



Artwork designs by Reuben Brown – aged 8

Beyond the Bush: Little Learners' BIG Connections Symposium Program Friday 15 May 2026

Aim of the Symposium

Beyond the Bush: Little Learners' BIG Connections is a full-day professional learning experience designed to deepen understanding of Country and its cultural significance. The symposium supports early childhood educators and community workers to explore Aboriginal ways of teaching and learning and embed them meaningfully in learning environments.

Participants will gain insights into cultural protocols, respectful practices, and practical strategies for connecting children and families to Country – even when direct access isn't possible. Through interactive sessions, best-practice examples, and hands-on workshops, attendees will learn how to create culturally safe spaces, develop inclusive pedagogies, and foster strong community connections. The day concludes with collaborative reflection, enabling participants to consolidate learning, share insights, and plan actionable steps for future practice.

Event Details

- Date:** Friday, 15 May 2026
- Arrival:** 8:00 am for an 8:30 am start
- Finish:** Between 4:20 pm and 5:00 pm
- Venue:** Wollongong Conservatorium of Music
(on the grounds of Wollongong Botanic Garden)
- Entrance:** Murphys Avenue, Keiraville NSW 2500
- Wet Weather:** Sessions will move indoors in The Con Building if required
- Registration:** Broccoli Tree — follow signage; please be seated by 8:30 am





Symposium Delivery

During the symposium, participants will learn through a mixture of seminars and workshops. Seminars will be delivered by Aboriginal presenters who will set the scene for the upcoming workshops. Seminars will give participants knowledge and insight into Aboriginal culture, protocols and connection. Workshops will be delivered by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal presenters and will allow participants to engage in hands on learning and activities.

This symposium is structured around **four key parts**, each designed to deepen participants' relationship with Country through listening, learning, doing, and reflecting. The flow of the day mirrors Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing, beginning with grounding and guidance from Aboriginal knowledge holders, moving into applied learning, and concluding with collective reflection.

PART 1 - Listening

How do we listen to Country? (*Listening*)

Participants are invited to slow down, connect with place, and listen to Country. A Welcome to Country and Smoking ceremony will assist participants in grounding themselves, and set the tone for learning that is respectful, relational, and Country-centred.

PART 2 - Learning

How do we learn from Country? (*Learning / Understanding*).

Aboriginal presenters guide participants through key concepts, protocols, and perspectives to support culturally safe and meaningful practice. These sessions prioritise understanding before action - ensuring that doing emerges from culturally grounded learning.

PART 3 - Doing

How do we share these learnings & practices? (*Sharing / Doing / Practising*)

Participants will rotate through a series of workshops that demonstrate how to put cultural learning into practice - using local environments, mapping resources, exploring natural materials, and embedding cultural perspectives in everyday experiences with children. These workshops prioritise doing, practising, and experimenting in ways that are guided by the learning established in Parts 1 and 2.

PART 4 - Reflecting

What will you take away from today? (*Reflecting*)

The day concludes with a collaborative reflection session. Participants come together to share insights, discuss what they have learned, and identify practical steps for bringing these understandings into their work with children, families, and community. This final session reinforces that learning from Country is ongoing, relational, and strengthened through shared reflection.



Symposium Program

8.00am – 8.30am

ARRIVAL & REGISTRATION

Meet at Broccoli Tree and follow signage to designated area.
Please be seated by 8:30 am.

PART 1 - LISTENING

How do we listen to Country?

8.30am – 9.00am

WELCOME TO COUNTRY

Uncle Richard Davis

RESPECT FOR COUNTRY CEREMONY with reference to smoke in the movement/pattern

Peter Hewitt (Jerrinja-Yuin) - Lecturer (University of Wollongong)

9.00am – 9.30am

WHAT IS COUNTRY? The Big C & Little C

Maiquilla Brown (Manager, Indigenous Advancement, UOW)

This session will focus on foundational knowledge needed to participate in the symposium seminars and workshops. It will focus on the concept of Country from an Aboriginal perspective, in contrast with Western views of Country.

9.30am – 10.00am

MORNING TEA

Refreshments provided.

PART 2 - LEARNING

How do we learn from Country?

10.00am – 10.15am

INTRO: COUNTRY-CENTRED LEARNING: COUNTRY AS TEACHER

Charlie Ashby (Cultural Lead Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child & Family Centre)

Explore what it truly means to connect with Country and embed cultural ways of teaching and learning in early childhood environments.

