reconnect
Reconnecting relationships through technology

Whakapiri (Engagement): Using an Indigenous engagement framework to enhance online teaching

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Massey University staff used a New Zealand indigenous (Māori) engagement framework, developed for working with at-risk youth, to restructure the content and student engagement for an online introductory course with a non-traditional student cohort. Each online teaching page embedded three sections reflecting the concepts of Whakapiri (Engagement), Whakamārama (Enlightenment) and Whakamana (Empowerment). This sequenced content provision for students, guiding them through an initial topic overview and learning outcomes through to core teaching content and learning activities and finally onto assessments, putting their learning to practice. This framework also underpinned staff engagement approaches with students, focusing on ensuring staff presence online, proactive contact, recognition for learning illustrated, encouragement of class engagement, clarity in course guidance and assessment feedback that praised and empowered change. Compared to the old course, subsequent deliveries showed greater course engagement, improved class GPA of 36%-50%, and feedback confirms a consistently positive and connected student learning experience.

Keywords: Non-traditional students, Online teaching, Indigenous engagement framework

The challenge

The development of positive student-teacher relationships is foundational to good teaching, but this can be a challenge for three key reasons. First, the international higher-education environment is increasingly online and asynchronous, a space within which many lecturers lack knowledge or expertise in design and assessment (García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, & Martín-Rojas, 2021). A second challenge, particularly for indigenous students, is the predominance of courses that are mono-cultural in content and design, devoid of the multicultural worldviews, knowledge and teaching pedagogy expected of a culturally responsive learning experience for an increasingly non-Western student body (Morong & DesBiens, 2016). The third challenge is the need to design for engagement with an increasing number of 'non-traditional' students who are mature and not necessarily technologically savvy, yet are juggling full-time work and family commitments while trying to study part-time and online (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). A potential solution to these challenges is the integration of practical indigenous relational frameworks within current online teaching pedagogy. Research now shows that course design reflecting indigenous knowledge and engagement practices enhances educators relationship building capacity with students (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021), increases both indigenous and non-indigenous student engagement (Reano, 2020), and improves online curriculum design (Wilks, Wilson, & Kinnane, 2017).

In 2020, staff at Massey University were tasked with the redesign of an old course which was to become a foundational course in the newly developed *Mental Health and Addiction Programme*. This introductory course faced all the relational challenges previously identified, in that it was to be (a) delivered online, (b) culturally responsive to a student cohort comprised of a significant number who identify as Māori (the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) and (c) designed for a largely non-traditional student cohort upskilling for work in the health sector. To meet these challenges, staff utilised a Māori engagement framework to structure both the design of their online teaching platform and their student engagement approach. This manuscript describes this course and engagement redesign and provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the success of this approach for reconnecting students with educators and enhancing the student learning experience.

The student cohort

Massey University's *Mental Health and Addiction Programme* was designed in response to national concern

over the increasing rates of mental health and addiction, particularly in Māori and Pacific Island communities, and the lack of workforce education pathways required to meet these challenges (Patterson, Durie, Disley, & Tiatia-Seath, 2018). Programme staff, working with mental health and addiction sector workforce development agencies, determined that the cohort entering our foundational course would be *non-traditional*, reflecting students that are (a) older than 25, (b) first in their families to attend university, (c) currently working in the sector, (d) enrolled part-time, (e) studying online, (f) from lower socioeconomic families, and (g) with a higher proportion than usual coming from minority ethnic communities, particularly Māori and Pacific Island.

Many if not all of the cohort characteristics noted above were also identified as key risk factors for potential failure or dropout from higher-education (Pearson, 2019). Mitigation of these risk factors required an approach sensitive to the often precarious and stressful context of these students. This meant balancing *Transactional Distance*, such that they received sufficient structure to reduce stress and develop fluidity with content, but were offered sufficient opportunities for dialogue to satisfy autonomy over their learning journey (Moore, 2019). Further, it required a focus on the engagement factors known to support non-traditional student cohort retention, including prioritising regular dialogue and meaningful engagement activities, welcoming the sharing of their own experiences as part of the learning process, and encouraging positive engagement and reflective discussions with other students in the class (Stone, Downing, & Dyment, 2021; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

The *Whakapiri* (Engagement) Framework

Sir Mason Durie's *Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework* was originally developed as a guide for health professionals working with disengaged Māori youth populations, but is now recognised as having broad application to many different hard-to-reach cohorts (Lang & Gardiner, 2014). This framework highlights that our ability to act in an enlightened manner is the result of a process of learning and engagement. Specifically, it starts with *Whakapiri* (Engagement), which serves to develop trust and respect between two parties. Once trust and respect are established the second step of *Whakamārama* (Enlightenment) can occur, a stage at which the parties meet to discuss, debate and come to an understanding about the issues at hand. The result is *Whakamana* (Empowerment) of the individual – the youth in the original framework conceptualisation – to act independently for their betterment, applying the knowledge and understanding of the issue they have developed.

