Navigating the places we now inhabit: Stories of migrant learning designers

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Learning design involves creating educational opportunities that are engaging and effective. In many countries, this process must attune to indigenous ways of being and knowing. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the learning design process requires the ability to create culturally inclusive learning opportunities that are respectful of Māori culture, but also beneficial to all learners - a process that calls for deeper reflection and understanding of tikanga Māori (Māori customs and practices). This paper highlights the experiences of migrant learning designers and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, who work at the intersection of Māori knowledge and Western educational practices. As non-indigenous immigrants, learning designers, teachers, and educational researchers, the authors drew on autoethnography as the methodology, to analyse and reflect on their role as allies of Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. This research aims to find and share ways of reconciling principles of learning design with different ways of knowing, whilst honouring the Māori culture. The paper contributes to wider debates in education that discuss how indigenous knowledge systems can enrich modern educational practices.

Keywords: critical pedagogies; indigenous knowledge, autoethnographic, learning design, Māori principles, cultural inclusiveness

Introduction

Academic mobility is a rather common experience for many teachers and students in higher education. It involves people relocating to study or work in a new city or country. These opportunities for mobility (Cain, 2017; Spoonley & Bedford, 2012; Vertovec, 2007) alongside our experiences of living in an increasingly interconnected world, has impacted the field of learning design, which has evolved to encompass diverse cultural perspectives. In this paper, we explore the experiences of migrant learning designers and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, who are working at the intersection of Māori knowledge and Western educational practices. Drawing on autoethnographic methodology, we reflect on our experiences as immigrants and as educational designers, on how our positionality as non-indigenous immigrants in Aotearoa New Zealand allows us to act as allies and supporters of Māori, the indigenous people of this land. The paper discusses ways of reconciling principles of learning design, with one's own heritage and connections to different ways of knowing and being, whilst honouring the Māori culture of the place and land where we now live.

Learning design, as a discipline, involves creating educational opportunities that are both engaging and effective. In many countries, a learning design process must attune to indigenous ways of being and knowing. As educational designers navigate this landscape, they must be informed by culturally responsive design (Green et al., 2023; Rātima et al., 2022), a design approach that appreciates, honours, and celebrates the cultural heritage, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students contribute to a learning environment (Taylor & Sobel, 2011). Within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori principles and values are deeply rooted in

the culture and history of New Zealand, and offer rich insights into how educational practices can be more culturally responsive and inclusive.

One of the critical areas of our work is exploring how new technological potentials can support and expand pedagogical practices. With the increase of online teaching and learning, these innovations must be evaluated through the lens of Māori principles. This approach ensures that technological advancements in education do not merely replicate existing biases but instead promote equity and inclusion. We are principles-led in our practices, and consistently guided by Māori values as we integrate new technologies into our pedagogical frameworks.

A key contribution of this paper is a focus on how pedagogical practices for online learning, learning design, and academic development can be brought together to form the cornerstone of educational practices. As other educators, we are interested in creating educational opportunities that are inclusive, engaging, and culturally responsive. We are still trying to navigate our ways to learn and work in the context. By aligning our work with Māori principles, we hope to share our stories and contribute to a broader understanding of how indigenous knowledge systems can enrich modern educational practices.

Background

We draw on critical theory, a perspective that positions education as a vehicle to question dominant structures of socio-economic and political relations (Freire, 1972, 1994). On this view, learners are encouraged to engage with the critical construction of just, democratic, and sustainable societies and education is seen as a universal right (Roberts, 2017). Dialogue is a central element in critical pedagogies, essential to the pedagogical process where students are invited to contribute with their own knowledge and experiences to discussions, so that knowledge can be constructed and contested. And as learners engage in these discussions and question the status quo, they become empowered to find alternatives to create a different (better) world. In adopting a critical theory stance, we acknowledge the influence of Aotearoa New Zealand socio-economic and political context in educational practices. This requires understanding principles of partnership that were set long ago, when the British first arrived on this land.

Honouring the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the 1840 foundational partnership agreement between Māori chiefs and British Crown representatives in Aotearoa New Zealand, requires to engage with, understand and implement Māori principles in mainstream higher education/ tertiary programs. Although some progress has been made in learning and teaching with Māori principles online and face-to-face, this is an ongoing struggle in education, and more work is required to integrate concepts and practices, based on the principles, in mainstream higher education (Schwenger, 2019; Rātima et al., 2022).

These principles can guide educators to ensure that when designing for learning, Māori and non-Māori students are in mind, and help consider how to support learning in online and kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) modes (Schwenger, 2019; Rātima et al., 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori education experiences have included different pedagogical forms; and it is essential that when merging technology with Māori epistemology and tikanga, we pay attention to the need to validate Māori "people, language, culture and … aspirations" as Pihama, Smith, Taki and Lee (2004, p. 32) point out.

