

Resource Guide

The Arts—Dance

The information and resources contained in this guide provide a platform for teachers and educators to consider how to effectively embed important ideas around reconciliation, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions, within the specific subject/learning area of [The Arts- Dance](#). Please note that this guide is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, and that teaching staff are encouraged to consult with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and [critically evaluate resources](#), in engaging with the material contained in the guide.

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Please be aware this guide may contain references to names and works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are now deceased. External links may also include names and images of those who are now deceased.

Background and Introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance

“The dancing grounds are where we connect with our Ancestors, where our heritage, language and identity are passed on.” — Phillemon Mosby, Torres Strait Island Regional Councillor.

It is important to appreciate that, while this guide predominantly focuses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives and dance conventions since European colonisation, dance has been an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years, and continues to play an active and important part in cultural life to this day.

It is also worth pointing out that, while the subject/learning Areas of The Arts— and the [subject guides](#) that Reconciliation Australia’s Narragunnawali team have built around these— have been separated into distinct Dance, Drama, Music, Media and Visual Arts categories, traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance is ultimately based on a strong and simultaneous use of cross-arts frameworks and features such as song, drama and storytelling.

Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance has often taken the form of a corroboree— a ceremonial amalgamation of dance, song and visual symbols or stimuli to provide a representation of, and to pass on information about, the Dreaming. Corroboree dancers often use subtle yet stylised symbolic movement to support the telling of stories, including those carried through Songlines—traditional musical narratives which serve as an Aboriginal ‘voice map’ of Country, conveying important journeys made during the Dreaming. In this way, and akin to traditional belief systems, dance customs have tended to embrace an intricate human, geographic and spiritual interrelationship.

It is important to point out that there can be great diversity in the forms or features of a traditional corroboree. ‘Corroboree’ is a very generic word that was in fact coined by Europeans in an attempt to imitate a term from just one Aboriginal language of NSW. There is indeed no single corroboree structure, style or story with a number of different corroborees existing both between and within distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic-cultural groups. For example, Miriwoong/Ngaliwurru man, Chris Griffiths, effectively describes the diversity of dance-song styles in the East Kimberley region alone:

*“There are lots of different kinds of song and dance cycles... **joonba, moonga-moonga, balga, janba, marndiwa, wangga and lirrga**. Each style has different rhythms, different body paint, different songs, different artefacts, different instruments and different dances. These are the things that special people are given in their dreams. They’re also inspired by the Ngarranggarni (Dreaming), and the knowledge of the old people. It’s part of our tradition, and we’re holding on to it today.”¹*

Questions of custodianship, authority and authenticity are important to consider when it comes to the teaching and practice of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance. It is also important to appreciate distinct protocols around participation in, or attendance at, a corroboree—these can depend on whether or not a particular corroboree is more public and informal, or indeed more sacred and ritualised in nature, and on whether or not there are any culturally informed age or gender restrictions surrounding the corroboree event. For these

¹ Griffiths, Chris (2016) ‘Sharing one cup,’ *UN Magazine*, Issue 10.1, www.unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-10-1/sharing-one-cup/

reasons, it is integral to consult with your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community when considering engaging with events and/or wider learning experiences pertaining to corroborees.

Acknowledging the historical and continued significance of traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance is a pivotal precursor to researching and reflecting on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives and dance conventions have entered into, or have been represented in, more contemporary dance domains. As well as appreciating the ancient and continuing dance traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is important to appreciate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance – like all cultural practices – is dynamic and is thus subject to organic patterns of evolution over time. So too is it important to critically reflect on how this evolution has been impacted on by ‘Western’ (mis)appropriations of First Peoples’ dance conventions.

Timeline of Key Dates in the Contemporary History of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance

This timeline chronologically lists some of the key dates in the more recent history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance and/or with regard to the relationship between dance and reconciliation more generally.