Given the utility of the *Whakapiri* framework for reaching disengaged youth, programme staff identified it as an ideal framework for engaging with their student cohort. The potential utility of this framework as guide was evident for two components of course delivery: (1) as a structure for the weekly delivery of content in the online learning environment, and (2) as a guiding framework for structuring the online engagement and interactions between staff and students.

Applying the Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework: Online environment

The *Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework* components (engagement, enlightenment and empowerment) reflect a clear structure for the sequenced delivery of online course content and assessments, in a manner similar to which *SOLO Taxonomy* builds students capacity through increasing stages of content complexity (Biggs & Collis, 2014). It also offers an online design structure for content that meets critical online design requirements for learning, including creating a sense of unity between potentially diverse weekly topics, a clear visual hierarchy of information and distinction between the aims of each components, a visual rhythm for motivating movement from one component to the next, and a clear balance to each page which offered little chance for visual asymmetry between the three key components (Bader & Lowenthal, 2018).

Whakapiri (Engagement): In the *Whakapiri* framework, initial engagement is critical to establishing the positive relationships upon which trust is established and learning can begin. Applied to an online learning environment this means that initial engagement needs to be calm, respectful, clear in its guidance, culturally relevant and respectful of diversity. Programme staff operationalised this by providing an initial section labelled 'Whakapiri' which offered students a definition of this term and why it was being used, a simple and warm welcome, an overview of the topic under study that week, and learning outcomes and expectations, delivered both in writing and via video. This presented a low-stress initiation to the weekly focus, re-engaged students with teaching staff, helped clarify the key concepts under focus that week, and helped students establish trust in staff guidance.

Whakamārama (Enlightenment): In the *Whakapiri* framework, enlightenment is founded on trustworthy engagement and is the result of two or more parties joining to explore, discuss, debate and come to an agreement on an issue. Applied to an online learning environment this means that (a) learning is a process affecting both parties, not simply the student, and (b) learning requires interaction not static observation. Programme staff operationalised this with e-books that sequenced student progression through learning materials from simple to

complex issues, offered in multiple media formats including written content, visual imagery, podcasts, and videos. Dialogue and class engagement on this content (student-student and student-staff) were facilitated via an online forum that specifically sought critical reflection on key concepts and encouraged students to draw on their own lived experiences as a framing narrative for their responses. The e-book content for each week also integrated private and formative assessment activities for students to gauge their understanding of content and prompt revision of gaps in their knowledge or understanding.

Whakamana (Empowerment): In the *Whakapiri* framework, empowerment is the result of enlightenment and reflects a state in which individuals can act with knowledge and insight gained through shared understanding of an issue (i.e., they are empowered by knowledge). Applied to an online learning environment this requires the provision of activities or assessments relevant to the weekly content within which students can demonstrate their knowledge and mastery of this area. Programme staff operationalised this in two ways. First, they used multiple short quizzes in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the content under study that week. While individually these weekly courses only reflected 3% of the students' overall course mark, offering a low-risk test of knowledge, collectively the 10 quizzes across the course accounted for 30% of their final mark. Second, students were directed to complete weekly entries in their reflective journals (worth 30% of the overall course mark) allowing them to demonstrate their learning journey from initial understanding of specific weekly topics, their final understanding, and the learning activities or content that facilitated their enlightenment.

