



## Putting whanaungatanga at the heart of students' online learning experiences

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This paper explores the role of relationships in students' experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa| New Zealand. Students' voices are foregrounded through narratives and the analysis of four discrete stories of these specific circumstances. Using a conceptual framing of whanaungatanga, a Māori view of the process of establishing and maintaining relationships, we move beyond who is involved in the relationship to explore how relationships are developed and what counts from the students' perspectives. Sharing, an ethic of care, a sense of belonging, collaboration, scaffolding of learning, and feedback acknowledging students' efforts were all considered important aspects of relationships between students and faculty which were enacted online. The importance of broader institutional relationships, such as those with the library and student support services, were also foregrounded.

Keywords: student voice, narratives, online learning experiences, relationships, whanaungatanga.

### Background and introduction

Equity in online learning is of critical importance particularly in the pandemic context. It has often been noted in relation to material, social and political dimensions (Bayne et al. 2020), however less has been said about the cultural imperatives of inclusion (MacKenzie et al 2021). Educational institutions in Aotearoa are required to uphold their obligations of the Treaty of Waitangi| *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*<sup>1</sup>. One strategy has been through explicit focus on culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) which has grown in importance particularly in the early childhood and compulsory schooling sectors (Ministry of Education 2011, 2017). In tertiary education this is reflected through inclusion of Māori values and explicit graduate attributes such as bicultural competence and confidence. Other approaches include challenging the way institutional work is measured and valued through embedding of Māori values in programmes and standards through the Ako Aronui framework (Buissink et al, 2017). Whilst the government has progressed the vision of tertiary success for everyone (Tertiary Education Commission, 2022) to be more inclusive, equitable and connected for Māori and Pasifika learners, converting the vision into practice is somewhat more of a challenge. To this end *Ngā Hau e Whā o Tāwhirimātea* (Rātima et al 2021) offers a framework for tertiary educators to become more responsive and culturally adept in our teaching. This connects with the re-theorisation of CRP by Berryman, Lawrence and Lamont (2018) as cultural relationships for responsive pedagogy. This research positions relationships as central and foundational with responsive pedagogy, which concurs with research demonstrating that relationships are key to authentic learning for Māori and non Māori alike (Blackberry & Kearney, 2020; Rangiwai, et al, 2020).

### Methods

This paper discusses part of a larger research project exploring Aotearoa university students' experiences of online learning during the pandemic (Brown et al., 2021). The authors include Māori, Pākehā, and Tauwiwi researchers<sup>2</sup>. The project team worked in collaboration with national student associations (including Māori students association Te Mana Ākonga) to invite student participation in the survey.

An explanatory sequential mixed method research design was adopted for the main study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A national online questionnaire, conducted in the later part of 2020, resulted in 952 valid

<sup>1</sup> The founding document of New Zealand written te reo Māori and English see <https://waitangitribunal.govt.nz>

<sup>2</sup> Pākehā is te reo Māori for non-Maori, and Tauwiwi is te reo Māori for foreigners.

responses from all eight Aotearoa universities. Although the majority of students were Pākehā/ New Zealand European (55%), other ethnicities represented included Asian (20%), Māori (5%) and the Pacific Islands (8%). Survey participants, who indicated their interest in participating in an interview, were invited to participate in an online focus group or interview. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with 41 participants online, and provided stories of learning during the pandemic. The four participants selected represented a diversity of experiences of the overall participant group. Participants' discrete stories of the specific circumstances of learning online as a result of the pandemic were constructed into narratives (Reissman, 2003) and then further analysed for emerging themes pertaining to relationships. Ethics approval was gained prior to the commencement of the research.

