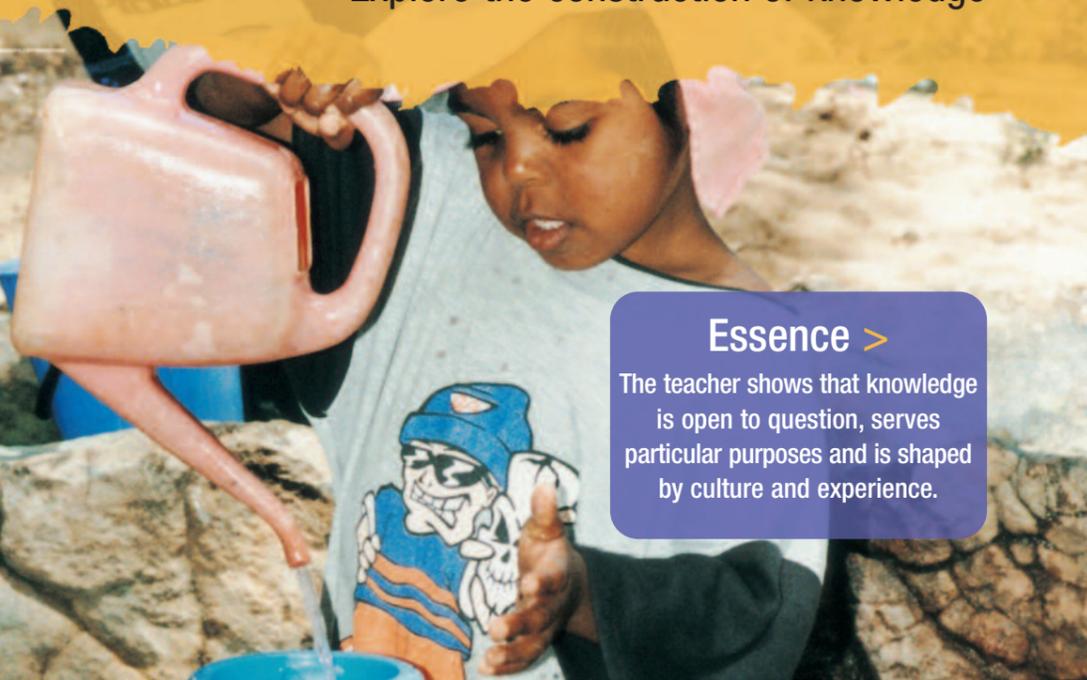


### 3.3 Develop expert learners: Explore the construction of knowledge



**Essence >**  
The teacher shows that knowledge is open to question, serves particular purposes and is shaped by culture and experience.

#### Aboriginal learners connecting to country

I couldn't believe it—we had won! We didn't win just the state competition but the national one as well! What had started as an idea to help our Kurna students reconnect to their country had blossomed into a full-on community project. Without a shadow of doubt, the learning outcomes and social benefits surpassed all our expectations.

It all started in 2003 when we began to develop a wetland area on the Kurna Plains school site, with the intention of increasing students' cultural pride and understanding. Over the next two years, as the students worked and talked together, their shared cultural knowledge grew. They watched their wetlands become a living environment, and their questions flowed.

Like our Kurna Plains students, most Aboriginal learners live in urban areas and, whilst many still retain a cultural connection to their country, many children and students find it difficult to experience and maintain cultural practices and develop a sense of identity. They live in cultural dislocation, and often 'learning about' that identity is the nearest they come to understanding.

Connection to country is evident in the more remote areas of Australia where traditional practices live on, but still there are challenges to face. Even though cultural knowledge and understandings are stronger in these areas, Aboriginal learners are required to move between two cultural worlds.

The secondary students were going to bring their two cultural worlds together. They started on the reconnection project. To grow cultural identity and understandings we developed a strategy which would bring together the wisdom and knowledge of Kurna elders in the community with that of the students. By listening to and discussing the community stories and elders' oral histories, students could build on their existing understandings and compare with each other. For many students this was the first time they'd heard and made personal connections with things they'd 'learnt about'.

