

Ako Wānanga: The Art, Science and Spiritual Endeavour of Teaching and Learning in a Wānanga: A Localised Approach

Shane Edwards¹

¹*Ngāti Maniapoto/Waikato, New Zealand.*

Received: 26 Dec. 2012, Accepted: 1 Feb. 2013

Published online: 1 July 2013

Abstract: Wānanga are characterised and distinguished in Aotearoa/New Zealand statute by advancing education through teaching, learning and research informed and underpinned by tikanga and āhuatanga Māori¹. This differentiation has been necessary because the Aotearoa/New Zealand modern educational tradition has and remains largely a monocultural and one dimensional. As a result, positively different powerful potentials may be underutilised. Whilst the recent history of education in New Zealand, in so far as her Māori citizens are concerned, has come through orchestrated systems of assimilationist, integration, bicultural and most recently multiculturalist agendas, now more than at any other time in our colonial history, a move to Māori ways of knowing, doing and being are most pronounced. This is seen very clearly in the relatively recent dialogue and action of advancement framed within ‘Mātauranga Māori’ – Māori knowledge and practice.

Keywords: Māori ways of teaching and learning, indigenous, Ako Wānanga.

1. Whakataki/Introduction

One of the areas that have received only fleeting attention thus far is Māori ways of teaching and learning at the adult level, particularly ways powerfully underpinned and informed by Māori world views and Māori epistemologies as part of the paradigm of contributing to the continuation of the Mātauranga Māori continuum of knowledge. The discussion here seeks to explore ideas related to teaching and learning from a Mātauranga Māori perspective. In advancing Mātauranga Māori we recognise that it is part of the corpus of taonga tuku iho, inherited legacies, and this is most powerfully practiced and successful when it is carried by mana tuku iho. To engage with and through Mātauranga Māori also assumes that Mātauranga Māori is not accountable to ‘the academy’, ‘but rather, to ancestors and mokopuna. Mokopuna as yet unborn gave us Mātauranga Māori many eons ago and we have a duty to return it to them in the same state that it was gifted or tuku iho.

The developmental work at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA) that seeks to design, develop and implement a TWOA andragogy, what has been articulated as Ako Wānanga is an attempt to re-member and take the

appropriate elements of Māori world view and to apply them in the challenging contemporary time.

This discussion explores the need for (k)new² approaches to teaching and learning if Māori are to ever be free of the high levels of dis-ease and dis-comfort we currently experience³. This attempt to be courageous enough to ethnovision, to re-invent and to re-connect with our own ways of knowing, doing and being supports the idea that we are capable and should take responsibility to develop our own frameworks of being

2. Frameworks of being – why develop our own way?

Indigenous, including Māori (Nepe, 1991; Smith & Cram, 1997; Smith, 1999) scholars have called for us to develop our own frameworks for being so as to facilitate a shift from an over reliance on ‘others’ ways of knowing to distinctively Māori ways of knowing and being. This calls for distinctively Māori frameworks that are drawn from our own inventory of cultural epistemological and metaphysical foundations. This idea acknowledges that as Māori and as a Wānanga we know, and we wish to have

¹ Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

and share, our ways in which to teach, learn, evaluate and expend energy that we (k)new and still know can enter the world as justice, care and compassion and that we have a history of such ideas.

One way that TWoA does this is through the operationalization of its core philosophy – more correctly its kaupapa. The kaupapa in turn has been reshaped for application into a framework for practice called Kaupapa Wānanga that is fed by the elements of Koha, Kaitiakitanga and Āhurutanga in the pursuit of Mauri Ora. The framing in this way is an important way of moving from philosophy and theory to actual lived practice. Māori scholar, Linda Smith (1996:204)¹ is clear on the importance of framing and structuring our philosophies and kaupapa when she states;

The concept of kaupapa implies a way of framing and structuring how we think about those ideas and practices.

We are encouraged by these words at TWoA to go beyond what we have assumed and to no longer fear our own interpretation or remain unconscious to our own episteme. At a Wānanga level we can take the courageous space to not depend on the approval of established thought alone, we can engage in our own ways for our own needs. This recognises that in some quarters this work is counter hegemonic and counter scholarship, our efforts in regaining and reclaiming knowledge, potential and possibility.