- **60,000+ years ago:**
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia have maintained longstanding conventions and conceptualisations pertaining to dance for tens of thousands of years.
- **1973:**
 - The Aboriginal Arts Board, made up of Aboriginal artists, authors and performers, was established.
- **1976:**
 - The [National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association](#) (NAISDA) Dance College was set up under the leadership of founding Director, Carole Y Johnson.
- **1977:**
 - NAISDA's student performing group, Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT) embarked on its first international tour, with Wayne Nicol, Michael Leslie, Richard Talonga, Lillian Cromble and guest artist Roslyn Watson participating in the African and Black World Festival of Arts and Culture in Nigeria.
- **1989:**
 - [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#) was birthed from the energy of NAISDA founder Carole Y Johnson, along with NAISDA graduates, and Rob Bryant and Cheryl Stone.
- **1991:**
 - Stephen Page was appointed Artistic Director of Bangarra Dance Theatre.
- **2000:**
 - Nunukul Watamaa Aboriginal dance troupe was selected to perform at the opening of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.
- **2005:**
 - *Creating Pathways* National Indigenous Dance Forum held at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, leading to the *Treading the Pathways* initiative of 2007.
- **2009:**
 - Bangarra's production, *Mathinna*, won Best Ballet or Dance Work, Best Choreography in a Dance or Physical Theatre Production and Best Original Score at the Helpmann Awards.
- **2013:**
 - Wiradjuri woman [Ella Havelka](#) became the first Aboriginal dancer to join the 50-year-old Australian Ballet. 'ELLA,' a documentary by Ronin Films was later released, in 2016, to explore the Ella Havelka's "intimate and inspirational journey." Since this time, Aboriginal Dancer [Evie Ferris](#) has also joined the Australian ballet.

Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dances

The table below lists a number of contemporary dance performances featuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander themes, or themes relating to reconciliation. The list focuses on examples which have published recordings or learning/teaching resources built around them, meaning that teachers may be able to usefully draw upon these materials in the classroom context.

Year of Performance	Name of Dance	Choreographer(s)	Synopsis
2006	<u>Gathering</u> (comprised of reworked <u>Rites</u> and <u>Amalgamate</u>)	<u>Stephen Page</u>	A collaborative double bill between Bangarra Dance Theatre and the Australian Ballet, cleverly combining the beauty of ballet and the intense spirituality of Aboriginal culture.
2008	<u>Mathinna</u>	<u>Stephen Page</u>	Based on the true story of a young Tasmanian Aboriginal girl named Mathinna, this performance illustrates some of the key political, cultural and social interactions that occurred at the time of colonisation. It focuses on the disruptions that occurred as colonial powers relocated Aboriginal people from their homelands and intervened in their cultural practices by imposing modern European values and systems into their lives and lifestyles.
2009	<u>Reconcile</u>	<u>Bernadette Walong;</u> <u>Nikki Smith</u>	Marking the 2009 International Year of Reconciliation, this dance performance explored and expressed the concept of reconciliation, including definitions such as 'settlement,' 'squaring off,' 'resolution,' 'compromise,' 'cease fire,' 'reunion,' 'bringing together,' 'appeasement,' 'recognition,' 'acknowledgement of imbalance,' 'resolution' and 'recognition and acceptance of difference.'
2011	<u>About</u> (see also	<u>Elma Kris</u>	Recognising that the four seasons in the Torres Strait Islands relate directly to the type and direction of the winds, this is a

			dance that expresses the effects of the winds on the land, sea and community.
2011	<u>ID</u>	<u>Stephen Page</u>	Based on personal observations of people tracing their bloodlines and reconnecting with traditional culture, this performance asks important questions about identity and reconnection with one's heritage.
2012	<u>Artefact</u>	<u>Frances Rings</u>	A powerful dance theatre performance which works to breathe life back into Aboriginal objects that represent the continuum of practices that date back thousands of years. Within the performance, each artefact is respected for the story it tells in reconnecting people with their traditional culture and heritage.
2012	<u>Terrain</u>	<u>Frances Rings</u>	Set in the Lake Eyre area of Australia, this performance explores the fundamental connection between people and the land, capturing Aboriginal conceptualisations around how the land is treated, how its spirit is understood, and how its future is regarded.
2013	<u>Blak</u>	<u>Stephen Page;</u> <u>Daniel Riley</u>	An edgy three-part story which draws on the artists' urban perspectives to expose a yearning for spiritual connection.
2015	<u>Long Grass</u>	<u>Vicki van Hout</u>	A performance which encourages audiences to appreciate the diverse circumstances around Darwin's Aboriginal homeless population, or 'Long Grassers,' rather than simply looking upon these people with derision or scorn, walking past them, or simply ignoring them.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dancers and Choreographers

There is a great wealth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have played, and/or continue to play, a key role in the field of Dance in their local communities and across Australia. Should you wish to provide opportunities for students and children to explore and acknowledge individuals and groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have contributed to the subject/learning area of Dance – in the capacity of Dancers, Choreographers or more broadly – some avenues for relevant research and classroom learning could include:

- Engaging with information and resources available through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Companies/Institutions mentioned on pages 8-9 of this guide. For example, the [Bangarra website](#) includes an '[Our Team](#)' and '[Our Dancers](#)' section, alongside a specific '[Education Resources](#)' section.
- Use the [Black Book Indigenous Dancers Directory](#) and/or the 'Contributors' filter within the [AusStage](#) search tool to research Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers and choreographers.
- Explore the information and resources included in Narragunnawali's Drama, Music, Media Arts and Visuals Arts [subject guides](#), given the intricate interrelationship between Dance and these other subject/learning areas.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Companies/Institutions

The following list includes several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance companies or wider Performing Arts institutions that are either active today, or have played an active role in the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance in Australia. While music, drama and visual arts are often important features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance, please see The Arts—Music, The Arts— Drama and The Arts—Visual Arts resource guides for more music, drama or visual arts-specific organisational lists. On a related note, you may find that, in your local area, it is actually your local Art Centre², Language³/Culture Centre, or another community organisation that acts as the main host for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance events.