A focus on Te Reo Māori (Māori language) and Māori worldview in online design: Working toward cultural responsiveness and relevance, programme staff embedded Māori language and worldviews in their online design in three ways. First, Māori terms (and English definitions) were used as standard terminology for key course structure and content components. For example, *Tangata whai ora* (a person seeking wellbeing) replaced the terms 'client' or 'patient', standardising use of this term and helping shift student understanding of mental health and addiction service users from passive *medical patients* (a Western worldview) toward active individual agents *seeking wellbeing* (a Māori worldview). Second, Māori terms with accompanying English translations were used as standard for all online navigation links, such as 'Ngā Aromatawai' (Assessments), 'Wāhi Kōrero' (Communication), and 'Wāhanga Tuatahi' (Week 1). Third, programme staff prioritised the description of concepts, issues, and approaches within mental health and addiction each week from a Māori and a Pacific worldview prior to referencing the currently dominant Western worldview. This sought both to legitimise Māori and Pacific worldviews as valid and also expand student understanding beyond the dominant Western worldview, particularly regarding how issues can be understood, and solutions sought.

Applying the Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework: Online teaching approach

In addition to acting as a structure for online course design, the *Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework* also offered a clear guide for reconnecting students with programme staff in a process that supported the development of respectful and trusting relationships. In fact, this framework supported relationship building in a manner that clearly reflected the five R's critical for developing an online learning experience supportive of indigenous learners: *respect*, *relevance*, *reciprocity*, *responsibility*, and *relationships* (Tessaro et al., 2018). This framework also facilitated the development of relationships in a manner supportive of non-traditional students, including early and individualised contact, consistent online staff presence for support, quick response times to queries, public recognition of learning and encouragement of interaction with classmates, recognition of lived experiences as valuable learning narratives, and acknowledgement of the multiple identities and commitments these students have besides study (Stone et al., 2021).

Whakapiri (Engagement): The nature of both initial and ongoing engagement between staff and students was critical to the establishment and maintenance of strong relationships throughout this course. Programme staff sought to shape this engagement in three ways. First, reflecting the desire to illustrate *respectful* engagement at the outset, programme staff provided a pre-semester 'Ngā mihi' (Introduction) forum in which students were encouraged to introduce themselves and their reason for taking the course. Staff responded quickly to every student post, specifically responding in a manner that publicly recognised and positively responded to (a) their reason for entering the course, (b) experiences shaping their reasoning, and (c) encouraging their participation in class activities to come. Second, highlighting their *responsibility* to maintain consistent and protective relationships with students, programme staff provided guidance and motivation to engage each week that was consistent and clear in timing, instruction, and layout. Written in colloquial and accessible language, these messages provided (a) an initial overview of the topic and expectations of activities to complete, (b) a mid-week check-in identifying progress students had hopefully made and praising students already engaging online, and (c) an end-of-week wrap-up detailing key take-home messages for students to have learned from this content.

Whakamārama (Enlightenment): Programme staff sought to lead and encourage culturally *relevant* engagement throughout the course, but particularly in the *Whakamārama* sections where students explored and debated concepts together. Programme staff accomplished this in guidance throughout student discussions and debates. Specifically, in their response and encouragement to student posts they sought to emphasise the importance of Māori knowledge, worldviews and explanations as critical for a multicultural understanding of key concepts. This helped broaden student views initially shaped by the predominant Western worldview and clarified Māori and non-Māori student understanding of issues and how they may be resolved through different cultural lenses. *Whakamana (empowerment):* A key focus of programme staff was the empowerment of students not only regarding their learning but also their willingness to engage in *relationship* building and give back to others in the class. In this regard, programme staff specifically encouraged *reciprocal* student-student and student-staff relationships at every engagement opportunity. For example, programme staff always publicly praised student feedback and illustration of learning in forum discussions, specifically highlighting how student personal narratives offered further insight into lived experience of key concepts for the class (student-staff reciprocity). Further, students were always encouraged to review and respond to other student critiques or appraisal of course concepts (student-student reciprocity) as a means for critical enlightenment and relationship building.

A focus on Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) in student engagement: Reflecting a desire for culturally responsive engagement with all students (whether Māori or non-Māori), in every written, video, or oral communication with students, programme staff utilised Māori greetings, salutations and exclamations, including examples such as 'Kia ora' (Hello), 'Tino kino te pai' (That is awesome), 'Ngā mihi nui' (Kindest regards) and 'Mauri ora' (May the vitality of life be with you).

