

Indigenous dispossession empathy activity

You will need

Butcher's paper [you can use art paper, but butcher's is better]

Felt tipped pens or coloured pencils [ask students to bring their own]

Scrap paper cut/guillotined into small pieces – one person's name needs to be written on each piece.

Outline of process (modify according to needs of student group).

Today you are going to be involved in an activity where you will learn with your heart, rather than with your head. It is important that everyone is involved...It would be wonderful if no one sits back and just watches...all need to be involved. You can choose your own groups - of 5 or 6.

One person from each group come is to collect a piece of butchers paper for each group. the activity will involve you following directions to create a response; you will be asked to stop at various times.... It is very important that we don't have to wait on groups when asked to stop. Please enter into the spirit of things and when ever I [hold up my hand, count backwards to five...whatever...] you need to be quiet to hear the next instruction. You will find the activity more engaging if you listen carefully and follow the directions!

Today you are no longer students; each group is an aboriginal tribe.

And the piece of paper before you represents your tribal land.

What do you know about the indigenous people's attitude to land? How does it compare to European attitudes to land?

Each tribe has a totem.... [Explain as necessary] choose a totem for your tribe [an Australian native animal.... No lions, camels etc!!!!] teacher can remind students about the enormous variety of topography, climate, temperature etc in Australia... coastal tribes might have a fish, desert tribes a frilled neck lizard, tribes from the rainforest up north etc...

Remember, feather, fur and fins

Sketch it in the middle of the paper. This is not an art activity.... Don't take too long...make it stylised. It's a symbol.

Now, if you are going to live on this land, the first thing you will need is a water source.

Draw your water source. [river, waterfall, billabong....]

What food does your land provide for you [not just the obvious macropods, but snake, and berries/ plants/honey ants.... Think widely. No shops ! Draw the foods...this is a good chance to check everyone is involved...everyone can draw something different.

Add the place where the tribe meet together when discussion and decisions are needed, or everyone just gets together for relaxation.

Add the place where men meet when they are talking about issues like initiation, hunting etc...

Add the place where women talk about Secret Women's Business...

Add the place the tribe buries its dead.

Add those special plants [bush, tree, creeper...] which provides your medicines.

Add the spot where you get the ochre for painting your body in corroboree

[add extras here if you wish, depending on time]

We could keep adding aspects of the life that is lived on the land, but we won't have time...but you get the idea. Your piece of paper is a representation of the life you live here.

So you have the land...now you need the rest of your family. Take some of these little bits of paper. Write on each the name of one of your family and friends...the people who are close to you and give your life meaning. [My dog? Yes... anyone that you love]
Now spread each of the tribes people over the land.

You don't want this to take too long, but you need to have them invest enough time on this, that when the next part starts, they will feel affronted.

Teacher wanders through the groups and talks the students through the following scenario:

Now we go back to January 26, 1788 ... Sydney Cove.... White ships arrive ... lots of strange people arrive [some commentators say the indigenous people would have thought white skinned people were their ancestors, and so they were welcomed.]

Some people ran away into the bush... some welcomed...

Gradually the colony expanded.... Places needed for water, planting food, pitching 600 tents, etc... build up the story and then manoeuvre yourself to a spot where you can easily bend down and rip a corner off one group's "land" - along with some comment like "I need this land to graze my cattle ..." they will be shocked and you need to be on the ball so that it doesn't get out of hand.

Next, talk about how the indigenous people had no resistance to European illness, like measles, smallpox etc... then reach down and grab a handful of names from another tribe's land. Depending on how things go and how many groups you have, you can visit a few more tribes and do the same. Screw them up and throw them over your shoulder in a very casual way with a terse "they're dead" or similar.

Then go back to the narrative about the expansion of the colony, ripping more bits from the paper [this is why butcher's paper is better than art paper] ; another smallpox epidemic etc... ham it up, play a role.... spin it out or restrict it as suits you. there re plenty of websites or text books that can give you the rough outline of the development of the colony...you don't have time to go into much more than Parramatta – over the Blue Mountains [1813] ...and the rest can be generic 'expansion' . You can send individuals away to work for a white family [especially girls – as domestics] here you need to talk about what it means to separated from "county"...

If you have other teachers, you can use them as soldiers to take people away to gaol [sitting on the side lines].... Use condescending tone in lines like "I don't like trouble makers... I'll fix you... take him away to gaol" etc... demonstrate the arbitrary nature of white power. Improvise and use the students' reactions or shouted out lines to help direct where you go next. Every time I do it, it's different...there is no right or wrong...

It is important to link back to the land they created in the beginning...the land you loved has been taken away...where will you go ... to another tribe, with a different totem, different food etc... a new way of life ... dispossession.

Some of the students might start to protect their land...sitting on it etc so you can't rip some off. Use that, work with it....talk about how some aborigines did try to resist, but they had

stone age weapons against guns, no horses etc... this is where you can use the soldiers to take the trouble makers away to gaol....

Then...

The very important time ...make sure you don't run out of time ...this de-brief is important...where the learning will take place, the empathy is built.

How did you feel? What did you learn?

You can talk about this being a simulation...some of you got really angry, but this after all is just a piece of paper... what must it have been like if they [the bits of paper] were real people and it was your ancestral lands that had been taken?

[You could work in the stolen generation, and explore that too]

Alcoholism is a huge problem in indigenous society. Is it any wonder? We might drink to forget if this had been our experience, too. Imagine not knowing if your child was still alive or dead? Had she grown up to be a solid member of society or pulled apart by not knowing her family? Etc etc...

Get them talking about how they feel.

Time requirement 80-90 mins, so choose the part of the day where you can get this in one slot. It's important to de-brief them before you send them home.

Acknowledgements: inspired by a presentation by Santa Sabina History staff
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