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Cultural literacies

Explore these pages to develop your cultural awareness and cultural literacy skills.

Cultural literacy
Because you live in a diverse and global society with people of many different cultures, your cultural literacy will help you at university and in your career.

STUDY SMART WEBSITE
Find this section on the Study Smart website here:
https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/cultural_literacy
What is cultural literacy?

You have cultural literacy when you know what an average member of that culture would be expected to know, which is usually assumed and often unstated (Hirsch, 1983). Hirsch (1983) developed the term "cultural literacy" because people can't learn reading, writing, and other communication as skills separate from the culturally assumed knowledge that shapes what people communicate about. For example, the meaning of many words is culture-specific. Telling someone you wear thongs to the beach in Australia is common, but it would have a very different reaction in the USA!

Cultural literacy is culture-specific. There are too many different cultures to be literate in all of them. Most people have a fluent cultural literacy in their culture of origin, as they will have been learning their culture's assumed knowledge from childhood. You will need to develop new cultural literacies when you enter a new culture, or interact with members of that culture.

What is the assumed knowledge of a culture?

Culture is often described as being like an iceberg. Above the water are the aspects of the culture that you can easily see and experience: language, dress, food, festivals and the like. Below the water, where you can't see it, are the aspects of the culture that those within the culture know and understand, often without thinking about it or questioning it.

The unspoken aspects of a culture are influenced by its history, values, and assumptions, and range from perceptions of right and wrong, gender and other roles, and customs like use of personal space, to idiomatic language use (language based on assumed knowledge). For example, people from English-speaking cultures usually know what a "white elephant" is (a possession or gift that has no use and is expensive or difficult to keep), but the term makes no sense unless you know what its meaning is in the culture.

Assumed knowledge and values have real impact on people's lives. One example is racism, in which people do not have an understanding or valuing of the other culture or peoples, and negatively stereotype its members. Racism can lead to discrimination, exclusion, and even violence.
Another example is gender and gender roles. Many cultures recognise only male and female genders, and have assumptions about what a man or a woman should be, or do: how to behave, what to wear, what kinds of work they can do. "Men are strong" and "women are caring" are two examples of cultural assumptions about gender. People who don't match up to the assumptions may be judged negatively.

Culture can also be specific to workplaces or institutions. When you first arrived at university, did you feel like you didn't understand much of what was going on? The values, customs, and language and terminology used at university have to be learned like any other culture. Words such as 'referencing' have meanings, expectations, assumptions, and right-and-wrongs that may often be unstated.

References

Why is cultural literacy important?

Cultural literacy is important both to individuals and to the society they live in.

As an individual, your cultural literacy will help you to successfully interact with people from diverse backgrounds, including Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It helps you to develop a critical cultural perspective, especially if you are part of the ‘dominant culture’: instead of taking your own cultural beliefs and practices for granted and seeing them as 'normal', you can see them in the context of many cultures and evaluate their strengths and limitations (Flavell, Thackrah & Hoffman, 2013). Cultural literacy also helps you develop associated skills, such as communication and self-reflection (Flavell, Thackrah & Hoffman, 2013).

Cultural literacy contributes positively to the society in which you live. It

→ reduces prejudice and inequality based on culture,
→ increases the value placed on diversity, and
→ increases participation in the social practices of that society, including access to institutions and services (Anning, 2010).

For example, when culturally literate people have influence in institutions like universities or government agencies, they can ensure that people from all cultural backgrounds are able to participate equitably in education and services.

References


Cultural literacy for Western Sydney

Cultural literacy is particularly important for those living and working in Greater Western Sydney, and for students at Western Sydney University. Click below to find out why.

Cultural literacy in Greater Western Sydney

Because you are studying and perhaps also working and living in the Greater Western Sydney region, being culturally literate is essential for interacting effectively. Greater Western Sydney is one of the most culturally diverse regions in Australia (The Centre for Western Sydney, n.d.). Furthermore, over half of Sydney’s Aboriginal population lives in the region (Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education, 2012). See Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultural literacy for more information.