## Conceptual framing

In this paper we draw on the Māori concept of *whanaungatanga* which is one of the five interdependent and co-existing components of the *Ngā Hau e Whā o Tāwhirimātea* model (Rātima et al, 2021). "Whanaungatanga is the process of establishing and maintaining relationships." It is about bringing "people together around a common cause or association. This can be based on such things as kinship ties, connections to place(s), interests, the environment and, of course, shared learning experiences." (p. 28). We draw on whanaungatanga as a conceptual framing to enhance our understanding of Māori worldviews, and foreground examples of responsive pedagogies that are culturally connected and supportive of Māori learners. The paper aims to demonstrate the centrality of relationships to the learning process and how, when educators work alongside learners and engage in responsive praxis, it enhances students' learning experiences. The guiding question for this paper is "What were the elements of whanaungatanga that were critically important for students' learning in Aotearoa during the pandemic and what can we learn from this?".

## Narratives

Ben is a first year student for whom routine is very important. He has previous experience studying online through home school. Describing himself as autistic he was comfortable learning on his own. However, he missed campus during lockdown as he liked the library as a place to study and learn. Despite his familiarity with online learning he found it hard to collaborate online and missed face to face group work. He appreciated lecturers and support services who were able to provide the personal touch.

Rachel is an international student from South America living in Aotearoa with her immediate family. Her work required her to advance her qualifications and whilst most of her degree is online she did have in person requirements. She enjoys online learning and uses social media groups as additional support and connection as she likes expressing her ideas in writing rather than verbally. She appreciated the support from the university.

Julie is in her 4th year and lives with a flatmate she isn't close to so finding a space to study/work at home was hard. As a teacher she also had her own online students and had to set a routine but found it hard to introduce fun into the class. In her studies whilst online materials did help provide an overview of content, recorded videos were unhelpful. It was hard to stay motivated and focused.

Kate is in 2nd year and lives with her husband, and daughter. With a living room that doubles as work and study space, Kate does her university work between 9pm and 2am whilst her daughter sleeps. This made online learning lonely and disconnected and she had to rely on friends and Q&A forums. She found all the screen reading hard and looked forward to getting back on campus to share ideas, stress and worries and to reconnect.

## Discussion

In our research project students weren't asked specifically about relationships, rather they were asked what aspects of learning online were helpful for them and which were challenging. Our preliminary report showed that social learning, care and connection were critical elements of learning (Brown et al., 2021). However, in exploring the four students' narratives through the lens of whanaungatanga we illuminate a multifaceted view of the role of relationships in learning and teaching.

For Māori, the concept of 'nō hea' (where you are from) precedes the concept of 'ko wai' (who you are). "In sharing with learners information about their connections to people and places, their experiences and their own learning journeys, educators model their desire to connect with students" (Rātima et al 2021, p 29). This was valued by Kate who described how her lecturers would "*give their life experiences as well*" and as a

consequence she felt they were more accepting of her personal challenges noting *“she understands how I find it difficult. So, she was really good actually. She was amazing.”*

Reaching out to students with **care** and consideration opens the concept of relationships to include students' physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. When Rachel suffered a medical incident she appreciated that teachers were *“so kind”* and how having *“this support like telling me, .... that they give you extensions”* helped her feel at ease. For Kate, her classes were an essential space to ask for clarification. *“the teacher would come around in the lecture and ask me, are you okay? Do you need me to go through anything with you?”* And if I was doing some work, I could always ask them, *“could you help me?”* Moving online this experience was different. However, knowing lecturers cared about her learning was critical for maintaining whanaungatanga as Kate indicated *“I Zoomed my lecturer because she was happy to Zoom”*.

The value of ako or reciprocal teaching and learning where the educator moves alongside the learner, shifts the power of the learning context. Rachel found it empowering to be able to contribute to the class and described if she was *“searching Facebook and found really a lot of [new] things”* that she was encouraged to share *“with the class and the teacher”*. When Rachel missed a few classes due to health, her sense of belonging was enhanced when the *“teachers asked me to be a speaker. It empowered me ... that I had to talk and to share, encouraged me to participate.”*

