend educates her on the relationship that Indigenous people have with the land and their sustainable practices. This book introduces children to the disparities between how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are physically, spiritually and emotionally impacted by climate change, and how their attitudes towards environmentalism are subsequently different. At its heart, it is a story about understanding each other, uniting on common ground and collaborating to achieve a shared goal. The resource I have developed is designed for teachers to use alongside the book, and covers many of the book's concepts with more detail in line with outcomes in the Australian curriculum, along with activities to develop students' advocacy skills.

My goals, reflections and learnings as a timeline

December

In December, my main deliverable was orienting myself with the topic of environmental justice in Australia and the disparate impacts Indigenous people face as a result of climate change coupled with colonialist attitudes. Thus my goals revolved around contacting Indigenous people to listen to their experiences, challenges and perspectives which I believed would be much more rich, meaningful and nuanced than a google search. However, a google search had to be good enough for December as the holiday season meant that no one was working or responding to their emails. Instead I focused on researching Indigenous perspectives on Country, environmental management, and climate justice. I also worked to undertake market research at my local libraries and bookstores to identify a gap in the children's book market.

My research in December really subverted my prior assumptions as I became aware of the emotional toll climate change takes on Indigenous Australians. When reflecting on why I assumed Indigenous people were mostly suffering physically, as in other countries with issues such as redlining, I realised that I was not aware enough of the intense interconnection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Country. I learnt that their traditional practices - which are more sustainable than current practices - are frowned upon, and this as well as the destruction of Country reinforces the dispossession that they have been facing since British colonisation.

January

In January, I focused on asking relevant stakeholders whether what I was doing was going to be

culturally appropriate. As a non-Indigenous person, I did not want to tell a story that should be told by Indigenous people, and I was hyper aware of being disrespectful regardless of my good intentions. In Australia, this is an ongoing issue, where the experiences shared by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long been suppressed and replaced with non-Indigenous stories that perpetuates the colonialist agenda.

I was able to get in contact with a notable Aboriginal author, Gregg Dreise, who advised me that stories about Indigenous people should be told by Indigenous people. He suggested portraying my storyline as more imaginative, with a heavy use of fantasy. However, I also received feedback on my perspectives and ideas from a local Indigenous editor, Natalie, and her daughter Ruby. When discussing Gregg Dreise's feedback with them via Zoom, they both agreed that bringing this story into the abstract/fantasy would distract from the real meaning and impact. They were both very enthusiastic about my project, with Ruby mentioning that she would have loved something like this to be around when she was younger to better inform her peers. The conflicting opinions I received actually became my greatest strength rather than a barrier as I expected. I decided to portray my story from the perspective of a non-Indigenous person, so as to instead show what we have to gain by listening to their perspectives.

February

My major goal for February was to deliver a complete draft of my book. The research conducted in prior months allowed me to gain a holistic and informed perspective through which I felt able to construct a respectful and constructive final product. Following on from January's learnings, my central theme for my book became demonstrating the immense wealth of knowledge that Indigenous people have to offer us, and the opportunities we have to collaborate to ensure the health of our earth for generations to come. A few trips to the library allowed me to simplify my book's concept which was a significant challenge I faced, focusing on listening to others' perspectives, collaborating with enthusiasm, and working towards a shared goal. Another significant hurdle during February was looking towards the resources and knowledge I would need in order to get this book published, or ready for publication, by April. A vital component of this preparation was illustrations. I was able to reach out to a friend who offered to illustrate my book for me, which was really exciting. I also began looking at options for publishing, contacting publishing houses, and researching options for self-publishing.

March

In February I was able to complete 3 drafts of my book and as such my 2 primary aims for this month were to get my illustrations completed and to complete my teaching resource that I intended to go alongside my book. After discussing my perspectives with my friend, setting deadlines and constructing a storyboard with my loose visions for illustrations, I sent my manuscript to her for illustration. Additionally, throughout February I had been collating a list of Australian school curriculum outcomes for my target age group which I wanted my resource to center around. In order to create a relevant and useful teaching resource I first needed to research current formatting and activities of teaching resources for similar topics. Whilst constructing this resource I really felt for the responsibility that teachers take on to educate our next generation and reflected on how inspired I am by passionate teachers who do this

everyday. This month I also received a request for my manuscript by the Australian publisher Boolarong Press!

Outcomes, impact and potential for impact

Whilst writing and publishing a book typically takes over a year, I am really proud to have been able to finish my book and teaching resource within the 5 month timeframe! However, although this is my physical deliverable, this journey has seen multiple intangible outcomes that have altered my perspective as an individual working for a holistically healthy earth for everyone. I have experienced the importance of listening to and liaising with vital stakeholders, the need for consistent hard work and activism, and the necessity of teamwork and collaboration in order to achieve greater impact.

The feedback I have gotten from relevant stakeholders has been overwhelmingly positive, and has been a good representation of the potential for impact when exposed to a larger group of stakeholders. Indigenous people I have been in contact with have said that it is a great representation of the need for collaboration and have praised me on my respect and execution of a delicate topic. Teachers I have contacted for feedback and information have been impressed by its comprehensiveness and would be willing to use it in the classroom, with one teacher suggesting it should be reviewed by ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, for inclusion as a prescribed teaching material. However, the piece of feedback I have been most proud to receive has been from an Indigenous young student who said how much she wished this was put into schools so her peers could understand how she felt, and what they could do to help.

My materials that I've developed for my CAP aim to reinforce the importance of learning together, in the hope that the next generation will be more successful in reinventing our relationship with our First Nations people and realising their wealth of knowledge, skill and experience. The inclusion of these classroom materials will also develop the skills students need to be able to advocate for a sustainable future where everyone has a say. Additionally, these materials will help give teachers the support they need to teach these nuanced and difficult topics, and help to reinforce cross curriculum priorities within Australian primary schools.

I've achieved most of my initial goals for my CAP, but that doesn't mean I'll be stopping there. I've gained so much momentum with my project and have made lots of connections along the way that could potentially help me bring this further and amplify the impact of my CAP. I'm looking forward to receiving feedback from various publishing houses I have submitted my manuscript to, including Boolarong Press and Pan Macmillan Australia. I'm also excited to continue to refine and develop both my book and my resource and have real students learning from these materials in a classroom.