The goal of achieving Mauri ora through our kaupapa acknowledges that this pursuit is transformative, it is conscious and that contextualisation is critical and that there is a human element that requires ‘real’ action.

² This idea of (k)new acknowledges a point made throughout this work, that the degree of our colonial infections, the subjugation of our ways of knowing and being have had the effect that things we may be constructing as ‘new’ may actually have already been known by our ancestors and we are simply engaging in the powerful project of ‘re-membling,’ (Smith, 1999).

³ Statistically Maori are represented negatively highlighting the worrying effects of inequity and life chances. For example, Maori make up close to 15% of the population yet we are 38% of youth unemployment, receive 35% of unemployment benefits, 42% of Domestic Purposes benefits and are 51% of the incarceration population. Retrieved on October 14th 2011 from <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/news/print.cfm?objectid=10757042&pnum=1>

⁴ Smith, L.T. (1996). *Kaupapa Maori Health Research. In, Hui Whakapiri: A Hui to Discuss Strategic Directions for Maori Health Research*. Wellington School of Medicine: Te Roopu Rangahau Hauora a Eru Pomare.

3. An important differentiation – Ako and Teaching and Learning

Up until this point in the discussion ‘teaching and learning’ has been used to describe what can be called the facilitation of learning. The use of the English language to describe Māori ways of being is challenging. It is even more challenged in attempting to present and transmit ideas from Māori episteme to Eurocentric thinkers and non-speakers of Te reo Māori, in the English language. There is challenge as regards the commensurability of thought and understanding of reason and reality. At a basic level it is difficult to explain Māori terms and ideas in English, and still adequately express the depth of Māori thought with the ‘to and fro’ required as you move between thought and representation (Gidley, 1994:9). You quickly realise that in attempting translations that sense and meaning differ when employing different types of language function in Māori and English, for example, generic-specific, synonyms-antonyms, contrastive pairs, semantic sets and multiple senses of allegorical terms.

Although all languages and cultures have concepts, each language and culture conceptualises, packages and codifies concepts and meaning using different systems of understanding. Language is not a neutral tool but rather is an epistemological system through which the world is ordered and knowledge is ordered as a network of meaning actively constitutive of reality (Wetherell, 2007). In this context language is a social process that is discursive and has material consequences. Salmond (1985:260) explains how a depth of understanding of Māori world views and in particular, language is essential if an accurate discourse of the culture from and of the culture is to be utilised.

The ontological orders of Māori knowledge are not obvious, and in seeking to begin to understand Mātauranga, a western epistemology cannot be presupposed. The reasonableness of Mātauranga rests within Māori knowledge and not in the partialities of translation, and gaps in translatability make room for political interest to enter discussions of Māori thought.

However Māori have always had ways to express the exchange, sharing, transmission, building and creation of knowledge. One of the ideas that contain the codified and encyclopaedic knowledge of our ancestors and how we might operationalize these timeless truths is contained within ‘ako.’

Some of the preeminent work on/in ako has been done by renowned Māori educationalist Dr Rose Pere in her work titled *Ako: Concepts and Learning in the Māori Tradition*. This seminal work explored the place and practice of culturalist education and learning from a Māori perspective. The work showed the timeless applicability

of Māori modes of learning and their significance. The work highlighted the centrality of ako in this approach.

Similar to the findings in Pere's work our own enquiry has found that as Māori we know the world through ako and that ako is a taonga tuku iho – (quote from here) it has traversed Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and is old and tested with elements of timelessness. As evidence we can look to language from some of the different parts of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa to track its development. For example, in the Samoan language A'o means to teach, a'oa'o to learn/teacher, a'oa'oina – learner. Similarly in Tahitian a'o is to advise/counsel, Hawaiian – ao to teach, to be enlightened, aoao to practice and in Tongan, ako – to teach.