Whilst the above examples were between the educator and student, building a strong culture of collaboration and support between peers is also an important component of whanaungatanga. Whilst for Kate this wasn't a course requirement, it was an essential lifeline to keep her on track. Having a young child at home meant Kate's participation online was not synchronous and she missed out on her usual ways of interacting *“I suppose at that time, no one's around like the lecturers and not around 9, 10, 11, 12. So, it was hard to get motivated because I had no feedback from anyone. I wasn't sure if I was on the right track”*. Kate and a friend developed a way of working together where *“My friend, she supported me, usually on Zoom in the evenings as she works. And so, we Zoom together and just sit down and do our work and then we could ask each if we wanted to, but we used to work in silence.”*

Educators can support peer learning by providing opportunities for students to learn together. Ben described how he collaborated *“through Google Docs”* as part of group assessment and how with another student *“she had a look and then I... we both sort of went back and forth via text or via Messenger, via email and said you know, you better change this bit or do you want me to change that and that sort of thing.”* Using technology for informal learning conversations enabled Ben and Kate to work more effectively in partnership with peers. As Rātima et al note (2021) *“building a strong culture of collaboration (through assessment, curriculum and learning activities) is a hallmark of whanaungatanga (p.31). Peer tutoring was another strategy students drew on. Kate and Julie found it easier to run ideas past friends, “ I would ask my friend - Is this a stupid question?’ If she said no, then ask my teacher” (Kate), similarly “the stupid questions that you just come up with and you don't want to email the lecturer. You kind of want to be able to ask a friend.” (Julie).*

Supportive peers also created a culture of well-being and belonging. Kate looked forward to going to campus as it gave her the chance to talk with other students, share ideas, stress and worries and to reconnect. Being on the campus and sharing her feelings lessened her stress and relieved her from all the pressure of home. Social media also played a role in this affective dimension of learning *“we also have our special groups that we can talk to, ... on Facebook and in WhatsApp. So, we were there and it was easy for some people to express [themselves]”* (Rachel). Virtual whanaungatanga is a concept which *“enables relationships to be formed, strengthened and maintained in culturally recognisable ways.”* (Keegan & Sciasa, 2018, p.365).

Providing feedback that is *“purposeful and constructive, and that acknowledges effort and achievement is another way for educators to demonstrate they value the learning relationship with their students. Teachers need to balance constructive criticism with positive reinforcement”* (Ratima et al 2022 p 42). As Ben noted for one assignment for which he got a low mark and was just told it should be better, *“I actually had to, basically ask for a re-submission to actually get the feedback”*. However, in another course a recent PhD graduate took over from the lecturer who was very busy and set up a forum to have discussions about the assignment topic and that was really engaging as students could bounce ideas off each other *“I'd say “hey, is this the right idea? Am I on the right track?” Julie really found the lack of peer feedback impacted on her results which were “a lot lower. And I think the major reason is just, normally you'd talk to people. because I didn't want to study at home alone ... and it's not that the people would give you answers or anything. You'd just all be able to like, hive mind”*.

Institutions also play a role in relationships and can enhance students' learning. Simple acknowledgements as Ben described *"I got a "good work done" ... letter from the university saying "congratulations you've done really well." So that's my little pick me up when I feel like real bad. Before I study."* Direct support in terms of a loaned device was not just an enabler for learning but indicated mattering *"If you cannot have a computer, they [university] gave it to me. So that things help because if you don't have a good device, that's a problem."* (Rachel). Academic services also played a critical role *"The Disability Support Office, did get hold of me to get someone to do note-taking, that was pretty cool, which made things a bit easier."* (Ben) Rachel had a similar experience *"I am dyslexic and the disability department was behind me. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?" And they supported me, but they sent me to the Studiosity program to check my assignment"*.

