

CHAPTER

1

Kaupapa Wānanga: The Impact of an Institutional Philosophy

ZINA MANU

My Education Journey

When I attended university in New Zealand, I faced many barriers to learning. Just 19 years old, I felt like I had entered another world in which I had no place. It was foreign, cold, and harsh. I struggled with the teaching styles of my lecturers, who talked to me not as an individual but rather as one of the many faceless people they would never get to know. I knew then that if I ever got the chance to teach adults, I would teach very differently.

In my view, great teachers think strategically and act with commitment, as described by Nesbit, Leach, and Foley (2004). When we watch such teachers in action, we can see and admire their grasp of proper techniques. These teachers have more than skill, however: They also have a deep understanding of themselves and their students, and of the organisational contexts in which they work. They “think on their feet” and take a long-term view of their work, which is underpinned by a passionate commitment to particular values (Nesbit, Leach, & Foley, p. 74). In 2005, I started working for a school called Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA) and got the opportunity to work at becoming a great teacher.

Kaupapa Wānanga Framework

One of the reasons why I was able to work toward becoming the great teacher I always wanted to be was because TWOA has a framework that grows out of its mission and philosophy. This framework is called Kaupapa Wānanga, and it guides us as teachers (*kaiako*) to put the organisation’s mission, philosophy, and values into action (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015a, p. 17). These are values that I am very passionate about and committed to.

The key elements of this framework are *kaitiakitanga*, *āhurutanga*, *koha*, and *Mauri ora* (see Figure 1 below). **Kaitiakitanga** is best described as the “Who,” acknowledging the importance of people and their respective skills, knowledge, strengths, and talents. For the Maori people, this means caring and responsible trusteeship. It is about putting the right people together, in the right

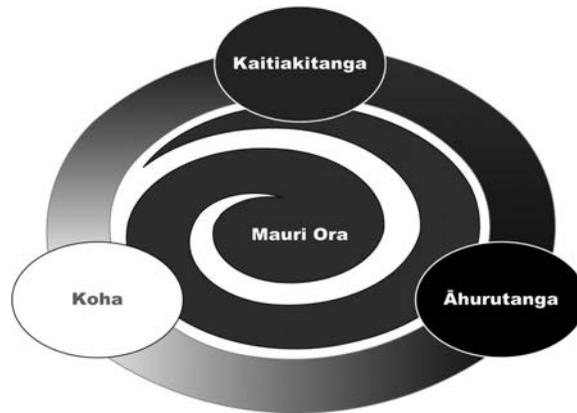


Figure 1. The Kaupapa Wānanga framework.

places, with the right responsibilities, to get a job done in the best way possible (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015a, p. 18).

Āhurutanga is best described as the “How,” acknowledging the varied activities that need to be undertaken in an ethical and meaningful way. For the Maori people, it is about nurturing safe spaces. Part of human nature is the need to feel warm and safe, and that is what Āhurutanga is about. It relates to kaitiakitanga in that we assume responsibilities that challenge us as long as we are provided with sufficient support. This keeps us safe and allows us to successfully complete the tasks and responsibilities we have been given (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015a, p. 18).

Koha is best described as the “What,” acknowledging the importance of relevance making *contributions of consequence*. Koha is an act of giving and receiving, and it is always done generously. We can koha our time, talents, energy, resources, our aroha, and our understanding. We are more likely to koha in these kinds of ways if we feel safe, so koha is strongly connected to Āhurutanga (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015a, p. 18).

Mauri ora, located in the centre of the diagram, is so positioned because of an acknowledgement that the overall purpose of any and every value (kaupapa) must be considered in relation to the ongoing and conscious pursuit of the well-being (Mauri Ora) of that same value. Thus, the placement of Mauri ora acknowledging the pursuit of well-being is at the core of all TWoA values and activities (Hoani, 2012). Mauri ora is the energy that drives us to contribute, learn, and grow so that we can achieve our fullest potential.

To summarise, this framework asks us as teachers to make contributions that should have profound consequences through koha, to behave in a supportive and nurturing manner through Āhurutanga, and to do so by maintaining kaitiakitanga as compassionate beings, for the achievement of Mauri ora (Edwards, 2011).

Dynaspeak

In TWoA, we have an English language school called Dynaspeak. There is a variety of courses offered for students (taura) that includes New Zealand national certificates of English, International English, and Cambridge English courses. These programmes are classroom-based (face-to-face) learning, where the students work as a whole class, in smaller groups, in pairs, and on their own (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015a). Students also receive tasks to complete between classes to guide them in their learning. The following section will demonstrate how the language teaching at

TWōA is especially powerful because it is so strongly influenced by the values of the organisation (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, 2015b).