As such, in the Māori context ako has value and is valuable. It relates ako as cultural capital, ethnic, organisational and other. This then makes ako epistemic capital, in that it explains how we know and how we apply Māori ways and modes of learning. The traverse of levels of knowing often found in mōhio, matau and marama have ako their common thread. Royal further denotes the common held ideas that ako denotes sometimes teacher and sometimes learner. He explains that ako is the grasping of a new knowing or ability and at the same time can be the process of facilitating knowing or ability. He shares further the family of ako, including kaiako, whakaako, akoako, akoranga, akomanga and ākonga highlighting ako as a distinctive field in its own right. To summarise the journey to date, Ako wānanga is the educational philosophy and practice of teaching and learning, the Te Wānanga o Aotearoa way, inspired and informed by three pou of our organisation:

- Te kaupapa o Te Wānanga o Aotearoa;
- Ngā uara (values); and
- Ngā takepu (principles) of Kaupapa Wānanga.

4. Ngā Takepu - The tenets of Ako Wānanga

TWoA has taken the ideas encapsulated in its kaupapa through kaupapa wānanga and the ideas contained within the paradigm known as Ako and designed and developed for itself a localised philosophy, theory and practice to support its objectives of achieving '*Whānau Transformation*

Ako through Education.' Ako Wānanga has four tenets of practice building on the philosophy and theory of Kaupapa Wānanga. These tenets of practice are;

- *Whanaungatanga* – the relationship principle:

This tenet advances the centrality of relationships between entities, animate and inanimate, experience and the

whakapapa or inextricable connections as a base platform for educational success. Whanaungatanga supports comfort, validates lived experience, accepts people for who they are and everything they are and bring as well as actively seeks to make concrete connections of satisfaction. This grounded esteem and knowing allows learners to stand in positions and move from them without feelings of awkwardness or inferiority. It is bound together with the other tenets of Ako Wānanga

- *Ako* – the āhuatanga principle:

Recognises a reciprocal responsibility and obligation to learning. Ako is a sharing idea, sharing knowing, experience, time, space and energy. Ako includes action through content and transmission fora that is context rich, relevant and appropriate, learner centred and links with the other tenets.

- *Aro* – the reflection principle:

Aro is the focused intent within knowing, knowledge creation and knowledge building inherent within Ako Wānanga. It incorporates ideas of conscientisation, praxis and critical reflection supporting agency, change and transformation at individual and group levels. The view that only through *aro* will the inverse *ora* be achieved contained within our commitment to Mauri Ora.

- *Te Hiringa* – the wairua principle:

Te Hiringa visibilises the inherent nature of spirituality within indigenous world views including education. This element is fed by motivation, passion and intent, what many Māori commentators called, te ihi, te wehi and te wana that provides the ethos and added value in practice. It is the emotional content of wānanga education and acknowledges that spirituality is a source of quality for groups, especially when it is infused with purpose and enthusiasm within the host group.

5. The Mauri Ora Continuum of Development and Measuring Ako Wānanga

The tenets of Ako Wānanga are inextricably linked to our goal of achieving Mauri Ora. The Mauri Ora position is a state of excellence in the elements of our practice of knowledge building, creation and sharing - Ako. To help guide us through positions, levels or spaces of being to the state of Mauri Ora we have created and articulated a set of standards that in our context describe those positions, that we observe and evaluate ourselves against as part of a larger system of quality improvement. We utilize these as anchors to help us make self-assessment at individual and group level about our practice against the tenets of Ako Wānanga detailed above. The Mauri Ora Continuum of

Development utilizes the timeless principle of Mauri at each stage of development and differentiates the various levels of development. We articulate these developmental stages as Mauri Moe, Mauri Noho, Mauri Tu, and Mauri Ora.

We have four Mauri states that we use to grade the quality of ako at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

State	Definition
Mauri Ora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transformative practice that consistently exceeds expectations. Can confidently contribute to the development and transformation of others; kaimahi and ākongā.
Mauri Tū	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High level of proficiency and consistently informs practice.
Mauri Noho	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited application yet has begun to participate and interact. Expresses willingness to engage and develop ones practice.
Mauri Moe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State of inactivity and non-participation. Has potential and is an opportunity 'not yet begun'.

6. Observations to support quality improvement with the Mauri Ora continuum of Development

Ako Observations (AO) are a pragmatic approach to evaluating the practice of the tenets of Ako Wānanga. The observation system helps us both measure relative levels of competency and skill whilst also identifying where needs, resources and focus exists and energy should be placed, also helping us to determine where we will place investment in Ako Wānanga training and development.