**Programming note: participants will rotate between streams and will listen to one presenter from each stream (2 x workshops in total).*



10.20am – 11.00am

STREAM 1: COUNTRY-CENTERED LEARNING

Charlie Ashby (Cultural Lead Cullunghutti)

This session will share Aboriginal worldviews, protocols and practices for learning using the idea of 'Country as Teacher'. Participants will be lead through grounding, as presenters share practical and theoretical insights on connecting with, listening to and learning from Country. Presenters will cover ideologies such as respect, responsibility, and protocols for being on Country and bringing Country into the learning environment. Learn how to walk respectfully in two worlds, navigate cultural protocols, and develop pedagogies that honor Aboriginal knowledge while fostering inclusive, respectful practice.

10.20am – 11.00am

STREAM 1: COUNTRY-CENTERED LEARNING

Anthony McKnight (Curriculum Transformation Lead, Indigenous strategy unit, Woolyungah UOW)

How do we bring Country into the classroom is a question that is often asked by educators. This session will help educators to gain further insight on how we can work with Country as a pedagogy with respect when teaching inside and outside of the classroom. We will invite, model and engage the audience to participate within these pedagogies to experience the learning from Country. Then as a community of learners, we will yarn about how we can bring these experiences into the classroom.

11.05am – 11.45am

STREAM 2: ENGAGING & CONNECTING IN COMMUNITY

Catherine Moyle (Interim Vice President Indigenous Strategy & Engagement -Woolyungah UOW)

This session explores practical ways early childhood services can build respectful and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal Community. Participants will learn how to approach community connections with cultural sensitivity, understand protocols for engagement, and discover strategies for creating partnerships that support children's learning on Country.

11.05am – 11.45am

STREAM 2: ENGAGING & CONNECTING IN COMMUNITY

Julie Street Smith (Aboriginal Cultural Inclusion Officer Wollongong City Council & Northern Illawarra AECG President)

This session supports educators to strengthen respectful and meaningful relationships with Aboriginal communities. Together, we will explore culturally sensitive ways to connect with local community members, learn about the appropriate protocols for engagement, and develop practical strategies for building partnerships that enrich children's learning and experiences on Country.



11.45am – 12.45pm

LUNCH

Enjoy a break and happy networking.

PART 3 - DOING

How do we share these learnings & practices?

12.45pm – 1.00pm

INTRO: CONNECTING WITH COUNTRY: EMBEDDING CULTURAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Sam Crosby (Wollongong City Council Botanic Garden, Education & Outreach Specialist)

This intro will be delivered in partnership between Sam and Dale and explore the duality of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on developing and implementing Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing.

Growth requires curiosity and courage to engage with new things, look from different perspectives and, sometimes, to be uncomfortable. These are the same attributes we strive to encourage in our little learners. Teaching from a place of respect for Country and culture provides this basis for learning and cultural safety.

Programming note: participants will rotate between sessions and will participate in each workshop (4 x workshops in total). An in-depth overview of each workshop is included in the **“Workshop details” section of the program below.*

1.00pm – 2.30pm

WORKSHOP SESSIONS – Rotation 1 & 2

Hands-on sessions to translate theory into practice.

2.30pm – 2.45pm

AFTERNOON TEA

Refreshments provided.

2.45pm – 4.15pm

WORKSHOP SESSIONS – Rotation 3 & 4

Continued practical workshops.



