Te Toka Āhuru: An indigenous framework for whakaako (academic development)

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Patai: *What might academic development look like in a Māori context?*

At Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWoA) we face the daily challenge of creating models and frameworks which are relevant for our context, that being an environment grounded in Mātauranga Māori epistemologies and ideologies. After an 18-month journey as academic advisors in the Tainui region of TWoA, we formed the 'Ako Unit', a resource centre designed to support the reflective practice of our kaiako (teachers). This was based on our desire to facilitate the constant improvement of Ako, a concept which encompasses both teaching and learning. As our voyage progressed we considered the term 'academic development' and concluded that for us, this practice is 'whakaako' or the act of developing ako. In turn we re-titled our role as 'kaiwhakaako'. We examined our practice, our beliefs, our values, current practice external to TWoA, considered what would be best for our context, and created Te Toka Āhuru: A Māori framework for whakaako.
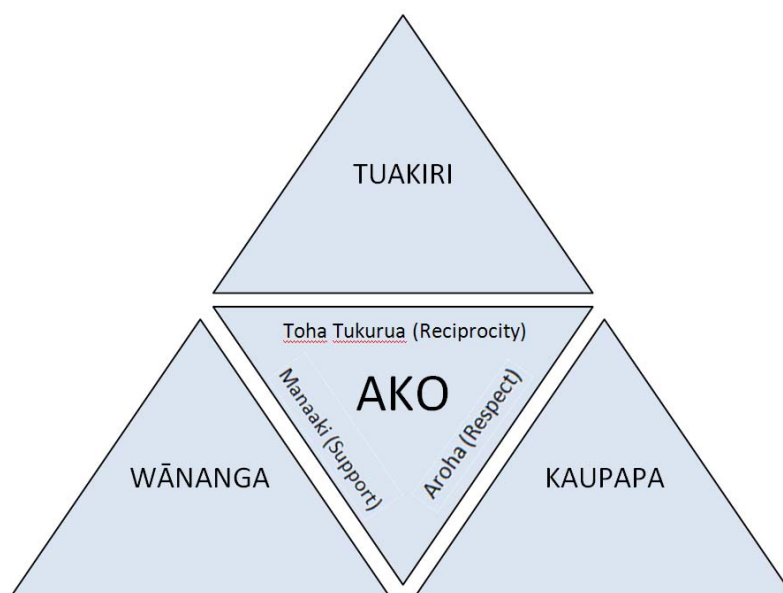

Figure 1: Te Toka Āhuru

The title, Te Toka Āhuru is used in waiata (songs) to refer to traditional landmarks, and expresses a sentiment of something resilient and homely. Ultimately te toka āhuru is a place of comfort and safety. In terms of this model, then, this place of comfort and safety is provided when all facets of preparation are implemented. When a tauira (student) is enshrined within a space of safety, challenge and support, the learning and teaching reaches a critical state.

The āhua (design, shape, look, feel) of this model comprises many traditional symbols: kawau māro for the strength of the flock (safety, strength); pātiki for the elusive flounder (sustenance); niho taniwha for the teeth of the sea beast (strength, whakapapa/genealogy); and

overall is a representation of nestling the most precious assets centrally for maximum protection. In this way, Te Toka Āhuru is an ako-centred model. It is kaiako-focussed with the kaiako as tauira. In it, the contribution of tauira and kaiwhakaako are equally valued, reinforcing relationships which are supportive and non-threatening.

The three outer facets of the model (Figure 1), tuakiri, wānanga, and kaupapa represent the three different categories of our practice. 'Tuakiri' refers to individuality and therefore individual strengths and needs of each kaiako we work with. It encompasses the reflective practices we engage in, such as in-class observations, Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) and any form of data collection for the purpose of assisting a kaiako in reflective practice.

'Wānanga' encompasses knowledge, wisdom, ideas, considerations, resources, and the creation, retention, dissemination, utilisation and advancement of such. It refers to the developmental practices in whakaako, such as training, workshops, and professional development or any activities designed to enhance the practices of the kaiako. The wānanga facet also alludes to a responsibility to past, present and future generations, giving a greater perspective to the work of the kaiwhakaako.

'Kaupapa' is congruence, or the state of cohesion in thoughts, directions and goals. This facet refers to the supportive practices we engage in, such as mentoring, establishing and facilitating communities of practice, and ongoing one-to-one support between kaiako and kaiwhakaako.

In the central kokiri (triangle) are the ako indicators. These are the observable occurrences which indicate that ako, within the context of whakaako, are occurring. They are: toha tukurua (reciprocity), aroha (respect) and manaaki (support). If any of these indicators are absent, this would cause the kaiwhakaako to take a step back and consider which of the facets of Te Toka Āhuru are not being applied successfully for the benefit of the kaiako.

The motivating force behind Te Toka Āhuru is tino rangatiratanga, or the belief that each individual should have the right to conduct him or herself in a way which is driven by internal rather than external motivation. The outcome of this is that, in action, Te Toka Āhuru may look different to other practices which attempt to combine both quality improvement and quality assurance, or in other words, development with compliance.

So what, then, might academic development look like in a Māori context? For us, Te Toka Āhuru in action will both assert and exemplify the following: 1) that significant development of ako is a result of internal, not external motivation; and therefore 2) whakaako must be completely and transparently separate from management processes and performance appraisal; and therefore 3) the relationship between kaiako and kaiwhakaako must be completely confidential, thereby creating the safe and non-threatening environment conducive to reflection and growth. In this way, the mauri ora of all those involved is preserved, and our right to tino rangatiratanga is sustained, while the quality of ako is continually enhanced.

Mauri ora!

Suggestions for further reading

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