AO aims to support practitioners in the development, application and knowledge of Ako Wānanga. As an organization committed to transformation AO provides empirical evidence that demonstrates quality practice at TWoA and that supports our agenda of self-assessment and quality improvement. Additionally, best practice is able to be shared and disseminated TWoA wide. Finally, AO allows us to demonstrate continuous improvement through reflection and action in regards to the quality of learner success.

AO is a 3-phased process designed with the intent that all activity is commensurate with kaupapa Wānanga and

specifically the tenets of āhurutanga, koha and kaitiakitanga. We utilize the tenets of Ako Wānanga detailed above and the Mauri states as the levels of proficiency (refer table above) and progression. It is important to note that the intent of AO in this early stage is to support, develop, invest and leverage areas of strength and developing in our provision and practice of Ako Wānanga. This process is not a tool for performance management or remuneration benefits.

7. Conclusion

The work here as sought to explain and further advance what ako looks, feels, tastes, smells and sounds like in our context. We are in the position of moving from reclaiming, naming and describing to positions of practicing. This is powerful work as we appreciate that should we be successful then at that point transformation and liberation will move from possibility to actuality. We have framed this within our institutions philosophy through kaupapa wānanga and called it Ako Wānanga. Ako Wānanga plays a significant role in quality improvement as it is the basis of kaiako recruitment and professional development which then manifests itself as quality teaching and learning for akonga.

Moreover it articulates the expectations of ako in Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and in turn informs kaiako practice, attitudes and behaviours in our ako spaces and engagements. This is a new position for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, where it is clearly defining its unique approach to education through identifying the 'key ingredients' that has contributed to positive learning experiences for thousands of akonga who have entered its doors over the past twenty-five years.

Ako Wānanga is shaped by te kaupapa o Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, ngā uara and ngā takepu that make it unique to Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

There are four tenets of Ako Wānanga: **Whanaungatanga, Ako, Aro** and **Te Hiringa**. All four are equally important and represent key aspects of ako and are highly valued by Te Wānanga o Aotearoa as contributors to creating an environment conducive to quality ako.

Ako Wānanga responds to meet our ako obligations to the tenets of kaupapa Wānanga that asks us to make contributions of profound consequence - koha, provision of supportive and nurturing behaviours – āhurutanga and to do so as part of kaitiakitanga – compassionate beings, for the achievement of well-being – Mauri ora.

In the broader sense Ako Wānanga is a localised approach to what most closely resembles teaching and learning in 'other' contexts. We interpret and apply ako as an inherited legacy, a taonga tuku iho, through Ako Wānanga

as the art, science and spiritual endeavour of ako. In this regard ako and Ako Wānanga forms part of the corpus of Mātauranga Māori where this approach is both philosophically based and resides. It is theoretically

positioned as best practice for our context and applied in our everyday practice.

References

Gidley, M. (1994). *Representing Others: An Introduction*. In, Gidley, M (ed.). *Representing Others: White Views of Indigenous Peoples*. University of Exeter Press: Exeter.

Nepe, T. M. (1991). *E Hao Nei e Tenei Reanga: Te Toi Huarewa Tipuna; Kaupapa Māori : An Educational Intervention System*. Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, University of Auckland.

Pere, R. (1994). *Ako: Concepts and Learning in the Māori Tradition*. Monograph, Te Kohanga Reo National Trust Board.

Salmond, A. (1985). *Māori Epistemologies*. In, Reason and Morality. Ed. Joanna Overing. London: Tavistock Publications.

Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Smith, L.T. (1996). *Kaupapa Māori Health Research*. In, *Hui Whakapiri: A Hui to Discuss Strategic Directions for Māori Health Research*. Wellington School of Medicine: Te Roopu Rangahau Hauora a Eru Pomare.

Smith, L. T. & Cram, F. (1997). *An Evaluation of the Community Panel Division Pilot Programme*. Commissioned Report for the Crime prevention Unit. Wellington Department of Corrections.

Wetherell, M., Lafleche, M. & Berkeley, R. (2007). *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion*. California: Sage.