PART 3 - REFLECTING

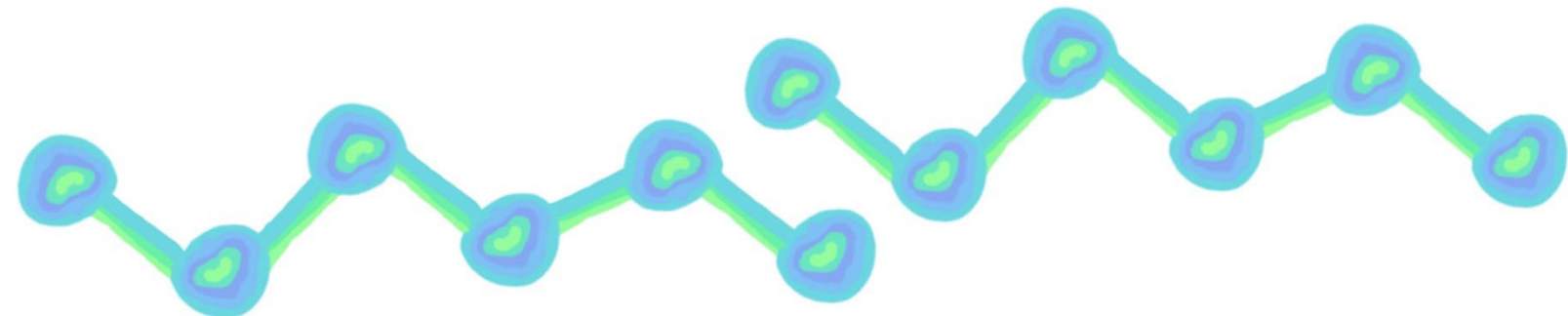
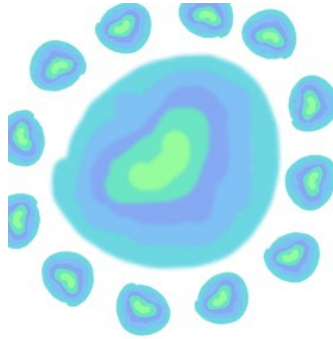
What will you take away from today?

4.20pm – 5.00pm

WRAP UP & REFLECTION:

Catherine Moyle

The day concludes with a collaborative reflection session, encouraging participants to share insights and plan next steps for embedding cultural connections in their practice.





Workshop Details

Participants will engage in practical sessions designed to translate theory into practice. These workshops will:

- Map local sites and resources within the Botanic Gardens.
- Explore strategies for connecting children to their environment in culturally safe ways, even when direct access to Country isn't possible.
- Share practical ideas for turning everyday observations into cultural learning opportunities.
- Include demonstrations from local centers practicing best approaches, such as bush and beach kindy programs.

Workshop #1	Keeping it Simple – Practical Cultural Connections
Presenters:	Charlie Ashby & Jacinta McMahon Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child & Family Centre
Focus:	Everyday strategies for embedding cultural respect; practical ideas to connect children to Country.
Learning Outcome:	Identify simple, practical ways to integrate cultural perspectives in learning.

Workshop #2	Best Practice in Action
Focus:	Practical strategies for connecting children to Country in early childhood settings. This session will showcase how services achieve meaningful cultural connections regardless of whether they have access to bush or beach kindy programs.
Learning Outcome	Participants will explore real-world examples from early childhood centers and develop practical ideas for embedding respect for Country into everyday practice, adaptable to any setting.
Presenter: x 2 sessions	Amber Tierney & Jerry Bailey Early Education & Care Service



<p>Abstract:</p>	<p>This session shares the practical journey of embedding regular, meaningful community-based experiences. We will reflect on how our service got started, the values and conversations that shaped our approach, and the small, achievable steps that supported sustainable implementation.</p> <p>Participants will hear how building genuine relationships with local community members, organisations and Country has enriched children's learning, strengthened our sense of belonging, and supported our service's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). We will explore how these connections grew over time, the challenges and learnings along the way, and how community engagement has become an authentic part of everyday practice.</p> <p>This session is designed for educators seeking practical ideas, real examples and encouragement to deepen community connections in ways that are respectful, responsive and embedded in their local context.</p>
<p>Presenter: x 2 sessions</p>	<p>Naomi Gates, Kiama Pre-school</p>
<p>Abstract</p>	<p>Naomi Gates has dedicated the past 22 years to Kiama Preschool, building deep local knowledge that she shares with children, families, and the wider community. Her journey began by exploring the street signs surrounding the preschool and within the local area, learning the Dharawal meanings behind the place names and their connection to Country. She recognises that children often arrive at preschool with more knowledge than they realise, already familiar with Dharawal words through the towns they visit and the streets they live on. By starting with what children already know, she builds meaningful learning experiences that deepen their understanding of Country. Through slow, sensory walks on Country, Naomi and her colleagues create opportunities for children and educators alike to observe, listen to and notice changes in the environment, acknowledging that learning about Country is an ongoing, shared journey.</p> <p>She will demonstrate how Kiama Preschool connects with the local community and uses the surrounding environment as a starting point for learning Dharawal language, cultural protocols, and noticing changes on Country. Naomi will share the process her service has taken to support small groups of children and educators to connect deeply with Country, fostering respect and encouraging children to carry this understanding beyond preschool and into their families and community.</p>



Workshop #3	Hands-On with Natural Materials
Presenters:	Sam Crosby Wollongong City Council, Botanic Garden, Education & Outreach Specialist
Focus:	Active imagination activities for developing ecological connections.
Learning Outcome	Participants will enjoy quick fire activities and games to help develop Connection to Country and engage their imagination towards the more than human world.

