

Pandora Petrovska

Why Aboriginal languages should be taught

"Before we started I had absolutely no idea that our language even existed." – VCE Indigenous Reclamation Language Student



There is something profoundly sad about a young person being oblivious to their own history. Knowledge about oneself and one's heritage is fundamental to our sense of self, and understanding of the world. Language is an enduring marker of identity and culture, and this story shows how individuals strive to overcome the deep wounding of past policy affecting self, to this day.

It was the summer of 2005 when I first met Wotjobaluk woman Jennifer Beer from the Wimmera, as she stood in the doorway of my office. It was hot and she had travelled from Horsham to Melbourne to meet with somebody who could help her realise her dream: the teaching of her language, Wergaia.

Jennifer Beer is one of those remarkable characters you are truly fortunate to meet in a lifetime; a person whose vision inspires many to do things they never imagined were possible, like asking for the basic rights we take for granted. For Jennifer, this meant teaching a Victorian Aboriginal language that is no longer spoken as a primary means of communication.

It is a well-known fact that after the establishment

of government and church missions, where Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their language, or practise their culture, the transmission of Victorian Aboriginal languages ceased. This, and the threat of having their children removed, was an effective mechanism to achieve a situation where these languages simply faded.

We had a country centre at Horsham, so delivering an Indigenous language was possible. But this experience was very different from the many established languages we taught.

Jennifer Beer had come to the right place: the Victorian School of Languages, a specialist government language school teaching 45 languages in over 40 schools in Melbourne and country Victoria, as well as a distance education section teaching nine languages to all school sectors. With broad VCE provision, many thousands of students around the state, and

recent delivery of Yorta Yorta in partnership with Northland Secondary College, we were well placed to assist.

We had a country centre at Horsham, so delivering an Indigenous language was possible. But this experience was very different from the many established languages we taught. There were no dictionaries or grammar books. Even when we undertake the teaching of refugee languages, like Dinka and Somali, materials have often been developed internationally, and may be adapted for the Australian classroom. This required a partnerships and collaboration with many to become a reality.

Permission to undertake the reclamation and revival of Wergaia was given by the community in the Wimmera, and after consultation with the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG) and the Land Council, the community received funding from the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages (VACL) to develop a Wergaia word list. Monash University linguist, Dr Julie Reid, developed the Wergaia Community Grammar and Dictionary in 2007.

For the first time, Wergaia was taught at VCE level to students in Horsham and Ballarat using



**IVANHOE
PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING**

FRIDAY 31 JULY

Phonics and Spelling in the Early Years

David Hornsby

PREP TO YEAR 2 TEACHERS

WEDNESDAY 12 AUGUST

Three Dimensions in a Day – Part 2: Measurement, Chance & Data and Working Mathematically

Rob Vingerhoets

(can be attended as a stand-alone seminar)

PREP TO YEAR 6 TEACHERS

Term 3 & 4 Program

Ivanhoe Grammar School is committed to building academic professional knowledge through the delivery of high quality seminars and workshops presented by internal and external speakers.

THURSDAY 20 AUGUST

Project-Based Learning in the Middle Years of Schooling

Darryn Kruse

YEARS 3 TO 9 TEACHERS

THURSDAY 27 AUGUST

Comprehension and Strategies for Fiction

Deb Sukarna

YEARS 3 TO 9 TEACHERS

TUESDAY 1 SEPTEMBER

Assessment for Learning in the Inquiring Classroom

Kath Murdoch

PREP TO YEAR 6 TEACHERS

FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER

Ensuring an Effective and Strong Final Term in Maths

Rob Vingerhoets

PREP TO YEAR 6 TEACHERS

THURSDAY 15 OCTOBER

Mathematics – Teaching and Learning the Four Operations in Number

Michael Ymer

PREP TO YEAR 6 TEACHERS

Where: Darebin Arts & Entertainment Centre
(Cnr Bell Street & St Georges Road, Preston)
Time: 9:30am – 3:30pm (Registration from 9:00am)
Cost: \$185 (inc. GST). Cost includes morning tea, lunch & hand-outs

For registration forms and enquiries, please contact Paula Welham on:

Telephone: 9490 1877 • Mobile: 0488 110 000 • Email: mail@ivanhoepl.com • Book online: www.ivanhoepl.com

our video conferencing facility in Thornbury. Linguist Dr Julie Reid conducted weekly two-hour classes, and regular one-day workshops in Ballarat in accordance with the VCE Study Design for Indigenous Languages of Victoria: Revival and Reclamation, which was specifically designed to teach the fundamentals of language reclamation.

The starting point for the linguist, and the class, was the sketch grammar written by Hercus (1986) based on 1960s audio recordings of individuals speaking Wergaia. Unbeknownst to her, these audio recordings had captured the voice of one of Jennifer's own relatives. "I remember growing up hearing Uncle Walter and others speak language as a small child, but I did not know he had been recorded," she told me. "When I heard his voice on the tapes, I had a deep sense of pride."

Seeing these VCE Indigenous Language Reclamation students successfully complete their studies and receive validation from Minister for Education Bronwyn Pike, at our VCE Top Scorers Function was brilliant. The joy for me will be seeing what they do with this knowledge in the future and the language classes they will teach. On reflection, as I write this, I understand why I came to spend so many years with this language school.

Pandora Petrovska is assistant principal of the Victorian School of Languages (VSL). She leads curriculum and training for over 700 language teachers employed by the VSL statewide and has been instrumental in the implementation of VELS electronic reporting and many other projects at the VSL, which are shared across all government schools.



 **Tell us what you think.**
Email editor@edumail.vic.gov.au

Contact CRT's Directly. Online 24/7.
Simple to Use • No Ongoing Fees • No Contracts

 **Emergencyteachers.com.au**

Get Connected. Online. Everytime.

- ✓ Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary & Secondary
- ✓ Tertiary
- ✓ TAFE
- ✓ Language Centres
- ✓ Childcare Centres

Australia Wide Service
Casual Relief Teacher & Childcare Staff Referral Service
Emergency Teachers Australia Pty Ltd. Suite 299/18 Cotham Road Kew 3101

camp
Coolamatong



Equipping *Nurturing* *Inspiring*

www.campcoolamatong.com
School Camping Specialists