

What is Tika when Teaching Small Groups in a University Setting in Aotearoa New Zealand?

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Question: Rather than asking how tikanga Māori is applicable to the practice of teaching small groups, I would like to consider: what is tika when teaching small groups?

As facilitators of a small group (ideally with less than 40 people) it is our privilege, our responsibility and our challenge to create a supportive learning environment that is safe for all participants to engage in discussion and/or problem and task based learning. Not only must the environment for learning be safe, but students and the facilitator should leave the group more skilled and more knowledgeable than when they arrived. As the facilitator of this process, this expectation can be daunting. Drawing on almost two decades of my own experience teaching in a university, I consider that the following teaching practices are tika in the context of teaching small groups.

Mihimihi

At the first scheduled session give all participants (including yourself as the teacher) the opportunity to place themselves in context by telling everyone: who they are, where they are from, what programme they are enrolled in, why they are taking your course and any other relevant information the learner would like to share with the group. Since you will be mindful to create a safe environment for the sharing of this kind of information, learners should be receptive to this first vitally important task.

The significance of the mihimihi cannot be underestimated and the process should not be truncated or excluded. The following is a sample response and indeed, could have been my response as an undergraduate student:

Tēnā koutou (Hello, greetings)
Ko Robyn Manuel āhau (I am Robyn Manuel)
Nō Te Rarawa rāua ko Ngāti Kahu (I am from Te Rarawa and Ngāti Kahu, two tribes in the far north of Aotearoa NZ)
Ko Roma rāua ko Ōtangaroa ōku marae (My marae are Roma and Ōtangaroa)
Tokorua ōku tuākana, kotahi tāku teina, tokorua āku tungane (I have two older sisters, one younger sister and two brothers)
E tipu ake āhau i Māngere (Though I am from Te Rarawa and Ngāti Kahu, I grew up in Māngere, Auckland)
Whaia te iti kahurangi, he tohu putaiāo (I am studying towards a degree in science)
I am here because this course is a pre-requisite for Stage 3 Inorganic Chemistry and I want to be a science teacher at secondary school.
I am the first in my whānau to come to University and I dream of representing NZ in netball.

Your other students may respond that they are parents, study part-time, speak several languages, are on international scholarships, catch two buses and a train then drop off their 2-year old at daycare before they get to your 8am class etc. What matters most is that they have been given the opportunity to tell you who they are and you now know considerably more about them than their name and student identification number.

The opportunity to mihimihi to the group must be afforded to all new people who join the class at a later time or date. This allows each person to be placed in context and find their fit in the class.

Inclusion of te reo and Mātauranga Māori

In the context of a University in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is appropriate that te reo and mātauranga Māori are incorporated naturally into your teaching practice and course learning material. For some subject matter, quantum physics and organic chemistry as examples, this may pose a challenge. However, the sooner you begin your journey towards understanding and accepting other knowledges as valid and valuable, the sooner the incorporation of te reo and mātauranga Māori becomes a natural process. This validation of other knowledge systems is a critical component of inclusive teaching practice.

Whānau(ngatanga)

There are many definitions of whānau. Your group may in time consider themselves a whānau and thus function both as interdependent individuals grounded in their connections to each other and as, independent individuals brought together several times a week for 50 minutes at a time. Either way, this is a distinct learning community within a much larger, sometimes overwhelming, university-wide learning community.

The mihimihi session may well have exposed kinship whānau ties whereby class members share common ancestry or grew up in the same obscure part of the country (or world). Ultimately, having the group functioning as a whānau allows for the sharing of resources including skill sets and knowledge bases, different interpretations of learning material and finally, an accountability to each other to succeed. Perhaps more than anything, being accountable to others is a powerful motivator and as is the case in many whānau, a certain degree of tolerance and understanding towards each other is required.

Manaaki tangata

A natural consequence of a group learning together and being bound by whānaungatanga is the desire to manaaki (care) and support each other. Therefore, creating opportunities and providing the mechanism for students to work in groups, to solve problems and craft responses to assignments, is as valid as providing opportunities for students to work independently. As a student, the practice of engaging the support of your teacher and your peers must be viewed as another way to engage with the learning material.

Whakamana te tangata

At all times, the mana (integrity and dignity) of the individual must at the very least, remain intact. In the first instance, this is the responsibility of the teacher; however, over time this becomes the responsibility of all members of this learning community. Maintaining or indeed enhancing the mana of the individual will likewise maintain or enhance the mana of the group. Any practice that diminishes the mana of the individual is a practice that cannot be acceptable to the group.

In practice this is most easily achieved by establishing a clear, mutually agreed to, classroom code of conduct or rules of engagement. This code of conduct is to be established at the beginning of the semester and will include “kaua e whakaiti te mana o te tangata, literally ‘do not ridicule or belittle others’. By implementing this component in the code of conduct, students learn valuable interpersonal skills such as empathy for others and how to interact with each other sensitively.

Tuakana/teina reciprocal relationships

We know what we know; we know what we don't know and, we don't know what we don't know. The teacher does not always know best. Our recognition of our limitations or knowledge gaps does not whakaiti or diminish us but can in fact, empower us. Fortunately,

the tuakana–teina reciprocal relationship allows all members of your small group to both teach and learn. Tuakana–teina can exist between students as well as between the teacher and the students. In most cases, the teacher is in the role of tuakana; however, in some situations the teacher can be located comfortably in the teina role with a, or some, students as tuākana. Note that any individual’s role as either tuakana or teina can change several times in a single session.

Summary

I have provided my thoughts on best practice teaching when working with smaller groups of students enrolled in the same University course. These values and practices are what I have found in my experience as a tertiary teacher in two distinct Faculties (Science, and Medical and Health Sciences) and in two Universities (University of Auckland and AUT University) to be tika and to produce empowered, engaged and successful learners.

In your role as a teacher of a small group, I invite you to implement some if not all, of the practices above to enhance the students’ experience of learning and sometimes teaching, in a small group.

Author Notes

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