# Engage with Asia through English and History

National Standards for Teachers of Asia Literacy

Fiona story

**Context**

The description of a Lead Teacher covers all aspects of teaching: attributes, attitudes, skills and habits, within a school and beyond into the wider professional community.

One such teacher works in a semi-rural school. The school buildings and grounds are very appealing and are in attractive suburban settings. The students are drawn from a broad socio-economic range in the primary schools but in the high school, one third of the populations is low SES. The school tends to attract a high number of Early Career Teachers and for this reason tends to have a high staff turnover.

The teacher’s role is to work with principals in several schools (primary and secondary) in a cluster and mentor teachers with a focus on pedagogy. She has identified herself at the standard of Lead Teacher and this standard has been independently confirmed by one of the principals in her cluster of schools. As part of her role she has promoted Asia literacy in these schools and while she does not have any particular qualifications to pursue Asia literacy, she does recognise and seize opportunities to make learning more vital for her students and to connect their learning with other aspects of the curriculum and with their lives.

Fiona’s initial interest in Asia education was sparked when she shared a class with a teacher of Indonesian who organised a school excursion to Indonesia which Fiona attended. Fiona found many ways of incorporating elements of Indonesian culture in her own English and Performing Arts classes through folk tales and readers’ theatre and this became a two-way street as aspects of English pedagogy were taken up in Indonesian lessons. So successful was the effect on student engagement and learning that both teachers began attending each other’s classes to explore further opportunities for cross cultural experiences.

An opportunity to apply for an Asia Education Foundation Scholarship came up and the application was successful allowing several teachers from the school to go to China. These teachers organised their own program, created contacts and visited schools. They brought back costumes and other items and developed units of work to engross school resources and ensure that the school would have a critical mass of material to continue and extend work on Asia.

**The interview**

The teacher was interviewed at length to obtain detailed information to build a rich description of a lead teacher to exemplify the standards in a case study that may be used by other teachers to assess their own progress, set professional learning goals and processes for attainment of lead teacher.

The key question: What does Asia literacy mean for a lead teacher?

**Standard 2: Know the content and how to teach it**

**2.1 Lead initiatives within the school to evaluate and improve knowledge of content and teaching strategies and demonstrate exemplary teaching of subjects using effective, research-based learning and teaching programs.**

**Attributes of a lead teacher using Asia Literacy to achieve Descriptor 2.1**

Fiona is committed to the development of Asia literacy, a natural extension to her interest and masters’ degrees focusing on catering for student diversity. She observes the effects of a programme of learning on students and tests those observations systematically. She has discerned that students’ knowledge about and understanding of Asia have given them more informed attitudes and a stance of openness to difference and has strengthened the validity of her observations through action research.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

Fiona organises for and manages the development of programs with an Asia focus. Pedagogy is the driver of studies of Asia in her schools and, in turn, Asia enriches content. These programs are developed through a *Learning by Design Framework* and align with other aspects of the curriculum, particularly literacy and values education. Fiona’s work with teachers in the cluster is designed to lead them in understanding the curriculum, its content and particularly pedagogies that will be effective in encouraging student learning.

**Leading through English teaching**

How can Asia literacy extend students in curriculum areas which can already be intellectually challenging? The example Fiona gives is through English. In Year 10, students study *Balzac and the* *Little Chinese Seamstress*. This novel leads students to find out about how the Cultural Revolution impacted on people’s lives through a story of adolescence.

While all novels give insight into the lives of others and are good for exploring significant issues, adolescent novels, in giving such prominence to adolescent experiences can sometimes lead to ‘navel gazing’. In novels set in students’ own culture, the differences in the experiences of characters can be naturalised as students identify with the protagonist and too easily project themselves into their situation.

A novel from a culture that is very different from our own highlights the similarities between people as the differences are made so manifest and cannot be overlooked or made to seem natural. This is one way to lift students out of adolescent reading into great literature.

Another example in the English curriculum is the picture book *Wabi Sabi,* a story about a cat trying to find out what its name means. This may seem simple enough until one realises that Wabi Sabi is a philosophical notion referring to the aspect of the [aesthetic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetic) in Japanese culture arising from the acceptance of [transience](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/transience). Much of this book is written in haiku and so working with meaning invites inferential rather than literal reading. Asian texts give students another dimension in their reading and learning; they are highly engaging and through their representation of difference provide opportunities for innovation and creativity.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

Fiona was easily able to place herself on the standards continuum as a Lead teacher, a standard that was readily, enthusiastically and independently confirmed by the cluster principal interviewed. Evidence of her achievement of this standard is clearly and easily available through the structures that she has set up for the school to implement Asia literacy programs. She has also involved the school actively in the Learning by Design project <http://newlearningonline.com/learning-by-design/> which requires detailed documentation of the work done in teaching units and support teachers in providing this. Their work is subsequently published on the cglearner website <http://cglearner.com/>, giving the teachers strong affirmation of their professionalism.

