

Learning from the Experiences of a Kura Kaupapa Māori Graduate

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Abstract

This ATLAANZ 2022 conference presentation was based on the experiences of an interviewee in the author's research on students' experiences and perceptions of learning support services at Toi Ohomai Te Pūkenga (Toi Ohomai). The interviewee had graduated from a Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) in a small town, where they had studied science in te reo Māori. At Toi Ohomai, they felt unable to disclose to the tutor of their English-medium, science-based course that they were not familiar with the vocabulary being used. The tutor, meanwhile, assumed all their learners knew the English terms. The interviewee described how in class they "felt dumb". At the same time, they were trying to adjust to life in a city which was very different. I reflected on how KKM graduates could be better supported. I concluded that if Toi Ohomai tutors and staff had a way to identify KKM graduates, they could proactively offer them support and resources. I explored options for identifying ākongā from Māori-medium education in the Toi Ohomai learning management system. I then spoke with the Head of Māori Success at Toi Ohomai, who discussed the idea with colleagues. An alternative approach was agreed upon, based on the core practice of knowing the learner.

Keywords: Kura Kaupapa Māori, Māori-medium education, Te Pūkenga, Know the learner

Introduction

Kia ora, ko Ruth Thomas ahau. I am a Learning Facilitator (Tertiary Learning Advisor) at the Mokoia campus of Toi Ohomai Te Pūkenga (Toi Ohomai) in Rotorua, in Te Ranga Eke Panuku (the Learning Support and Engagement team). We provide academic and pastoral care services to Toi Ohomai campus-based and distance learners.

My five-minute lightning presentation at the ATLAANZ 2022 conference was based on a mixed-methods study titled *Students' experiences and perceptions of learning support services at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology*. The project aimed to find out how the services of Te Ranga Eke Panuku were working for learners, following the merge of Waiariki Institute of Technology and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic to form Toi Ohomai. One learner, K, who responded to the online survey (Phase 1 of the study) showed signs of a te reo Māori immersion schooling background. K included their details enabling me to invite them for an interview (the second phase of the study) to amplify their voice. It transpired that they had seen the survey and took it as an opportunity to share the challenges they were facing. When I contacted K, they were willing to meet me in the expectation that we at Toi Ohomai could make improvements so that other graduates from Māori-medium settings might not experience the same difficulties they had. We arranged to meet *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) at a location that was convenient to them. Our *kōrero* was wide-ranging. Clearly, change was required in how we recognise and engage with Māori-medium education graduates to provide supportive learning experiences that nurture them as Māori.

Māori-Medium Education

Before exploring change options, let us first consider Māori-medium education and KKM graduates, and what and who they bring with them when they enter tertiary education. In their (2021) report, *Te Kura Huanui*, the Education Review Office describes the development of Māori-medium education as “hard won” (p. 6) and “one of the most significant advancements in New Zealand's education history” (p. 16). To better understand the factors supporting Kura Kaupapa Māori (KKM) graduate success, Kaupapa Māori researchers spoke with graduates of KKM and Ngā Kura ā Iwi to understand how they are influenced by their Māori-medium education. They then further explored the philosophies and unique education experiences provided by interviewing members of kura whānau such as kaiako, kaumātua, whānau and leaders. The researchers commented: “What has shone through is the ability of Māori-medium education to continually produce confident, successful graduates who are strengthened by their whakapapa, te reo Māori me ngā tikanga Māori” (p. 6).

Te Kura Huanui identifies five areas core to learners' success: *Mana Māori Motuhake* (being Māori), *Tikanga Māori*; *Whanaungatanga* (Relationships and Connectedness), *Ako*

(Teaching and Learning), and *Kanohi Whakakite* (Leaders as Visionaries). *Mana Māori Motuhake* ensures that ākonga Māori can live authentically; being Māori and *Tikanga Māori* give expression to this. *Whanaungatanga* acknowledges the relationships between kura, and whānau, kaumātua, hapū, iwi and wider networks, while *Ako* builds the sense of belonging where learners feel safe and nurtured. Finally, *Leaders as Visionaries* refers to effective, innovative, aspirational leaders, who in turn encourage these characteristics among their kaimahi (Ministry of Education, 2022).

As a provider of tertiary education, in which increasing numbers of graduates from Māori-medium education are enrolling, Toi Ohomai needs to offer pathways and experiences that enable these rangatahi (young people) to continue to thrive in the tertiary education environment, so they can enjoy success in achieving their study goals, as Māori.

K's Experiences

When I interviewed K, they commented that their kaiako “I think... just assumed we'd all know the basic English. But for me... I was just fluent in Māori.” K felt unable to disclose to the particular kaiako that the specialised terms being used in class were unfamiliar as their science studies had been completed in te reo Māori. They did not disclose to their classmates either, but rather quickly searched on Google to try to find a translation of the terminology, in an on-the-spot survival strategy. K had a deep appreciation of their Māori-medium education, but it was hard for them to hold onto this in class:

I felt dumb. But it was only because... they [peers] understood all the terminology, so it made me feel a bit like, yeah, just really dumb. And they could just answer questions and go about like, it wasn't new to them. And I don't know if I got a disadvantage from that. But I'm actually glad I learned everything in Māori. Yeah, I'm really appreciative of that.

The experience was stressful:

Exams were a challenge, assessments were a challenge, trying to get everything in. I was stressed. I even tried to do assignments in Māori... And kind of just translate it from there to get a better understanding of what I was trying to talk about.

Ākongā *can* complete assessments in te reo Māori at Toi Ohomai but in the scenario faced by K, this option could not be offered. In addition to their academic challenges, K was trying to adjust to life in a city where the social environment was very different, costs were much higher, and transport was a challenge. Their success was compromised.

Responding to Ākongā Voice – Knowing the Learner and Normalising Te Reo Māori

I considered the evidence provided by K and problem solved solutions as to how we at Toi Ohomai could prevent other Māori-medium education graduates going through a similar experience. Initially I believed that graduates of KKM could be tagged in the Toi Ohomai learning management system (LMS), in a similar way to international student learners, so that their holistic learning needs could be anticipated and met by kaiako and facilitators in Te Ranga Eke Panuku. In practical terms, it is possible to add a KKM tag in the Toi Ohomai LMS based on the last secondary school attended provided by new learners upon enrolment. Resources and support could then be proactively offered, including the option to complete assessments in te reo Māori.

A kōrero with our Head of Māori Success at Toi Ohomai, Leonie Nicholls, identified an alternative approach, based on the core practice of knowing the learner. Leonie discussed the proposal to tag KKM learners in the Toi Ohomai LMS with a small group of colleagues. All emphasised the importance of normalising the use of te reo Māori and placing the responsibility on us as kaiako and kaimahi (facilitators of learning) to support this. The Kaiako Success team (who support the development of academic staff) can reinforce kaiako being aware of their important role in knowing their learners, through whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) strategies, appropriate diagnostics and ako delivery. Through these core practices, and knowing who to reach out to for assistance, tutors can cater to a wide range of learning and/or support needs. In addition, Toi Ohomai has a number of other strategies in place as we strive to support ākongā Māori to achieve educational success as Māori. We aim to provide a learning environment which is responsive to all learners.

Conclusion

The culturally based practice of manaakitanga (showing care for others) includes watching out for those who need assistance but do not ask for it. In ako delivery, knowing our

learners is essential. The final words come from K. When asked to define what learning support is from their perspective, they replied “I feel like it's manaakitanga. So, looking after, or looking out for those who seek... not only for those who seek support, but those who don't want to kind of ask for help.”

References

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