Indigeneity, Engaging Students and the Articulation of Relationships

Sally Mihihara Steedman, Aqura Gordon, Jayne King and Miriama Scott
CONTEXT

MANUKAU INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Manukau Institute of Technology is located within the boundaries of Manukau City, the third largest city in New Zealand. The population of Manukau City is as ethnically diverse as it is young, with Pacific nations people making up 26.9% (6.5% nationally), Māori 16.5% (14.7% nationally) and Asian 15.1% (6.6% nationally).

The Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) is situated within the lowest socio-economic area of Manukau City, Otara, and would arguably host the largest ethnic student diversity of any learning institution in New Zealand. MIT struggles with its diversity dilemma as much as any other institution/organization, but seeks to address some of the inequalities through innovative strategies and initiatives which are seen as culturally inclusive and addressing some of the inherent dilemmas.

The first is the place of tangata whenua or the indigenous population, the second is the growing diversity and ethnicity, and thirdly is the affordability of tertiary study. It is within these conditions that ‘engaging students’ becomes a critical factor in not only attracting students to MIT, but also in maintaining the engagement, particularly as employers are demanding graduates with higher level qualifications. For example, if you want to practice as a social worker you must hold a degree (the minimum qualification being a Bachelors degree) and you must be deemed competent to practice by the Social Work Registration Board. This ruling will be enforced from 2007. MIT is responding to this by developing its own degree programme based on the Treaty of Waitangi and two world views.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on Māori as the Treaty of Waitangi partner and how Aqura and Jayne perceived their engagement (academic and pastoral) with the institution as full-time students studying in a bi-cultural programme, in the Māori Studies department, with Māori and non-Māori lecturers and support people. We will also let them tell their own stories of how they view the institution, and some of the practices they encountered, and their interpretation of how the institution is meeting its obligations and commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT – TWO PERSPECTIVES

Aqura’s Story

Aqura is a single parent 30 something year old female of Māori descent. Aqura completed school to the end of year 12, and has had quite a good educational background to high school level. She comes from a provincial town in the North Island. Aqura describes herself as being from a family of ‘generational beneficiaries’ and thought that this was how the rest of her life would be. Aqura is the only person in her immediate family who has completed any tertiary study. Aqura is regarded as a role model within her family.
Aqura was motivated to attend MIT due to a documentary she watched on TV about a gang affiliated Māori woman who had studied social work at MIT and who credits that learning to turning her life around. The woman Aqura describes was the only woman in New Zealand to become the president of a chapter of the gang to whom she affiliated. The woman had chosen to study social work in the Māori Studies Department of Manukau Institute of Technology; this is how Aqura ended up in the Diploma in Bicultural Social Work Practice.

**Jayne’s Story**

Jayne is also a 30 something year old female of Pākehā descent. Jayne was bought up in a ‘multicultural’ family. Jayne’s brother, mother and natural father are Pākehā. Jayne’s step-dad is Samoan, her siblings are half Pākehā/Samoan. Her step-brothers and sisters are Samoan. Jayne’s partner of many years is Māori and her two children are of Pākehā/Māori descent.

Jayne left school at the age of 14 with no qualifications. Jayne entered the next part of her life involved in drug-taking, alcohol abuse and gang affiliated activities. She and her partner still associate with the gang, whom Jayne describes as being ‘like family’. Jayne’s decision to enter tertiary education was not made lightly and took a tremendous amount of courage. She was more comfortable with Māori and Pasifika people, so purposely sought out a course of study to engage in from this world view. This is how she ended up enrolling on the Diploma in Bi-cultural Social Work Practice.

We present their stories so that we can learn from them as students who entered tertiary education with high expectations and a great deal of trepidation. It is critical for lecturers and institutions to respond to the diverse needs of students in order to engage them/for them to engage in the learning process.

**ENGAGING STUDENTS & BUILDING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

* Nau te rouru With your food basket
* Naku te rouru And my food basket
* Ka ora te iwi The people will be well

This Māori proverb is used to emphasise the importance of relationships, and this is particularly so in the relationship between the student and the lecturer. It also relates to the relationship the student feels or perceives she/he has between him/herself, the lecturer, the department and the institution.

For Jayne and Aqura there were times when they felt totally disconnected from everyone and everything at the institute and it seemed to them they were not getting what they had paid for or what they had anticipated. These ranged from being put down by individual lecturers; to feeling the institute was not honoring the Treaty of Waitangi or a Māori world view.

If engaging students is as much about the institution as it is about the motivation of the student, then the retention of students in the process of learning is a primary indicator of the lecturer and their ability to ‘feed’ the student with knowledge. The knowledge however must
be seen to be both relevant to the programme or course and ultimately to the workplace that the student has chosen as a career pathway. Therefore we view engagement around knowledge, how it is conveyed and whether the student feels affirmed in the learning process, which is facilitated by the lecturer and supported by institutional services (relationships). As a complementary process the lecturer, as a representative of the learning institution, is responsible for the transition from student to work professional and in particular for social work, working effectively and safely with clients.

The following diagram illustrates a series of triangular relationships, which in our opinion are pivotal to the role between the student, the learning environment and the workplace.

**Engagement/Relationship No. 1 - Student-Learning Environment-Lecturer**
The first triangle reflects the first year of engagement in the learning environment. The students are crucial to this business, as their engagement is a vital factor to the profitability of a learning institution. However, for Māori the reputation of a certain lecturer may well be an incentive for enrolling.

**Engagement/Relationship No. 2 - Worker-Lecturer-Workplace**
The second triangle refers to the central position of knowledge in the engagement between the student and lecturer. It builds on the previous triangle and is critical in preparing students for entry into the workforce. The knowledge must be current and relevant to the career prospects of the student. The pedagogy around delivery of information must be applicable to all students – in particular Māori. The professional skill of the lecturer and their relationship to the workplace is essential to fulfilling this objective.

**Engagement/Relationship No. 3 - Professional-Workplace-Client**
The final triangle represents the graduation of a skilled professional ready to work safely and effectively in the workplace with clients and their families. This professionalism is premised on how effectively the student has been engaged in the learning environment during their first year, and shows the commitment of all parties to the learning journey; student, lecturer and learning environment.