Cultural literacy at Western Sydney University

Cultural literacy is important at Western Sydney University, not only because it is beneficial in a broad sense, but also because the cultural profile of students and staff is as diverse as that of the Western Sydney region (Western Sydney University, n.d.).

Important aspects of cultural literacy for Western Sydney University students include:

- An understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, experiences and achievements
- Developing a critical awareness of your own culture or cultures, perceiving cultural strengths and limitations, and being able to change where needed
- The ability to communicate and work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds without judgement and without an expectation that others should change to conform to your culture
- Understanding that culture goes beyond where you live or what you look like, and can include different social groupings such as age groups
- Understanding that cultures are continuously changing, and that most people will participate in multiple cultures throughout their life
- Knowing that members of a culture are not all the same, but diverse, so you have to get to know the individual you are interacting with, as well as have an understanding of their culture
- Cultural literacy contributes to Western's policies and practices. The University's Equity and Diversity Team works in partnership with staff, students and the wider community to promote inclusive practices across the University. You can learn more on the Equity and Diversity webpages.

Cultural literacy is a foundation of one of the University's Graduate Attributes. The Indigenous Graduate Attribute says that Western Sydney University graduates should have:

- an understanding and valuing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples
- the ability to communicate and work effectively with Aboriginal Australian peoples and organisations
- the ability to communicate and work effectively with peoples from diverse cultures

What this means for you is that as you study for your degree, you will be learning about other cultural contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. You will also be doing incidental cultural learning through your socialising at university, and working in groups of diverse cultures.

See the Indigenous Graduate Attribute for more information.
References


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultural literacy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples belong to some of the oldest continuing cultures in the world. Although a common perception is that there is one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, it is important to understand that there are many cultures, characterised by their complexity and diversity. Indigenous cultural literacy involves an understanding of and appreciation for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge, and peoples, and valuing their unique contribution to an inclusive Australian identity (Anning, 2010).

The Share Our Pride website from Reconciliation Australia offers the following quick tips as "starting points for building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people":

→ 'Get to know us'
→ Attend local events
→ Visit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leaders
→ Link to the 'grapevine'
→ Begin with a relationship of trust

You can find much information about understanding and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the Internet. Two recommended websites are:

→ Interactive Ochre: An interactive website that will help you to learn about and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples.
→ Share Our Pride: The aim of this website is to help your understanding of life from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective.

References

Cultural literacy and you

What can you do to develop your cultural literacy? Click below to find some practical steps to take.

**What is your culture?**

Part of developing cultural literacy is being critically aware of one’s own culture. It means developing an awareness of the assumed knowledge and values of the culture, and being able to make a judgement about whether those knowledges and values are beneficial or detrimental. It is often easier to be aware of culture, both your own and others', when you move from one culture to another, or when you are part of a culture that is different from the majority culture.

![Activity: What do you know about your own culture?](image)

To learn more, you could do this quiz to "explore your cultural iceberg" on the [Difference Differently website](#).

Or try this cultural profile self-assessment from the [Harvard Business Review](#) to learn more about your culture, and how similar or different you are to the average members of your culture, or of the majority culture where you are living: What's your cultural profile?.

**Developing your cultural literacy**

Some key competencies you can develop to become culturally literate are:

- Recognise and value cultural diversity and difference
- Be able to communicate effectively with people from other cultures
- Understand that there is diversity and difference between individuals within cultural groups
- Treat everyone as an individual – have an open mind, no pre-expectations or stereotypes
- Assess each situation and behave appropriately

Lynda.com offers some practical, easy-to-understand online courses that help you to develop your cultural literacy and understand and work with people from other cultures. To access Lynda.com courses, follow the instructions on the Library FAQs page.

- [Developing Cross-Cultural Intelligence](#) (1 hour 14 minutes to complete)
- [Communicating Across Cultures](#) (18 minutes to complete)

Racism is a negative outcome of a lack of cultural literacy. To learn how to challenge racism (and develop your cultural literacy in that area), check out the [Anti-Racism Initiatives - what you can do to challenge racism](#) - from the Challenging Racism website.