- [Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts](#)
- [Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern](#)
- [Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre](#)
- [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#)
- [BlakDance](#)
- [Descendance](#)
- [Doonooch Dance Company](#)
- [DUBAIKUNGKAMIYALK](#)
- [IDJA Dance Theatre](#)
- [Jannawi Dance Theatre](#)
- [Jaran Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Company](#)
- [Keriba Mabaigal Women's Dance Company](#)
- [Koomurri](#)
- [Kurruru Youth Performing Arts](#)
- [Malu Kiai Mura Bai Company](#)
- [Marrugeku](#)

² For a list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centres, please see The Visual Arts resource guide.

³ For a list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Language Centres, please see the Languages resource guide.

- [NAISDA Dance College](#)
- [Ngadju Dance Group](#)
- [Nunukul Yuggera Aboriginal Troupe](#)
- [Ochre Contemporary Dance Company](#)
- [Tjapukai Dance Theatre](#)
- [Wadumbah Indigenous Dance](#)

You may also wish to use the 'Organisations' filter within the [AusStage search](#) tool to locate and read about a range of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance companies or institutions.

Celebratory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Events

The list below features examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance festivals or celebratory events:

- [Dance Rites, national Indigenous dance competition](#)
- [Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival](#)

For more information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander festivals/celebrations pertaining to The Arts more broadly, you may also like to visit:

- <https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/search/event/>
- <http://www.australia.com/en/search.html?q=aboriginal+events>
- <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-arts/>
- <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-arts/national-indigenous-arts-awards/>
- <https://www.australia.com/en/things-to-do/aboriginal-australia/5-most-amazing-aboriginal-festivals.html>

Other Online Guides/Reference Materials

- ABC Education (2016) *Communicating through Dance*, <http://education.abc.net.au/home/#!/digibook/1599782/communicating-through-dance>
- Australian Council for the Arts (2007) *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts (2nd edition)*, <https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/performing-arts-protocols-for-5b4bfd3988d3e.pdf>
- Bangarra Dance Theatre (2019) Education Resources, <https://www.bangarra.com.au/youth-outreach/education>
- Bangarra Dance Theatre (2013) E-Resources, www.bangarra.com.au/youthoutreach/education/resources
- Bangarra Dance Theatre (2019) 30 Years of Sixty Five Thousand Study Guide for Teachers and Students, <https://d13zn1k8jew9vh.cloudfront.net/files/BDT-30thStudyGuideA4v11web.pdf>
- Blackfella Films (2008) The Black Book Directory, <http://www.theblackbook.org.au/directory.asp>
- Blackfella Films (2008) The Black Book Library, www.theblackbook.org.au/library.asp
- Move It Mob Style (2017) Class Activities, www.moveitmobstyle.com.au/activities/
- Tasmanian Government (2018) The Orb: Living Cultures, www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures

Reflective Questions for Dance Staff and Students

- How have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures influenced Australian dance, and what active role do these histories and cultures play today?
- Research and describe some of the similarities and differences between the dance traditions of two or more distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic-cultural groups. What do the similarities suggest about some of the shared elements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures? What do the differences suggest about the diversity of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures?
- What are some of the similarities and differences between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance conventions? What are some of the ways in which these conventions have or can work together in interesting and important ways?
- Can Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, perspectives and dance performance styles be adequately or appropriately represented by non-Indigenous Australians?
- How might questions of ownership, authority and authenticity be important when considering the adoption or adaptation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance conventions in the 'Western' theatre?
- Choose to research an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander dancer or choreographer. What is the importance of his or her contributions to dance arts, either at the local or (inter)national scale?
- What is the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance and music, media, dramatic and/or visual arts? Why are these relationships important? How are they similar or different to non-Indigenous cross-arts collaboration, either in style or in purpose?
- Where possible, organise an excursion to a public Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance performance—whether an on-stage performance, or a public corroboree event hosted by your local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Centre, Language/Culture Centre, or another community organisation. What messages did you receive from this performance, and how did it make you feel? How was it similar or different to non-Indigenous performances that you have attended?
- How might your school or early learning service contribute to the celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance?
- How can embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories into the study and practice of Dance help to foster reconciliation?