Workshop #4	Continuing Practical Exploration
Presenter:	Stephanie Peters
Focus:	Guided sensory engagement with Country through slow observation, creative field-recording, and collective making. This workshop centres on listening to place, deepening relationship with the more-than-human world, and practising respectful, low-impact ways of learning with Country rather than about Country.
Learning Outcome	Participants will develop practical strategies for slowing down, observing, and responding to Country through sensory and creative practices. Educators will leave with ideas for facilitating respectful, place-based experiences with children that foster care, reciprocity, and connection to Country, while honouring cultural protocols and leaving no trace.
Abstract:	<p>This participatory workshop invites attendees to slow down and engage deeply with the living environment through guided sensory observation and collaborative making.</p> <p>Participants will “field-record” the landscape using words, symbols, or marks, before contributing a single found natural object to a shared temporary installation. Through careful attention, gathering, and collective action, the group will create a quiet portrait of place that honours presence, relationship, and care.</p> <p>The final work will be documented and respectfully returned to the environment, leaving no trace.</p>





Presenters

Maiquilla Brown

Maiquilla is a Yuin-Walbunja woman from the South Coast of NSW. She has over 15 years' experience in developing, co-designing and delivering Aboriginal programs with communities across the East Coast of NSW, with a focus on Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions.

She is the Manager of Projects (Indigenous Advancement) at the University of Wollongong, where she leads initiatives that strengthen cultural knowledge, community connection, and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being, and doing. With extensive experience in delivering culturally grounded programs and Maiquilla brings a practical, thoughtful approach to embedding Aboriginal perspectives in learning environments.

Charlie Ashby

Charlie is a Wodi Wodi Djuin from Roseby Park Mission, with family ties to La Perouse, Lightning Ridge, Coonabarabran and Mogo area. He is a proud father to 3 beautiful children. Working in the community sector for over 14 years and sitting on multiple committees, Charlie has had the joy of working at Cullunghutti for the last 8 years coordinating multiple programs.

Charlie now sits as the Cultural Lead in the Boori Milumba Program, supporting children with their Cultural journey while strengthening their Cultural identity, building relationships with Mother and always giving back to Country.

Jacinta McMahon-Stewart

Jacinta is a local Aboriginal woman who is a proud Wodi Wodi, Wandi Wandian, Walbunja woman. Who has family ties all up and down the south coast from the Stewart mob. She is a proud mother to 4 beautiful Boori's (children) Jacinta is an Aboriginal educator working at Cullunghutti for the last nearly 9 years with strong connections to community and extensive experience in early learning. Grounded in cultural knowledge and lived experience, her work at Cullunghutti centers on nurturing and supporting Boori's (children) to grow strong in identity, belonging and connection to Country from the earliest years.

Jacinta works closely with Aboriginal families, community, and educators to strengthen relationships and ensure Aboriginal perspectives are embedded in everyday practice in respectful and meaningful ways. She brings a strengths-based approach that values children as capable, connected learners and supports cultural safety, self-determination, and pride in identity.

At Cullunghutti, Jacinta is guided by Elders, community voice and responsibility to Country. She is committed to creating culturally safe spaces where truth-telling is honored, Aboriginal knowledge is respected, and educators are supported to learn, reflect and grow. Through this work, Jacinta supports strong outcomes for Aboriginal children while nurturing understanding, respect and shared responsibility across the early learning community.

Walking alongside Aboriginal families, community and educators, Jacinta works to ensure Aboriginal perspectives are embedded in everyday practice in meaningful and respectful ways.



Anthony McKnight

Anthony McKnight is an Awabakal, Gumaroi and Yuin Man. Anthony is a father, husband, uncle, son, grandson, brother, cousin, nephew, friend and cultural man. Anthony is currently a lecturer in the School of Education, Faculty of Social Science at the University of Wollongong. Anthony respects Country and values the knowledge that has been taught to him from Country, Elders, and teachers from the community(s). He continuously and respectfully incorporates Yuin ways of knowing and learning with a particular interest of contributing to this area to validate Yuin approaches in academia and schools. Anthony has recently completed a PhD called Singing Up Country in Academia: Teacher education academics and preservice teachers' experience with Yuin Country, in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Wollongong. He holds a Master of Education (HRD) from the University of Sydney and a Bachelor of Education, Health and Physical Education from the University of Wollongong.

