Enhancing Mana Through Co-design

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Ko Toirere te maunga
Ko Mamaru te waka
Ko Whangaroa te moana
Ko Kahukuraariki te whare
Ko Waitaruke te marae
Ko Ngāti Kahu ki Whangaroa te iwi
Ko Ngāti Roha te hapū
Ko Laura McKenzie ahau

My background
What is my personal context?

Having been in education for over a decade now, my pedagogy has evolved significantly.

Yet, one thing that has not changed for me is my focus on individuals’ strengths – the idea we must magnify these.

I remember what it was like growing up and hearing derogatory comments about Māori people – a direct result of colonisation. I have seen the effects of systemic injustice in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Hence, my year of research through the Dr. Vince Ham eFellowship proved hugely important to me, my whānau, and my learners.
When I was a teenager, I worked in a pharmacy. One day at the end of my shift, my sister came in to pick me up. My sister has a darker complexion and I have fair skin. Having not met my sister before, the pharmacist assumed I only had siblings that looked like me; light skinned with dark hair. However, my sister is very obviously Māori. The pharmacist held my arm then whispered in my ear. “Watch that one...” she said, gesturing toward my sister, “...you know how they can be” – insinuating my sister was going to steal. I quickly told her “that one” was my sister, and she tried to take it back “Oh oh” she stammered, “I suppose she’ll be alright then”. It’s these small comments that many of our Māori teenagers still face today. And when heard, again and again, day after day, they build and – in increments – can become painful cuts with real impact. Words which assume, and then manifest into real actions as other instruments that further oppress and dismiss our indigenous people.

These confrontations in my own adolescence led me as an educator to self-reflect on what I needed, and ask: “What would I have benefited from as a young ‘urban Māori’ in New Zealand’s education system?” My own ara (path) of personal healing prompted me to consider how I could help others heal from the negative effects of intergenerational trauma and help others grow their mana to succeed in the face of microaggressions. Late 2018, I applied for the Core Education Dr. Vince Ham eFellowship and completed the documents with my ideas of how I wanted to grow my learners’ mana in 2019. I was humbled to have been selected as one of the 2019 eFellows and am grateful for what this year has helped reveal.
My research
What was the focus and scope?

The Dr. Vince Ham eFellowship began with a hui where we drafted a research canvas. Through this process I developed my main focus question: How might a co-design approach work to decolonise the process of unit planning and therefore enhance the mana of our Māori tauira enabling equitable outcomes for these learners?

This initiated plans for a new course, which was given the go ahead by my school’s senior leadership team: 11Tikanga. This class had only one prerequisite: learners applying to be in 11Tikanga must bring enthusiasm and want to learn more about Māori culture, kaupapa, kawa and tikanga. Any student could sign up to the class – we refused no one. We had a number of Māori and non-Māori add 11Tikanga to their 2019 timetables.

In the early stages I had a lot of questions from family and friends, the most pertinent being: “Why is this type of class necessary?” I would relay the facts to them: According to anecdotal evidence, many Māori students in my context feel disconnected from school, bored, misunderstood, or not honoured as tangata whenua of Aotearoa. These feelings result in low grades, truancy, and a disconnect between the learner, their whānau and kura. Addressing inequity is important in turning the statistics which report Māori in top percentiles for prison populations, poverty, and low NCEA results. Decolonising spaces gives our Māori learners room to enhance their mana and tell their own stories. Through decolonisation we also bring to fruition the dreams of their ancestors, and this matters when we want to restore dignity to the indigenous people of Aotearoa who are still affected by colonisation.
Our methodology

Why did I do this?

From my research I believe we can all embed decolonising elements into our planning and courses, even without calling it that. Another way to think of this is indigenising through ‘creating green spaces’. I believe we can create pockets of positivity or ‘pockets of green’ and I have seen this in my own department at my school.

During one of our eFellowship hui in Ōtautahi we were told of the Green the Rubble project. This project focuses on ‘public green spaces and places where communities can gather’. They are a “charitable trust that grew after the Canterbury earthquakes to contribute to the rejuvenation of the city” (Greening the Rubble, n.d., para. 3). They co-create spaces that support strong connections and wellbeing between people and the environment.

Hearing about this inspired me and changed my mindset. Sometimes revamping a whole system or class is impossible. However, we can still ‘green the colonised rubble’ with small positive interjections and ideas. Often our criteria itself sets learners up to fail or produce work and ideas which may not necessarily showcase their true skills, ability, and talent. Our criteria is made with language and statements which sometimes, unintentionally, create inequality. It got me thinking about how sometimes even our criteria can be rehashed to more effectively ensure Māori have assessment result equity. Therefore, the first thing we did in 11Tikanga was co-design the process of unit planning and redefine task criteria.
What did we do?