**2.2 Lead initiatives that utilise comprehensive content knowledge to improve the selection and sequencing of content into coherently organised learning and teaching programs.**

**Attributes of a lead teacher using Asia Literacy to achieve Descriptor 2.2**

Fiona has a good sense of the overview of the schools’ curricula and how the primary schools prepare for work in the secondary school. She helps teachers find opportunities to include studies of Asia in their own subject area and is a strong supporter of and participant in team planning. She is realistic about what can be achieved, believing that a program in a school needs to have more than one goal to have traction as otherwise there is too much for teachers to do.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

The Asia literacy program was introduced initially to connect the work students do in Japanese lessons with that of the regular classroom. The study of a foreign language is compulsory in the ACT up to Year 8 and the three schools in the cluster all study Japanese. There were issues with disengagement in the primary schools as they have only one lesson a week and there was a sense that the learning was too fragmented. In the high school the foreign language did not hold the same status for the students as the core subjects The Asia literacy program has been successful in connecting the work students do in Japanese lessons with that of the broader curriculum.

**Supporting collaboration**

The Asia literacy program is developed through team planning, doing action research and sharing. A policy was introduced that each year at some time and in some area of the curriculum, students do a unit of work that has studies of Asia embedded in it. Asia literacy fits where it is most appropriate where people are keen, and can see a productive connection with their work in their own content area. For example students were trained in co-operative reading, a research-based reading strategy (<http://www.myread.org/guide_cooperative.htm>) through texts relating to Asian studies. In this way the schools were training teachers in delivering one of the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities at the same time as improving student outcomes. Similarly, in Japanese, students were developing their literacy skills through the study of information texts, so tying Asian studies directly with the schools’ literacy programs.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

So the issue of meeting the descriptor of “coherently organised learning and teaching programs” becomes and interesting one for teachers wanting to meet the standard through studies of Asia. As a cross curriculum priority, one needs to be opportunistic. Teachers in this school cluster find places in the curriculum where Asia is relevant and exploit an open-endedness that allows a teacher to fit the study anywhere. While this may seem a bit scattergun, studies of Asia presents a series of rich learning events which are coherent in themselves but not sequenced as a teaching program. However, studies of Asia are evident in subject scope and sequences and they reflect the increasingly demanding conceptualisation by students as they move up the school.

In her schools Asia literacy is used in areas of values education and to improve student literacy generally and to raise the intellectual quality of student learning.

She argues that given the nature of cross curriculum priorities, “the selection and sequencing of content into coherently organised learning and teaching programs” is not a feature of the priority itself but that Asia literacy makes an important contribution to the coherence of learning within all subjects, which is essentially its intention having been positioned as a cross curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum.

**2.3 Lead colleagues to develop learning and teaching programs using comprehensive knowledge of curriculum, assessment and reporting requirements.**

**Attributes of a lead teacher using Asia Literacy to achieve Descriptor 2.3**

Fiona has an understanding of curriculum and substantial knowledge of recent developments in teaching and learning. She makes it her business to develop symbiotic relationships with academics whose work is congruent with the needs of the school, they mentor her and the school providing real world feedback to them. This extends her collaborative approach beyond the school to the wider professional community.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

Fiona has used her expert knowledge to lead the staff of these three schools in developing units of work through Learning by Design approaches and frameworks. Together, they have developed the unit development framework <http://newlearningonline.com/learning-by-design/the-placemat/> as a way of summarising a unit to understand its teaching and learning “at a glance”. This has proven to be an effective tool for planning. Its ‘analysing critically’ section requires students to view the knowledge from different perspectives, making an Asia focus an easy fit as it invites students to challenge racial attitudes and stereotypes and to appreciate the diversity of cultures in the world.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

Fiona, as a key member of the School Executive, has worked with principals to develop a whole school and whole cluster approach to assessment for learning and giving feedback to students. Assessment is separated from grades to force students to look at teacher feedback and learn from it.

While there is considerable assessment of studies of Asia, meeting the reporting aspect of the standard can be more difficult as the schools do not report on this aspect of student work. However, they do inform parents of what students are doing through newsletters and through various celebrations of student work and through student portfolios. Fiona admits that the schools could encourage students to include some of the work they had done on Asia into the portfolio but as the choice of items for the portfolios are student choice, it would be difficult to do more than that. Formal reporting in the traditional sense could not be achieved at this stage.

**Standard 6**

**6.1 Use comprehensive knowledge of the National Professional Standards for Teachers to plan and lead the development of professional learning policies and programs that address the professional learning needs of colleagues and pre-service teachers.**

**Attribute**

A critical attribute for any teacher is to be receptive to different approaches to curriculum and learning. Involvement in her professional associations exposes Fiona to multiple ways of addressing educational issues in contexts different to her own schools and indeed beyond her own state. It also keeps her informed about current ideas about teaching.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

Fiona has been planning and leading the development of professional learning policies and programs in her schools using the Quality Teacher framework as reflective tool and Learning by Design for planning and implementing curriculum. She can see how useful these standards would be for planning professional learning and how standards can become a rationale and support for the kind of professional learning they have in the cluster schools.