Kaitiakitanga

Teachers who deliver these programmes are highly experienced and choose not to teach from the book. They think outside the box by using a whole range of activities to help students learn, and most of their teaching styles are very interactive. As one teacher stated, “I like them to move around and talk to each other. I’m not your traditional teacher: Open your textbook and work from one to 10. I also do some extra tutorial classes if needed.”

Another teacher said, “I tend to focus on speaking and listening and kinesthetic ideas where they jump around in class and do a lot of movement . . . and do kinesthetic stuff. I’ll leave most of the grammar and written work for their homework, because I think in class I’ll give them basic grammar and then practice it. That is the most important thing.”

My students were unanimous in stressing that the things they liked best about their classes were their teachers, learning English grammar, and making friends. These adult learners also enjoyed working with others and spending time on group discussions during which they shared ideas and experiences.

Āhurutanga

Safe spaces for students are created before they are enrolled by completing a needs assessment, during which the Dynaspeak staff and teachers try to understand the students’ goals and difficulties. Once their needs have been identified, their learning is tailored to help them achieve their goals. One student shared the story of how her son did not want her to go to his parent-teacher interviews because she could not speak English. By studying at Dynaspeak, she gained the confidence to attend her son’s parent-teacher interviews. Another student wanted to gain enough confidence to speak to her neighbours and other people she would come into contact with.

Teachers also create safe spaces in the classroom by building a rapport with their students. One teacher “puts students into a good supportive group pairing someone from the same nationality with someone struggling to help encourage them to speak English. If I see someone who is struggling a little bit, I try to put them with some strong students.” Another teacher acknowledged the need to be “careful with cultural sensitivities in regards to religion and politics. So it is important to know the background of each student.”

My students indicated that they thought Dynaspeak improved their English skills. They described the learning environment as very friendly and comfortable. All students said their learning material was very good, and one stated, “the teacher prepares the materials for us every day. I think it is really helpful.”

Koha

At Dynaspeak, there are about 25 different student nationalities, so teachers are always learning from their students. One teacher said, “They’ve . . . taught me that everyone learns differently so it has helped me develop my teaching skills to cater to everyone’s different needs, so I adjust my teaching styles to meet these needs.”

Students acknowledged that they learned from each other by doing tasks together and having group discussions. Enjoying opportunities to talk to each other and share with other students was a recurring theme when students expressed their opinions of the classes they attended.

Mauri ora

Teachers at Dynaspeak build good relationships with their students, and graduation is a rewarding time, with student progress on display. Teachers can get a sense of how they are feeling and get

quite close to their students, who they teach for six weeks and often see every day. It is quite a close relationship.

Students not only gain the ability to improve their spoken English, they also learn about New Zealand society, especially Maori culture. They leave Dynaspeak better able to converse with their children in English, and they are more confident in their ability to communicate with others in their communities.

My Reflection

When I compare my experience while at university with the experience our students have had while studying at TWoA, I see two different worlds. A key difference for me is the interaction between the teachers and students (*kaitiakitanga*). We get to know our students as individuals, and we adjust our styles to meet their learning needs. We also interact with them personally so that we all share in the learning experience.

Sewell and St. George (2008) reiterated that learning is enhanced when students have sustained opportunities to participate in reciprocal exchanges in their classroom. As they take on a wider range of roles and responsibilities in which they share power with their teachers, they become aware of new ways of learning, new ways of seeing themselves, and new ways of relating to others (p. 210). That is, students move away from seeing themselves as compliant consumers of knowledge. Rather, they become colearners and contributors to a knowledge-creating inquiry with their peers and their teachers (Sergiovanni, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

Another difference is the nurturing of safe spaces (*āhurutanga*) in which our students feel welcomed into our classrooms and build their confidence to share openly with each other. I have experienced many powerful moments in our institute and in my own classes since I have been teaching at TWoA. I have seen the transition of students beginning the class as strangers who did not talk to each other but ending as open, relaxed, and mutually supportive individuals. They work together as a class to support each other to make sure no one falls behind in their studies (*koha*). This certainly never happened for me while I was at university.

Conclusion

Kaupapa Wānanga shapes the way we as teachers (*kaiako*) deliver our programmes in TWoA, and through practice it becomes a natural approach for many teachers. For students (*tauirā*), learning English as a second language using this way of teaching and emphasizing nurturing support and open inquiry with their teachers produces a richer learning experience. A Maori proverb (*whakatauki*) summarizes this eloquently: “*He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata,*” which translates as, “What is the most important thing in the world? It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.” Our students are central to all that we do as teachers, and as an institute. It is this focus on students and their Mauri ora throughout every interaction, meeting, or decision that makes TWoA such a unique place to work and study.

Zina Manu is a teacher at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, New Zealand.

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