The Outcomes of Applying the Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework

An audit of course administrative data and student feedback shows the significant improvements in class success, staff and student engagement, and the student learning experience resulting from the integration of the *Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework* framework. Figure 1 uses standard university course completion data aggregated at the group level to offer a breakdown of the proportion of student passes (by grade), student failures and students disengaging with the course since 2019.
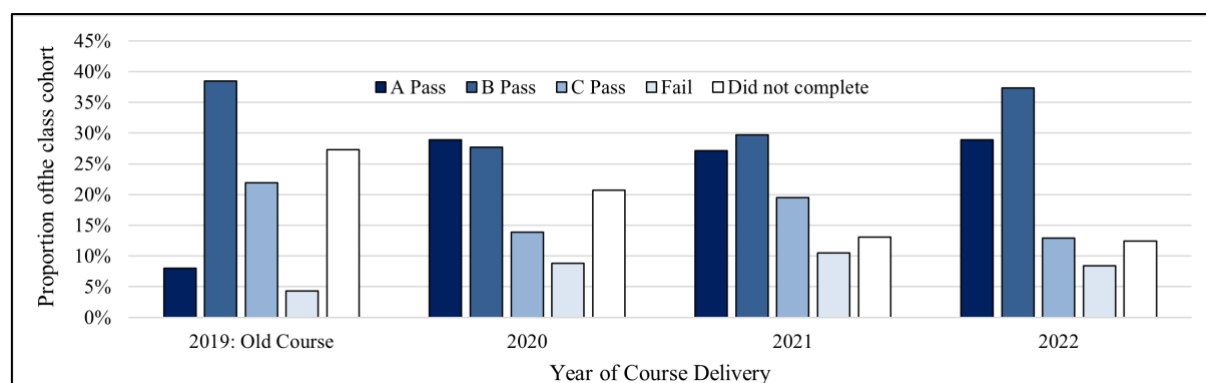
Figure 1: Proportion of student passes, failures, and non-completions 2019-2022

Between 2019 and 2020 there was a substantial improvement in class passing grades. In particular, the proportion of A-level passes more than tripled from 2019 (8%) to 2020 (29%). This predominance of A and B-level passes has been maintained across 2021 and 2022 deliveries. The proportion of students disengaging from the course (i.e., those identified as 'Did not complete') has also consistently fallen from 2019 (27%) to 2022 (12%), indicating the success of the new course delivery in engaging and retaining students. Interestingly, the proportion of students receiving a failing grade has doubled between 2019 (4%) and 2022 (8%). Review of this student sub-cohort indicates that (paradoxically) this increased failure rate is a result of the enhanced staff-student engagement. Specifically, this is a sub-cohort who previously would have disengaged from study early in the old course, but the enhanced staff engagement and relationship building from 2020 onward saw this sub-cohort remain in the course, though their achievement was still not sufficient to pass. Overall, and despite the slight increase in students failing, the improvements made to the course and increased retention of students has seen class GPA consistently improve compared to the 2019 class by 36% (2020), 42% (2021) and 53% (2022).

Our programme uses standardised, voluntary and anonymous course completion surveys to request student feedback on their learning experience. These surveys are embedded in the final week of the class online Moodle

site using the Moodle *Survey* tool, and they help teaching staff highlight areas of strength or weakness in course design and delivery. An audit of anonymous student feedback since 2020 shows an overwhelmingly positive learning experience, confirming the value on implementing the *Whakapiri (Engagement) Framework*. As identified in Table 1, integration of this framework has resulted in students consistently praising the sequenced online course layout, the staff engagement with and communication to students, the inclusion of both Māori language and worldviews. Overall, students now consistently rate this course as one of their favourites.

Table 1. Student feedback on specific aspects of the new course

Aspect of the course	Student feedback (Year of course delivery)
Course layout	I think it is the best laid out and best supported course I have ever done. (2020) I wish all of my courses were set out like this one. (2021) The way the [Moodle] site was organised was amazingly helpful. (2022)
Staff-student engagement	They were so encouraging, helpful and quick to respond. (2020) Having positive and engaging staff makes a huge difference. (2021) Thank you for teaching this course in an engaging, respectful and encouraging manner. (2022)
Staff communication with students	Communication was spot on and regular and they were so understanding. (2020) All communication was respectful, uplifting, encouraging, fair, justified, prompt and warm. (2021) They were great communicators, compassionate and honest. (2022)
Inclusion of Māori language and worldview	I really liked the inclusion of Māori language throughout the course. (2020) I really, really liked the Māori and Pacific inclusion throughout. (2021) I love how it incorporates Māori and Pasifika worldviews. (2022)

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This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz