Developing ‘Asia Literacy’ through the Australian Curriculum – English

Julie Hamston

Reading and writing have always been tools that take us across borders, build bridges across cultures and communities, and enable us to see and hold up to critical scrutiny the competing and complex texts that vie to influence our beliefs, everyday lives, moral commitments, and social investments (Allan Luke, 2003, p. 20).

Introduction
The above quote from Allan Luke was published in 2003, long before the Melbourne Declaration (2008) stated the ‘need for all Australians to be Asia literate’ (pp. 04–05) and the significance attributed to the ‘Asia priority’ within the Australian Curriculum. Luke’s words on the interrelationship between literacies, identity and culture also preceded similar sentiments expressed in the initial shaping of the nature and scope of the English learning area in the Australian Curriculum:

Young Australians’ developing identities, the cultures they live in, and their understanding of how identity and culture are connected, are all shaped by the growing capabilities for which the English curriculum takes a major responsibility (Freebody et al. English: Initial Advice, 2008, p. 5).

These important reminders to English educators to consider what ‘we teach people what to “do” with texts – intellectually and culturally, socially and politically’ (Luke, 2003, p. 20) ought to motivate us to reflect on the potential of the English learning area to support students to understand Asian cultures, values, ways of life and spirituality and to develop the skills to empathise and engage with people of Asian background, both within Australia and the wider world (see Kirby, 2009).

These reminders take on greater significance with the argument posed in the subsequent English Curriculum Framing Paper (2008) that currently in primary and secondary schools English content is chosen locally, is based on what teachers both enjoy and are used to teaching, what resources they have easy access to and what content is perceived to deliver successful and appropriate outcomes. This current approach to content decision-making, it is suggested, often denies Australian students ‘their entitlement (emphasis added) … to develop an awareness of the literary traditions and expressions of other nations in the Asia-Pacific region’ (National English Curriculum Framing Paper, November 2008, p. 11, paragraph 39).

I have been personally involved with the important education projects of English literacy, ‘Asia literacy’ and intercultural understanding for over two decades. I have pursued different means of integrating English, Asia literacy and intercultural understanding, from academic research through to curriculum and resource development for teachers and students (see for example, Hamston, 2003; Hamston with Murdoch, 2004), and so I am keenly interested
in, and supportive of, the goal of the Australian Curriculum to bring together these aspects of student learning.

Recently, I confirmed this professional commitment through participation in a leadership forum for the Asia Education Foundation focused on integrating a perspective on Asia in the English curriculum. Here I reiterated the centrality of texts, including print, multimodal and digital/online forms, to both English and the development of Asia literacy. I argued that experiences gained vicariously through texts enable one to ‘travel’ to Asia, back in time, to other cultures, other worldviews and experiences/perspectives. A focus on the Asia priority, in turn, assists in expanding the English curriculum. Texts at the heart of the English learning area may include those from Asia, in English or translated in English, texts about Asia (histories; civilisations; culture; worldviews and aesthetics) including those written by Australians; and texts about Australia, including those written by Asian Australians.

The Asia Education Foundation has identified different levels of articulation between Asia-related content and the learning areas of the Australian Curriculum and examples provided for English are included here:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Levels of Articulation</th>
<th>Examples from English</th>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit reference to Asia content in the Australian Curriculum</td>
<td>A topic or section of the curriculum that has explicit content relating to a country/countries/people from/of Asia (Asia Priority). Exploring models of sustained texts created for persuasive purposes about a challenging or complex issue from other cultures, including Asia (Year 10 ACELY1765 elaboration).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunities for Asia content relating to culture in the Australian Curriculum</td>
<td>Countries/people of Asia as examples for realising content: [Intercultural understanding]. Comparing two or more versions of the same story by different authors, or from different cultures, describing similarities and differences in authors’ points of view (Year 2 ACET 1591 elaboration).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Further opportunities in the Australian Curriculum for Asia content</td>
<td>Where Asia content could be included (but the connection isn’t necessarily obvious from the Australian Curriculum document). Recognising that a knowledge of word origins is not only interesting in its own right, but that it extends students; knowledge of vocabulary and spelling (Year 5 ACELA 1500 elaboration).</td>
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Adapted from: Asia Content in the Australian Curriculum, Asia Education Foundation.

I would like to extend these different opportunities for integrating Asia content through highlighting quality texts and resources that can be used in the English classroom.

Explicit reference to Asia content in the Australian Curriculum

Intersections of Identity – an online resource for secondary English (Asia Education Foundation).
This multimedia resource, designed for students of Years 7–10, supports the development of intercultural understanding and ‘Asia literacy’ in the English classroom.

In this resource students engage with film texts, poetry, biographies, documentaries, social media texts, newspaper articles, interviews, song lyrics, narratives and visual images to explore issues of Australia’s engagement with Asia. These texts are collected into five themes: Fusions, Journeys, Frictions, Look Both Ways, Out there!, designed to support students to examine and understand how Australian identity has been shaped, influenced, challenged
and enhanced by lived experience and the relationships established between Australians and the peoples of Asia.

The big questions motivating this resource include: What are some of the profound changes experienced by those Australians who travel to and live in Asia? What experiences have Asian Australians had in coming to live in Australia? What traditions and ideas have influenced artists and writers in Australia? How have people responded to issues of conflict or personal challenge created through stereotypes and misunderstanding? What has motivated people to travel to Asia and Australia to explore, take risks, participate in social change? What perceptions of Australia and Australians are held by people in the Asia region?

To address these questions, students may explore the ironic comedy of Lawrence Leung, or learn about the adventures of Australian explorer Tim Cope as he made his way across Asia in the footsteps of Genghis Khan. They can listen to the heartfelt challenges faced by Japanese war brides, or to the alluring rhythms of the Vietnamese poems written by Jane Gibian. Students can explore a light hearted discussion of stereotypes posted on a social network exchange or read the stirring account of Kirsty Sword Gusmao’s journey towards becoming First Lady of an independent East Timor.

Central to the resource is a structured learning pathway for each text:

- **CONTEXT** (textual; socio-political; historical; geographical)
- **CONNECT** (to the text; to the issue)
- **EXPLORE** (the text; the issue)
- **TRANSFORM** (the text; your thinking and feeling)
- **FINAL REFLECTION** (on the text; about the issue)

This pathway is designed to scaffold students’ learning about text, identity and culture. The integration of web 2.0 technologies supports students to reflect on their learning and to transform their understandings through the creation of their own texts. This emphasis on text creation aligns with the stated goal in the Australian Curriculum that through English ‘students develop communication skills that reflect cultural awareness and intercultural understanding’ (ACARA, English/Cross Curriculum-Priorities http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Cross-Curriculum-Priorities#Asia-and-Australias-engagement-with-Asia).
Importantly, *Intersections of Identity* simultaneously broadens students’ understanding of the nature of texts and how texts make meaning of Australia’s engagement with Asia. It presents students with opportunities to develop knowledge of:

- how context shapes texts;
- the ways texts construct particular worldviews;
- the ways texts may be interpreted according to cultural, social and personal backgrounds and contexts;
- themselves as readers and interpreters of texts: what they bring to their reading of a text in terms of cultural knowledge, values and beliefs.

With reference to Asia literacy, *Intersections of Identity* enables students to:

- develop and communicate informed attitudes, values and behaviours towards Asian people, events, issues and lifestyles;
- enhance their knowledge about traditional and contemporary Asia;
- make connections between Australia and Asia;
- display intercultural sensitivity in their interactions with peoples of the Asian region, both within and outside Australia; and
- develop content knowledge about Asian histories, civilisations; culture; worldview and aesthetics.

In returning to the words of Allan Luke, this multi-layered resource shows ‘students how to use literacy to go inward and outward, to engage in comparison and understanding of other possible worlds, discourses, and ideologies’ (Luke, 2003, p. 20).

**Opportunities for Asia content relating to culture in the Australian Curriculum**

*Literary texts from Asia and Australia*

One of the most effective ways to embed a perspective on Asia within the learning area of English is through the study of literature – a core element of every level of the English learning area. The paper providing Initial Advice to the English learning area (2008) presents a convincing argument in this regard:

A feature of Australian education in English language and literature is that it has become gradually more open to international English and world literature. Knowledge of these matters should form part of what young Australians know about English and about being Australian. The presence of Australian literary works and a growing appreciation of the place of Australian literature among other literary traditions should be a core element of the national English curriculum (Freebody et al., 2008, p. 8).

Many resources are available for English teachers from Foundation to Year 10. Some of these showcase the literary traditions of Asia and simultaneously introduce students to the concept of ‘world literature’. Some literary texts authored by Asian Australians highlight the ‘Asianness’ of Australia’s heritage and serve as models of Australian literature. Others, written by Australians of their own or other’s experiences in Asia bring to life the many facets of Australia’s engagement with Asia.

Some examples are provided here:
This wide range of ‘Asia-related’ literature – including picture books, novels and non-fiction texts and poetry – provides students with opportunities to reflect on personal, cultural, social and aesthetic experiences. In so doing, they develop an understanding of:

- how to use texts to make sense of their world and to develop shared cultural understandings;
- the diversity of Asia’s peoples, environments, cultures, belief systems and societies; and
- the contribution of Asian cultures, peoples, histories and traditions on Australia’s past, present and future.

This engagement with a rich heritage of world and Australian literature is potentially transformative. As Luke (2003) suggests, teachers have always known that texts have the capacity of transporting us to other lives and places, to engage with ‘other’ cultures. Texts can do so fictively, descriptively, empathetically, critically – with a host of effects (p. 20).

Further opportunities in the Australian Curriculum for Asia content

Incidental references to language, contexts and texts

Further opportunities for Asia content in the English curriculum arise with easily made connections to Asia, rather than an in-depth study or focus. For instance, students could discuss the spread of English throughout Asia as a result of British colonisation; they could be introduced to the etymology of words such as pyjama, typhoon, tsunami, amok, or they could view a television advertisement from Hong Kong or Japan, amongst many others, in a broader study of the media. These links should be authentic and meaningful to the
students’ learning in English, but they are dependent upon the teacher’s open disposition to ‘globalise’ rather than ‘localise’ content in the English classroom (see Luke, 2003).

Conclusion
In addition to the texts and resources currently in existence and production to support the integration of Asia content into English, the emergence of new forms of technologies and communication open up exciting possibilities for the future. Young Australians’ contact with the global world through these technologies means that they comprehend and create texts that cross boundaries, times and places. Central to this, however, is the need for an intercultural understanding, or ‘cultural literacy’ that is ‘an indispensable tool for transcending the ‘clash of ignorances’. It can be seen as part of a broad toolkit of worldviews, attitudes and competencies that young people acquire for their lifelong journey …’ (UNESCO, 2010, p. 118). The English classroom is an important site for this learning.

References

Book covers