Catherine Moyle

Catherine Moyle is a Gamilaroi researcher, teacher, artist and mother. Catherine has extensive experience in the fields of community development and advocacy, and is an active advocate for local community, health and environmental issues, holding positions within a range of First Nations and mainstream groups such as the Wollongong Northern District Aboriginal Community Inc (WNDAC), Healthy Cities Illawarra and the Illawarra Shoalhaven Social Investment Trust. She was the 2022 recipient of the International Women's Day Aunty Mary Davis award.

Catherine currently works as Conscious Community Lead in the Indigenous Strategy Unit at the University of Wollongong, with a focus on facilitating systemic change through strategy, research, curriculum, and business practices.

Julie Street-Smith

Julie Street-Smith is a Minang/Ngadjju Noongar woman who comes from Kalgoorlie WA, descending from the Harris, Woyliberry and Williams families. She has been living in Wollongong for most of her life and has always been involved with the Education of young people. As a Girl Guide leader, a youth and community worker, student support officer, Aboriginal Education Worker or in her roles as the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer for NSW School Services in the Illawarra and Wollongong City Council area.

Julie took up a casual vacancy on the NSW AECG Association Management Committee in August 2017. The primary role of the NSW AECG Inc. is to promote active participation by Aboriginal People in the consultative and decision-making process of education and training related matters. The strong member base is key to the organisation being the peak advisory body regarding Aboriginal Education and Training at both State and Commonwealth levels. Julie has been the President of the Northern Illawarra Local and Upper South Coast Regional Secretary for the past ten years and is very passionate about the education of our children. Julie understands that most people know the 'Why' of Aboriginal Education but very few know the 'How' and is actively trying to change that in her community.

Sam Crosby

Sam Crosby is a social ecologist, nature educator and eco artist who is currently working at the Wollongong Botanic Garden as their Education Specialist. She has over 25 years' experience educating in the outdoors. She is a co-creator of the Early Years Bush Connections training course and has worked with multiple organisations to set up and deliver Bush Kinders,



nature based learning programs and engaging outdoor play spaces. Her favourite bird is a Brush Turkey.

Amber Tierney

Hello, my name is Amber and I work at ECTARC Jerry Bailey Education and Care Service in Shoalhaven Heads. I have been part of the ECTARC family for the past 14 years and feel incredibly fortunate to have spent all that time at Jerry Bailey.

I grew up in Shoalhaven Heads and for the past seven years have lived in Bomaderry with my husband and our four-year-old daughter, Annie. Being part of a strong, connected community has always been important to us, and it is something I value deeply both personally and professionally. Working within the same community I grew up in allows me to build meaningful relationships with children and families and to contribute positively to the place we call home.

Stephanie Peters

Stephanie Peters is a multidisciplinary artist, educator, place maker, and creative producer with a passion for connecting people, place, and nature through art. With a background in visual arts, design, and horticulture, her work explores themes of environment, community, and storytelling.

Stephanie has led art workshops across Australia and internationally, encouraging playful experimentation and meaningful creative engagement with local environments.

Reuben Brown – Artist for Program Logo and Shirts

My story starts way back when I was 4 years old - when I first learnt how to draw and I drew lots of stuff. Whenever I thought of something cool I drew it! Now I'm 8 years old, I love drawing and I never give up no matter what people say. I have 3 cultures - Australian, Aboriginal and Samoan.

Artwork Story:

The Colours represent oceans and waterways and islands, like my cultures and Countries. The big circle (design) is Aboriginal culture, and the little circles are all the little people sitting around learning and bringing their own cultures and happily showing them off. The journey lines are our connections with everyone and everything. What matters most is how much you protect culture. There are little learners out there from one-year olds to thirteen-year-olds. It doesn't matter if you're big – small - or just in the middle. Family can love and care about you. When I think of big connections the first thing that comes to my head is love – BIG love hearts. And connections between all the animals and the people, we are all connected - mums, dads, parents and kids. I did this artwork and it took a long time to draw this And I'm happy that you people are standing here today, I hope you like my drawings. Thank you for your community and your company. Love from Reuben