

The importance of student perspectives in evaluating Asia literacy in Australia

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Asia literacy is a term frequently used to signify Australian students' ability to engage with Asia, and is currently described by the Australian national curriculum as 'provid[ing] students with the skills to communicate and engage with the peoples of Asia so they can effectively live, work and learn in the region'.

Since its incorporation into the national curriculum as one of three cross-curriculum priorities in 2013, reflecting an intention to blend teaching about Asia into all subjects, Asia literacy has been the focus of hundreds of studies aiming to understand its effectiveness and impacts. However, despite the classroom being the key place where Asia literacy is negotiated between students, teachers, and the curriculum, a review of 800 studies on Asia literacy by scholars Christine Halse and Rebecca Cairns' published between 1993-2018 found that most research has focused on Asia literacy's place in curricula rather than its actual execution in schools. Furthermore, while some research has analysed how teachers implement Asia literacy, and more recently a smaller body of studies has focused on student learning about Asia, there has been a persistent absence of research focused on how students actually engage with Asia literacy.

Considering this, the present study argues for a more productive discussion about the ongoing role of Asia literacy in Australia's education system that centralises student experiences and outcomes. Answers to two key questions have remained

elusive despite the large amount of academic focus placed on Asia literacy. First, how can we better understand the way students themselves learn about Asia whilst in school? And second, how should the success of Asia literacy be measured?

The little research that has solicited input from students to answer these questions suggests that Asia literacy has had limited success. A 2021 study by scholar Gary Bonar found that between 2002-2015, 'students [did] not perceive any difference in the amount or quality of Asia-related curriculum within their daily school lives'. Bonar's findings point to the need for more studies that include student perspectives when evaluating the effectiveness of Asia literacy. In order to contribute meaningfully to this gap, the analysis that follows is supplemented by an exploratory dataset of three focus groups conducted with 15 young adults in Perth, Western Australia in 2021 who graduated from Western Australian high schools between 2016-2018. This dataset, albeit modest in size, provides a degree of insight into how Asia literacy is understood by young Australians. Of course, substantive claims about the success or failure of the Asia literacy project cannot be drawn from such a small sample size. What can be emphasised, however, is the need to better blend research about Asia literacy curricula with the experiences of those most affected by it. Only by doing this can we begin to probe the complex question of whether Asia literacy has achieved its central goals.

Asia literacy: money talks

If one end of the spectrum of Asia literacy research is populated by the (relatively small) body of work on student and teacher engagement, the other is mostly research focusing on the curriculum and its theoretical underpinnings. Work in the latter realm has identified two central problems with the Asia literacy program. The first is that the motive of the program is largely economic. This critique is closely related to the fact that the Asia literacy curriculum in its current form was co-developed alongside the government's *Australia in the Asian Century* 2012 White Paper, which historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki has noted helped to perpetuate an image

of Asia as a one-dimensional market for Australia to penetrate, characterised by words such as ‘growth, consumers, and middle-class [which] run like a mantra throughout’. Within this discourse, Asia literacy was envisioned as a program preparing young Australians to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the ‘Asian century’, a term used by the White Paper to argue that the 21st Century would be defined by Asia’s rapid economic growth.

The second major critique of Asia literacy is aimed at its framing of Asia as a region that is situated firmly outside of Australia. This critique is grounded in a much longer history, drawing from processes of Australian national identity formation in which tension between Australia’s colonised European heritage and proximity to Asia has defined the cultural and political landscape. Some scholars have argued that Asia literacy glosses over the experiences and contributions of Asian-Australians in favour of presenting Asia as something ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered by Australian students.

With these two critiques in mind, it can be useful to view the Asia literacy program as influenced by views that Asia is either a ‘threat’ to Australia (e.g., Asian invasion of Australia, asylum seekers, or terrorism), or an ‘opportunity’ generally in the form of economic benefits. These representations combine to form what has been termed ‘Australia’s Asia’ by historians David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska: the ways in which Asia is imagined in a specifically Australian context. Within this binary, Asia literacy exists both as a ‘highly problematic’ way of knowing Asia in a definitive sense, and as ‘a utilitarian, economic rationale designed to serve the national interest’.

Applying this theoretical lens in the context of Asia literacy curricula begs a question: can young Australians’ perceptions of Asia and their interactions with the curriculum be similarly analysed, and how does this help us evaluate the ongoing relevance of the program? Of course, this question can only be answered with input from young Australians themselves.

Fighting the fear of Asia

The most apparent trend across the focus groups conducted as part of this study was participants' tendency to shun negative representations of Asia. When doing so, however, participants often did not transcend the threat/opportunity binary, instead responding with calls for Australia to embrace Asia's opportunities (be these tourism, economic growth, or popular culture). Part of this divide is undoubtedly generational, as identified by scholar Craig Norris, who found that spectacular economic performance is central to younger Australians' perceptions of Asia, whilst older generations still view Asia through the lenses of war and communism.