**6.2 Initiate collaborative relationships to expand professional learning opportunities, engage in research, and provide quality opportunities and placements for pre-service teachers.**

**Attributes**

A willingness for and skills in working collaboratively is a mark of a teaching professional. Fiona sees herself as “working shoulder to shoulder as well as leading”. From this statement, it is clear that Fiona recognises the importance of and encourages collaboration, networks within faculties, within schools and beyond. Her focus on cross-curriculum areas such as values education and Asia literacy has allowed her to move to positions where she can appreciate how a range of subject areas contribute to the education of a student and to the standards of learning in the whole school. Fiona has also been the president of her subject state association and represented her state at the national association. This demonstrates a proactive approach and an ongoing commitment to professional learning, important attributes in a leader.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

The cross curriculum nature of Asia literacy allows for a creative approach in developing opportunities for expanding collaborative and professional learning opportunities for teachers. The newness of this material for many teachers who are experts in their own subject area opens possibilities for initiating new kinds of work practices, partnerships and pedagogies. This can assist an aspiring lead teacher to innovate in areas that cut across established structures and attitudes in a school.

**6.3 Implement professional dialogue within the school or professional learning network(s) that is informed by feedback, analysis of current research and practice to improve the educational outcomes of students.**

**Attributes**

A lead teacher approaches her work through an understanding of educational practice and a desire to be a learner as much as to be a teacher and a leader. Fiona’s advocacy and support of action research projects within the school and within the cluster develops these attitudes in the teachers she leads. By encouraging teachers to present their findings to each other and to teachers outside the cluster she promotes teachers’ professionalism and their professional dignity.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

Combined professional learning for the cluster occurs through one full day per year and three after school meetings. Teachers are getting together four times a year. Professional dialogue and professional learning also happens when two or more teachers come together to design a unit of work. When there is only one teacher in a department, Fiona mentors the teacher to ensure dialogue and feedback. This kind of professional learning can be more powerful than courses.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

A key element of professional dialogue in Fiona’s schools is action research, a policy she initiated and continually nurtures. She is a keen advocate for action research seeing it as deliberate in building reflective capacity about practice. It directs teachers to becoming designers of learning that is going to achieve particular outcomes rather than simply creating activities for students in to tick off parts of a content area. As Fiona says, “if you are not impacting on student learning as your research indicates, then you need to rethink the design of your learning.” Action research develops an inquiring stance, contains rich assessment and invites teachers to provide evidence through intensive documentation. Teachers’ professionalism is enhanced through collaboration, sharing their work and documenting it at a high level.

Fiona says that her schools are becoming increasingly data focussed. “The data is diagnostic not something that just creates numbers or assigns reading ages; [it is] qualitative data” For example teachers conduct surveys about confidence and attitude; literacy is mapped against the *First Steps* reading map, a continuum of reading and writing which is a powerful tool for secondary as well as primary teachers. Through this program, students are engaged in writing and demonstrate at the end of its six weeks more indicators of outcomes than previously.

In 2010, there was a focus in the school on Asia literacy. About a hundred teachers presented their action research and each teacher would hear three or four presentations from others – about ten of these presenting on studies of Asia. For example teachers in the Food technology area collected data to see students start and end points in a unit about Asian food. Students were given a check-list of foods and were asked if they had/had not tasted and whether they liked/ did not like the item. In many instances, the teachers were surprised to learn how limited was student exposure to different foods. With this simple device, by the end of the unit it was clear how far the students had travelled in opening up to new experiences.

In the cluster schools there is also a 5-8 conference group. Year 7 teachers after listening to the primary teachers said that they needed to lift the difficulty of the work they are giving to the students as the work in the primary school was more sophisticated in some areas. This kind of dialogue stimulates discussion and drives standards up by raising expectations of students.

**6.4 Advocate, participate in and lead strategies to support high-quality professional learning opportunities for colleagues that focus on improved student learning.**

**Attributes**

Another important quality in a leader is to have a deep understanding of teachers’ circumstances, their constraints and opportunities, and the enterprise to overcome the former and enable the latter.

**Supporting teachers professionally**

In Fiona’s case, this has been evidenced through her successful planning and development of grant applications to support teachers in undertaking curriculum initiatives and the professional learning associated with them.

While Fiona does some coaching in classrooms and some modelling, she needs to be very selective in these practices. For example one teacher in the first three months of his placement could not let go of teacher centred pedagogy. An executive teacher, after failing to change teacher centred practice, asked her to model cooperative learning. What was powerful here was that as Fiona modelled co-operative learning, the executive teacher would be quietly explaining to the young teacher the techniques she was using.

So convinced was the young teacher that this was worth exploring further that he did his action research on co-operative learning and proved it to be very effective for student learning. Fiona also models for the new Japanese teachers who are from Japan and who need support in smoothing out some of the cultural differences between their traditional teaching styles and those expected and preferred by the students who are used to more agency in the classroom.

Mostly however, Fiona needs to focus on a bigger picture. She does a lot of collaborative planning with teachers to articulate what is quality teaching and works with them to design activities that elaborate or exemplify that. She works in helping them realise whole-school goals.

**What the standard means for a lead teacher approaching it through Asia literacy**

Once again, the cross curriculum nature of Asia literacy offers prospects to aspiring lead teachers to develop professional learning programs for colleagues in their school or through other kinds of networks and associations.