The students worked with a strong shared sense of purpose to produce a DVD entitled *Cooking Kangaroo Tail*. They learned how to dig an earth pit which became the cooking oven. To explain its cultural significance, they wrote a script, acted, filmed and then edited the footage. Watching their final product, there was a tangible sense of moving freely between two worlds. The students submitted their DVD to Panasonic in a nation-wide competition. Being chosen as winners of that national competition was powerful acknowledgment of their identity.

Having the wetlands on the school site has breathed life into learning. There is new knowledge, wellbeing, cultural understanding and connection to country. For me it is no longer just a 'head connection'—it is a 'heart connection'.

*Senior secondary teacher*

#### Key actions: Teachers

- Guide my students to understand that all individuals and groups have their own unique perspective on the world, and that their core beliefs and experiences influence the way they construct and value knowledge
- Challenge my students to consider what they don't know by exposing them to new ideas or perspectives
- Elicit students' responses to 'Why is this worth knowing?'
- Compare and contrast cultural understandings (eg creation stories), attitudes and conceptual understandings from different time periods (eg belief in a flat earth) to demonstrate that knowledge is a cultural, social and political construct that can change with time and circumstance
- Target discussions where students share perspectives and give and receive feedback on their ideas
- Stimulate rethinking by introducing contentious issues for students to question their own underlying assumptions and to have the opportunity to change their minds
- Explicitly teach skills and create opportunities for students to disagree with ideas and/or each other in appropriate ways
- Structure investigations that enable students to identify bias and racist/sexist/class conscious attitudes in the community and the media
- Teach students to critically analyse information and primary sources of data from a range of sources and for specific purposes
- Explore how each discipline has its own focus and constructs knowledge through its own processes and methods (eg compare the way scientists explore and express knowledge of forces with the way an artist would explore and express forces)
- Actively seek out online opportunities for students to compare beliefs and perspectives with other learners, wider society and experts
- Deepen students' understandings of the past and present as a means of influencing the future
- Design activities that encourage and actively support students to be 'apprentice' historians, scientists, writers, artists etc

#### Key actions: Students

- Listen carefully to others' ideas and try to see them from their point of view
- Use graphic organisers such as mind maps to work out the links between ideas
- Ask questions: 'Why would they think this way?', 'Who might say this?' and 'Is there another way that someone might see this?'
- Challenge people's ideas in ways that are not threatening
- Express ideas in different ways by asking myself 'How would I communicate this idea in science?' and 'What if this was creative writing?'
- Use a variety of different research skills and ask myself: 'How reliable is this information?', 'Whose interests are being served?', 'What was the author's purpose here?' and 'Is there any bias?'



*Knowledge is a story that works.*

*Yoram Harpaz*

#### Justice alert

What cultural constructs are dominant? Whose assumptions and core beliefs are affirmed and whose are threatened?

#### Ways to explore the construction of knowledge

**Human graph:** Each student considers the issue in question, then stands on a spot along a continuum that moves from 'strongly agree' through to 'strongly disagree'. When asked, students justify their position. After hearing others' views, they may wish to change position.

**Thinking scaffolds:** Students use strategies such as Venn diagrams to compare and contrast knowledge from different perspectives, times and places.

For more thinking scaffolds, go to <http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/venn.pdf>.

**Fact or opinion:** This is one way to support students to consider whether things they say are facts, opinions or a combination.

Fact or opinion		
Write your topic and the information you know. Add the details to the columns. Talk with others to check your ideas.		
Topic:		
Fact	Opinion	Not sure

**3 2 1 Strategy:** Students can follow these steps to clarify their thinking:

- 3 ideas I want to discuss
- 2 questions I want to ask
- 1 action I want/need to take

**Knowledge interrogation:** Provide opportunities for students to explore assumptions underpinning different perspectives, search for problems, generate ideas, and develop a critical attitude.

**Debates:** Pose a question for debate and allow students a class session for research or discussion before the debate. Split this preparation time so that they spend the first half gathering information about only the affirmative arguments, and then the same amount of time on only the negative arguments. The debate is conducted the next session/day. A topic might be 'Human nature: Good or evil?'

Continued page 56