Reflecting this shift one participant, *Donald, noted that he did not learn about Asia's economic success at school, which he implied to be positive knowledge about Asia: 'Until university, I did nothing on the growth of Asia [...] it was always about the history and the negative associations with it.'

Most participants in these focus groups shared Donald's view that the curriculum only presented Asia in negative contexts, focusing on things such as 'wars and atomic bombings' (*Khloey), or superfluous knowledge like 'endangered species' (*Janis), which was seen as 'not really preparing you for any Asian [engagement]... you're not going to go to Japan and be like 'what endangered species do you have?'' (Janis). What is evident from Donald's comments, however, is that when offering alternatives to a negative or threat-based narrative of Asia, these participants often 'swung' from one side of the binary to the other, away from a negative history-focused narrative and towards one that 'sells' Asia as a land of 'untold riches'. While this does suggest that there is an appetite among young Australians for a more positive mode of learning about Asia, it also highlights the enduring persistence of this binary as a particularly Australian way of imagining its region.

The divergence between curricular representations of Asia and participants' views on what they had learnt in school was a recurring theme throughout these focus groups. One area of particular attention among participants was on the tendency for

their own schooling to homogenise Asia into a single entity, despite the curriculum encouraging teachers to treat Asia as a diverse region:

**Steve: This [the high school curriculum...] highlights the differences between Asian countries .. and [...] you don't ever talk about that [in school].*

*[*Khloey nods head in agreement]*

Steve: They're just kind of all homogenised into one group, and it's like-

**Goon: 'Asians' [makes air quotes]*

Steve: (laughs) 'Asians' [makes air quotes]

By drawing attention to the widespread use of 'Asians' as a homogenising term, these participants (some of whom were Asian-Australians) challenge the problematic orientalist tendency for Asia to be cast as Australia's homogenous 'other', and speak to well-known Indonesian writer Ariel Heryanto's critique of Asia literacy's framing of Asia as an entity existing outside of Australia waiting to be discovered and interpreted. A similar sentiment was expressed by Janis, an Asian-Australian participant, who felt that Asia literacy failed to 'incorporate such a large portion of the Australian population that is Asian into education... [so that they can see] representations of where they're from or their history'. These critiques reaffirm the participants' desire for more inclusive Asia education that reflects the diversity they encounter in other aspects of their lives.

Lost in translation

A significant divide still exists between terms used in the curriculum itself to describe Asia-related learning and how young Australians vocalise their knowledge about Asia. There was virtually no overlap between the formal language of the curriculum and the colloquial understandings of such terms among participants. As a case in point, no participants in these focus groups had previously heard of the term Asia literacy. They also took issue with the phrase Asian Century, which many felt was deployed in a negative context in a video produced by the Asia Education

Foundation. Again, none of the participants in this focus group had previously encountered this term, and a question from me prompted these comments:

Moderator: 'So, what about that term Asian century?'

**Jen: 'Did he [a school principal in the video shown to participants] say century?'*

Moderator: 'Asian century, yes'

**Julia: 'It felt a little fear mongering the way he said it.'*

**Janis: [mocking tone] 'Asian century'*

**James: 'It was almost like 'well, they're coming for us'*

Julia: 'It didn't sound like because we're actually in Asia we need to engage with Asia, which is the main thing, they're like 'oh well they've taken over so we may as well learn now. That's what it sounded like to me, rather than 'I care about Asia'

In this conversation, *Julia frames the video's encouragement of Asia literacy upskilling as less of an economic or cultural rationale and more as one based on survival in a world that has been 'taken over' by Asia, directly addressing the persistent imagined fear of Australia being 'swamped' by Asians and Muslims, to borrow One Nation Senator Pauline Hanson's infamous use of the term in 1996. Furthermore, Julia implies that the drive for Asia literacy should instead be coming from a realisation that 'because we're actually in Asia we need to engage with Asia', a comment that asserts her own cosmopolitanism whilst simultaneously criticising its perceived absence in some Asia literacy content.

Both Julia's comments and Goon's mocking of the othering language to describe Asia in the curriculum suggest growing exasperation among younger Australians with parochial ideas of Australian nationhood that exclude others, whilst also displaying their preference for more positive modes of imagining Asia and highlighting the extent to which they feel these were absent from their own schooling.

Participants continued to challenge the notion of Asia posing a threat to Australia in their comments regarding an anecdote shared by Julia of a speech by her school's principal that directly confronted the 'fear of Asia' rhetoric:

Donald: We [Donald and Julia] had a relatively conservative principal, and I can't really remember ever doing much [Harmony Day-like activities].

Julia: No [agreeing]. The one thing I remember that he did was this massive speech at my younger sibling's graduation about the fear of Asia, it was really messed up. He talked about how his generation had World War II then it was Vietnam and how our biggest threat now is Asia, [..] And it was just really freaky and then he was like 'good luck with uni, goodbye'.

Donald: I think that really impacts how the teaching staff perceive that and how the kids do.

Julia: Yes.

The principal's comments, as represented by Donald and Julia, trace the presence of Asia as a threat in the Australian imaginary from World War II through to the present, and highlight how despite the political, social, and economic evolution of Australia's relationship with Asia over this time, presentations of the region as a threat to colonised Australia have never fundamentally changed. Influential academic Edward Said's idea of 'flexible positional superiority'; which refers to the ways in which the West (in this case Australia) positions itself vis-à-vis the Orient without ever losing the relative upper hand, is relevant in this context as a reflection of the idea that Asia has been constructed as a threat in the Australian imaginary in various ways over time. Despite this clear persistence of fear-based rhetoric in the Australian imaginary of Asia, however, Julia's obvious discomfort with this narrative and her memory of this specific event serves as another indication of participants' attempts to 'swing' away from negative representations of Asia towards more positive ones.

Measured success: The future of Asia literacy

With these findings from the interview data in mind, we can now direct our attention back to the Asia literacy curriculum itself. This study argues that student

perspectives must be included when evaluating the Asia literacy curriculum, and the findings outlined here offer some modest suggestions on how this could be achieved.

First, it is important to note that whilst scholars have devoted plenty of worthwhile attention to arguing what Australia's Asia curriculum *should* adopt as its central goals, Asia literacy in a historical sense must be assessed in the first instance on what it has *aimed to do*. In this regard, most scholars would likely conclude that the priority of Asia literacy, implicit or explicit, has always been to enhance young Australians' interest in economic engagement with Asia. Rather than being aspirational, however, the data presented here suggest that it is worth investigating whether this goal has already been met.

Participants in these focus groups expressed discomfort with negative representations of Asia, and aimed to replace these with ones that highlight both Asia's economic value and the benefits of close engagement between Australia and Asia. While it is unclear how much, if any, of this shift in sentiment can be *directly* attributed to the curriculum, especially given that participants felt many of the representations within the curriculum itself cast Asia in a negative light, economic engagement with Asia was clearly viewed as positive in these focus groups. This highlights a need to better incorporate the ways in which young Australians already negotiate their relationships with Asia when critically evaluating the goals of the Asia literacy curriculum.

Using Walker and Sobocinska's threat/opportunity theory to analyse young Australians' perceptions of Asia literacy suggests that the curriculum may be 'preaching to the choir' when it comes to preparing students for economic engagement with Asia. This poses a subsequent more interesting question: if the goal of Asia literacy has ultimately been to shift student perceptions towards a receptive, economically oriented mode of thinking about Asia, and if young Australians are indeed showing signs of embracing this mode of thinking, then is Asia literacy in its current form still entirely necessary?

Of course, this question is too broad to answer within the remit of this study and based on the data presented here. It is worth asking, however, as Australia's relationship with Asia rapidly evolves. The participants interviewed as part of this study graduated between 2016-2018. Between then and 2023, the Asian region has endured a pandemic, the presidency of Donald Trump in the US, more frequent North Korean missile tests, and increasing Chinese maritime assertiveness among other complex challenges. In line with these developments, the Australia-China relationship has rapidly soured: when these participants graduated, Australia still viewed China as an important economic partner and potential friend. These perceptions have since been replaced with calls for trade diversification and security enhancement backed by a return to traditional allies. Meanwhile, relationships with India, South Korea, Indonesia, and others are being redefined, in part by the challenges posed by China.

These major shifts may have precipitated further change in how young Australians locate themselves within the threat/opportunity binary. Regardless of where they fall, however, three things are now clearer than ever: first, there has never been one 'Asia' with which Australia has engaged. Second, this engagement has rarely, if ever, been purely economic, and third, Australia's relationship with Asia is far more complex than the rigid boundaries of 'threats' and 'opportunities' suggest.

This study thus concludes by pointing to the need for future studies that further interrogate Asia literacy. A deceptively simple question remains unanswered in this regard: how is the success of Asia literacy understood and evaluated? Only by meaningfully attempting to answer this question, with engagement from policymakers, teachers, and students, can the ongoing relevancy of Asia literacy in preparing Australian students for engagement with their dynamic region be fully understood. Without such interrogation, it is likely that Australia's Asia curriculum will remain beholden to the overly simplistic threat/opportunity binary that remains dominant in the Australian imaginary of Asia. That would do both the Australian curriculum and the students it aims to educate an abject disservice.

**Interviewees' names are pseudonyms.*

Image: New Colombo Plan students in Jakarta. Credit: Australian Embassy/Flickr.