Firstly, we got to know each other through storytelling (and explanations, research into oral storytelling in a Māori context), kai (and the importance of such as kawa for school pōwhiri), and our first unit of work: weaving harakeke.

At the beginning of the year I gave each student a kete – a basket where they could add physical or metaphorical items they believed would help or had helped grow their mana. At the end of each term I let them know that I would be asking them to share what was in their kete.

I gathered student voice data every term and used their responses to guide future tasks.

This data was gathered via Google forms so learners were able to remain anonymous unless they wanted to explicitly state their name.
Our results

What did learners share from their kete?

When asking learners what was in their kete at the end of the year, these were some of the responses:

“I have mana, but I always had that tbh (to be honest) – I also now have better rap skills – that’s important because Miss said I can use my raps in English for poetry.”

(No name, personal communication, September 18, 2019)

“I have a pen and a rubber. The rubber doesn’t look like it has any use because you can rub out pen, but I don’t want to rub out pieces of myself, even if they are mistakes. I have a pen so I can keep writing, even if I write a mistake at least I am writing my story and moving forward. It’s important not to be stuck.”

(No name, personal communication, September 18, 2019)

Listening to the learners’ voice like this was significant. I liked this as it showed learners making connections to other subject areas – something that they historically found challenging to do. We had talked a lot informally about how we can get out of stagnant awa (rivers), how we can move forward, or even move with strength against strong currents that may be trying to hold us back.

Another student wrote:

“I have memories of people that have gone before me. Photos of them and their names. Also my charger because my phone dies fast because I dropped it off the wharf accidentally.”

(No name, personal communication, September 18, 2019)
Yet another learner showcased courageous honesty in their responses:

“Some fear and some sadness – but over all hope.”

(No name, personal communication, September 18, 2019)

This particular student chose to be identified in the Google form so I was able to further discuss their response, where it emerged that hope came from the fact that “simply existing [as an intersectional teenager] is a radical act”. This led to us having a discussion on just how radical identity can be and, in the end, we talked about how being a teenager itself could be considered another category to slot under intersectionality. The student linked these ideas to a quote they saw on Instagram by Caroline Cardwell: “In a society that profits from your self doubt, liking yourself is a rebellious act”.
What were the overall outcomes?

The 11Tikanga unit grew from a class brainstorm where the learners asked to do “traditional and physical” (No name, personal communication, April 2, 2019) forms of mahi – work which required “group efforts and relaxation with no essay writing ... real learning” (No name, personal communication, April 2, 2019).

By the end of the year, learners had a 100% pass rate of the NCEA standards they attempted. 100% reported that they felt more confident, proud, and more knowledgeable at the end of their year. 80% wanted to continue into 12Tikanga.

I was so excited to read their comments and see this data. In the end of year survey, one student even noted:

“I am finally actual [sic] Māori now. I can speak about important Māori history and I know what to do during pōwhiri.”
(No name, personal communication, September 18, 2019)

My hopes and dreams for this project were met: We successfully co-design a mana-enhancing unit.
Our cultural sustainability

Where to now?

Next year we are continuing with 11Tikanga and forming the new 12Tikanga course. This is because 100% of the class passed every standard they attempted and the majority were keen to carry on into year 12. I am the HoD of English so the English staff are also working to indigenise English units across all of our classes from karakia to text choice.

During the year our class talked a lot about how to respond to microaggressions and racist ‘jokes’. I am always interested in the way others, especially educators, work to shut down and hydrate the pale, male, stale mindsets through ‘greening the rubble’ and giving others the space and dignity to grow their mana. As Angela Davis (2014) explained, “you have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time”.

I hope to continue to encourage others to think about how they create safe spaces, or decolonise and indigenise their workplaces – how can we encourage radical or rebellious acts of self love from our learners and colleagues? And, how can we unlearn unhelpful and deficit thinking?

Finally, I believe one specific section of our school karakia completely embodies the kaupapa of our 11Tikanga class for 2019 and inspires what we plan to do in the future:

‘Tāonga i huna, tāonga i tauakina. Te ngākau oha ka tūramatia. Tera te whetu kapokapo e te ngākau marie. He hau roki moana te hohou rongo kia tākoha noa te hinengaro’.

This can be summed up as follows: We know that some people have skills and talents that are visible and some people’s skills and talents are hidden or haven’t been realised yet, but we know that with kindness and compassion, we can spark the light in others. Let us be gentle and forgiving like a soft breeze that calms rough seas and let our minds be free of stress and worry so that we can focus on improving ourselves and others.

I am excited to see how our learners will work to radically transform their worlds as they continue to grow their mana.
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Ngā mihi nui,

Laura

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