Contemporary learning design that is informed by research in Māori tertiary educational settings (Ferguson, 2008) and in mainstream institutions (Rātima et al., 2022) can benefit students by reflecting and emphasizing Māori principles such as whanaungatanga (here understood as developing and maintaining relationships). Whanaungatanga is a foundational element of Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview) that brings people together for a common cause such as shared learning experiences. The importance of establishing and maintaining relationships has been recognized as fundamental to authentic learning and to success for non-Māori and Māori (Schwenger, 2019; Macfarlane & Derby, 2022; Greenwood and Te Aika;).

How to foster the relationships of students with teachers and amongst themselves should be at the core of design for online and face-to-face learning (Rātima et al., 2022; Pihama et al., 2004; Tiakiwai & Tiakiwai, 2010). Collaborative learning "to develop a sense of community" (p. 28) as one option to foster relationships, uses the notion of social constructivism where students interact in a shared enquiry in an intentionally designed learning situation (Garner & Rouse, 2016). Other ideas of supporting relationships, particularly online, are based on the concept of social presence created through, for example, timely feedback, online postings and contact with and between students (Garner & Rouse, 2016; Kahu, n.d.). Designing for learning with effective adult teaching and learning practices are vital to engage non-Māori and Māori learners, for example, by integrating various options to engage with content (Curtis et al., 2011; Greenwood and Te Aika, 2008) and with a focus on what students do to learn (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Research project

Adopting a reflective enquiry stance in the context of a researchers' lived experience is recommended, to develop educational knowledge and practices effectively (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2012). Thus, reflective enquiry can become ongoing rather than a short-term approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). This research draws on autoethnography as a methodology (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This methodology involves the use of writing, stories, and methods related to autobiographical and personal insights, where the researcher works to find ways of connecting these writings to cultural, social, and political narratives. There were three researchers involved in this project, each from different countries (Brazil, Germany, and Vietnam), who had been living in Aotearoa New Zealand for a period of 7 to 24 years. All of them had experience as teachers and learning designers.

Each of the researchers wrote an 800 word piece reflecting on their experiences of design for learning and articulating the ways they connected to the Matauranga Māori values in their practice. The focus was on how these values transpire through their designs. To write this 800 word piece each of the researchers drew on and analysed their lived experience in the learning environments they design for and work on, and each was working at different tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The next step was then to individually read the others' contributions, and to participate in a series of discussions to identify common themes. Key emerging themes were identified after three rounds of discussions.

Key findings

Through analysis and interpretation, the researchers gained insights on their self-identity (as academics, researchers, and as migrants to this land), examining connections between cultural rules and assumptions, and the ways each of them worked with resources available to them. Through reviewing and discussion of the written pieces they came up with and discussed shared meanings about the emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues that influence their practices at the professional settings and within the Aotearoa New Zealand context at large.

As the researchers in this project, it became evident that our positionality as non-indigenous immigrants was distinctive. We are neither detached observers nor primary guardians of Māori culture; instead, we see ourselves as allies (Barnes, 2013) committed to understanding and integrating Māori principles into our learning designs and teaching. This commitment manifests in our efforts to develop a deeper understanding of tikanga Māori (Māori customs and practices) and how these can be applied both in face-to-face and online learning environments. In our work as designers and teachers we want to create learning opportunities that are respectful of Māori culture and beneficial to all learners.

Some of the key findings emerging from these discussions include:

- Māori principles help to bring core values to educational design that add to Western views (e.g., social connections are important for learning, understanding the person through holistic lenses).
- Understanding that our interpretation of Māori principles and values is an ongoing effort and responsibility, important for teaching and learning Aotearoa New Zealand context.
- There are multiple ways that Māori principles inform educational practices in higher education - e.g., policies, language te reo, visuals, content, ways of relating to others.
- Māori elements can be made visible by using the language te reo (e.g. greetings), imagery and other content, practices (e.g., Pepeha, the traditional self-introduction).
- Common practices include the acknowledgement of different perspectives, ethics of care, and working on relationships.
- Struggles as migrants versus openness to new ideas.
- Questioning our assumptions (e.g., about teaching and learning strategies.
- Empathy towards Māori and feeling as "the other" (not descendants of the British Crown).

Conclusion and future directions

In this paper, we start to share stories as migrant learning designers and teachers, detailing our efforts to navigate the complex cultural landscape of Aotearoa New Zealand. Through our experiences, we emphasise the importance of partnership and cultural responsiveness. We also highlight the transformative potential of integrating indigenous knowledge into learning design, especially in the context of online teaching and learning. This narrative serves as both a reflection of our journey and a call to action for others in the field to consider the cultural dimensions of their educational practices.

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