Relationships can also be enhanced through the use of a *poutama* or scaffold. Establishing norms and expectations can provide clarity and consistency and as Julie indicated encouraged her to learn *"like big, sheets which are big overviews of the entire topic. Those were the best things to be able to look at through lockdown. Try and guide yourself to where you were"* (Julie). Otherwise, it was *"kind of frustrating"* because *"you'd spend most of your time trying to find what information you needed or like, where was the next lecture hidden."* (Julie)

There were, however, times when the relationship broke down. Ben did find developing connections hard virtually. He described how it *"was a bit annoying"* when half the group didn't show up for the project and how in the online forum they just had *"less and less people got involved. So, I think in some ways some people lost interest."* Even though he describes himself as solitary he does prefer to collaborate face to face for *"when they are in front of you, they can't ignore an email, and they can't quite ignore you standing over them"* In Julie's case she indicated that *"a lot of the lecturers would just post previous years' recordings. The Echo recordings from last year, which was a little bit cruel"* as they had told them in previous years not to rely on the *"zoom, echo recordings, you don't learn as well from them. And suddenly, that was all we had to learn off."* One explanation is not so much about the content but the break in relationship where students felt the lecture wasn't specifically for them. As Rachel reflected, their online classes included both live and recorded sessions and she preferred live *"because in the lives you interact. You ask questions, you add things."* Establishing and maintaining protocols of engagement and learning is critical to reduce the risk of relationships being damaged.

So what role did relationships play in supporting learning for these four students?

Ben valued his relationships with the institution, particularly with the student support services. He didn't "need" peers to support him in his learning unless it was a formal requirement. What was most important to him in his lecturer relationships was feedback whether this was via the formal assessment process or asynchronous discussions. This connects to the aspect of *whanaungatanga* around reaffirming success and expectations.

Rachel built relationships with peers through social media and valued it when her lecturers acknowledged her life experiences, and she could actively contribute to the class. Synchronous engagement was a key for her. Relationships were enhanced when the institution checked in with her and practically supported her learning needs. This connects to the aspect of *whanaungatanga* of the learning partnership.

Julie valued it when her lecturer scaffolded her learning by providing structure and direction so she could just get on with her work. She found pre-recordings disconnected her from her learning. Relationships with her peers were critical to her learning success as she relied on these for keeping on track and validating her learning journey. This connects to the aspect of *whanaungatanga* of the value of learning with others.

Kate felt able to approach her lecturers when they shared their personal experiences and checked in on her learning. However peer relationships were critical to her motivation and success as she valued having a partner to learn with. Peers were also critically important in supporting the affective dimension of her learning. This connects to the aspect of *whanaungatanga* of showing care for students' learning.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the value of using a cultural approach for responsive pedagogy we were able to broaden our view of relationships beyond interactions between teachers, students, content and technology to understand some of the nuances embedded in *whanaungatanga*. This included the use of *poutama* to guide students through the learning process which was particularly important when access to teachers and peers was restricted during the pandemic. Mattering was also demonstrated institutionally where support services recognised issues around digital access or learning difficulties which gave students a sense of belonging. Validation of students' efforts and learning journeys was demonstrated through feedback, also by enabling students' contribution to the

learning process of the class, and respecting and encouraging students' knowledge contributions. Holistic care for the student, acknowledging where they are coming from culturally, emotionally and spiritually and what they bring to class, provides students with a sense of place in the learning environment and supports the success of their learning journey.

This research demonstrates the need to think beyond the traditional approaches to design and teaching by putting not just the learner but whanaungatanga at the centre of the process. Social connection and relationships are an integral part of culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks in Aotearoa. Success in online learning during the pandemic is not so much about the “what” of teaching but “how” we go about it. Places and spaces (virtual and physical) of belonging need to account for diverse individual and cultural variation of learners. As we reflect on these student experiences' we see further opportunities, not evident in these research findings, to enhance and sustain meaningful and reciprocal relationships with students, particularly Māori students. Whilst *Ngā Hau e Whā o Tāwhirimātea* is situated in Aotearoa the value of whanaungatanga in teaching and learning is equally as relevant globally as it can benefit all students. We encourage educators to “consider this” as a start to deepen their commitment to building relationships with learners in culturally responsive ways (Rātima et al., 2021).

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