

The Poutama tukutuku metaphor and how it adds value to the tertiary learning journey

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An external review of student services in 2010 prompted us to reflect on how we might best foster academic learning in an increasingly diverse and expanding student body, within our finite resources. As a result we changed our name to Poutama Academic Learning Services to reflect our philosophical framework, and commissioned a tukutuku panel using the Poutama pattern to represent the aspirational, inspirational and scaffolding nature of our work with students and staff. We have since found the metaphors of Poutama and tukutuku to be powerful motivators of students as well as providing a philosophical framework for our practice with students and our active partnership with staff.

The adoption of the name Poutama Academic Learning Services was a deliberate strategy by our team to move away from any institutional perception of our former designation of Learning Skills being seen as one of remediation, towards the view of our service as one of legitimate and deliberate scaffolding of academic ability, motivation, persistence and effort. Simpson (2008) takes the view that these are keys to academic resilience and achievement. This shift was necessary to enable our existing resources to expand to align with the strategic requirements of The Tertiary Education Strategy (2010) with its focus on:

- More students progressing from Level 4 into Level 5-8 qualifications
- Students in Levels 1-3 improving their language, literacy and numeracy
- More students under 25 completing at Levels 4 and above, particularly at degree level
- More Māori students succeeding at higher levels
- More Pasifika students succeeding at higher levels
- More students with disabilities completing higher level qualifications
- More students completing qualifications at all levels

The Tertiary Education Commission focus was on more students succeeding. We needed to refine our own focus. Durie's (2001) Te Whare Tapa Whā model of Maori health with its four fundamental areas -wairua/spiritual, tinana/physical, whānau/social and hinengaro/cognitive – applied equally well to the field of education and student

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support. As Learning Advisors, we were well positioned to recognise when students could benefit from other services to support them in any of these areas and to refer them on. However our distinctive focus needed to be on hinengaro, to staircase more students towards academic retention, progression and success.

This has required an equitable increase in student access to academic advice. In 2004 every student had been entitled to two 60 minute one-to-one appointments each week. Students made their own bookings on a 'first come first served' basis, irrespective of level of study. By 2005, in the face of increasing demand and static staffing levels, this entitlement was reduced to one 50 minute appointment each week. After discussing the level of independence required at different levels of study with Faculty deans, we reduced the time slot for one-to-one sessions from 50 minutes to 25 minutes per week for students studying at Level 6 and above. This released many more potential one-to-one opportunities, and induced a sharper focus in each individual session. We increased the number of tutorial sessions and introduced co-tutoring in classes. The latter offered good use of our time through being able to work with whole classes of new students to cover many of the foundational academic skills needed at the beginning of their programmes. These sessions have been contextualised, aiming to stretch students to the next level of academic ability and cover many of the competencies which they require to persist and succeed.

Co-tutoring is where a content tutor and a Learning Advisor work together in a class session. This model has been extensively used in the Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) context where the Learning Advisor is an LLN expert. In the LLN context, Krsinich and Roberts (2008) identified three common variants of co-tutoring, all of which can and do occur jointly and severally within each of the sessions in a series. These are:

- Up-front teaching - This involves both staff members taking turns to teach. All teaching is contextualised to the course content so no extra LLN material is brought to the classroom. The Learning Advisor may pre-teach vocabulary, or other LLN skills or strategies that scaffold the students.
- Tag/tandem teaching – The Learning Advisor 'seizes the moment' to teach or comment on a specific LLN point where appropriate. Krsinich and Roberts (2008) found that content tutors appreciated LLN co-tutors who were able to "go with the flow".
- Roving – content tutor at the 'front' and Learning Advisor roving around providing assistance to individuals or small groups who need extra help.

The shape of a particular co-tutored session series evolves from the relationship of the co-tutors and the students as well as the parameters of the academic content and specific demands of the course.

At Whitireia New Zealand co-tutoring was initially used to embed LLN and to build capability in LLN. It was also employed to enrich the subject content of language

tutorials for English as an additional language (EAL) nursing students. Subsequently the model has evolved to support first year nursing, early childhood education and performing arts degree programmes through embedding aspects of academic scholarship such as academic reading and writing, oral presentation and clinical communication and study skills within the subject context in the first semester of a student's course of study. At this point it became apparent that changes in our modes of delivery were indicative of a cumulative process of change in focus from remediation to scaffolding students to learn and succeed. We changed the name of our service to Poutama Academic Learning Services to reflect this shift in philosophy and shape.

The traditional meaning of the Poutama pattern is described as

...the stepped pattern of tukutuku panels and woven mats, symbolising genealogies and also the various levels of learning and intellectual achievement. Some say they represent the steps which Tāne-o-te-wānanga ascended to the topmost realm in his quest for superior knowledge... (Māori Dictionary, 2011, para. 1).

This pattern is often used in a whareniui to represent the aspirations of an iwi, not just an individual. Arapera Royal Tangaere (1997) alludes to the significance of the Poutama pattern as a metaphor for the time spent consolidating new knowledge, represented by the plateau at each step; and for the period of engaging strenuously with the new knowledge, represented by the vertical step. These lead to continuing progress as people journey upwards together.

Vygotsky (1978) originally coined the term zone of proximal development (ZPD) to describe the gap between what a child can accomplish alone and what a child can accomplish with assistance. As the child is assisted or scaffolded and develops mastery of the new skill, the ZPD moves to the next stage of challenge. The Poutama pattern represents the process of scaffolding (Knowing your learner, 2010) as learners are provided with a framework and support to enable them to acquire new skills and knowledge, and to consolidate these before attempting the next challenge.

Deliberate acts of teaching are integral to this scaffolding process. These include explicit use of learning goals, students identifying what success looks like, overt teaching of how to learn and transfer skills, modelling of effective learner behaviour, scaffolding of new skills, using the teachable moment, enlisting peer support within the class, and regular and prompt feedback (MacGibbon, 2010).

Having decided upon the name change, we commissioned our Whitireia weavers to weave us a tukutuku panel as a visual representation of our new direction. There are many stylistic variations of the Poutama pattern. The version used in our particular Poutama tukutuku panel was chosen by master weaver Kohai Grace to emphasise the sense of continuous upward striving (personal communication, November 11, 2010).

Stepwise journeys occur in parallel with others as many learners and staff are on different upward journeys. Each stepwise journey comprises a group of stitches (tuhi) which represent peers and support on the learning journey. The vertical components of each step represent challenge and stretch to master new skills, while the horizontal components of each step represent periods of consolidation.

As this tukutuku panel was woven, aspects of the weaving process emerged as powerful metaphors. The weaving lattice comprises the honey-coloured vertical rods which are at the rear of the panel (kakaho) and the black horizontal rods which are visible at the front of the panel (kaho). The lattice is secured with golden vertical lashings on each side of the panel (tumatakahuki). At this point the lattice is stable and ready for the main pattern to be woven, and the kakaho are clearly visible through the kaho. Kakaho represent the students – their gifts, prior knowledge and contribution to the learning process. The honey colour of the kakaho visible through the kaho represents overt recognition of the value of the contribution of students to the formal learning process. Kaho represent the contribution of the institution and the body of knowledge which the students are seeking. The tumatakahoki speak of the roles of content tutors and Learning Advisors working together to create a safe environment for learning to occur.

This panel also speaks of diversity. Kakaho is a grassland plant, kaho is dressed and painted pinus radiata, the tumatakahuki are woven from pingao, a coastal dune plant, and the tuhi of the main pattern are woven from kiekie, an epiphytic plant from the forest. All of these components play an essential part in the tukutuku panel, just as all the partners in the learning journey come from diverse backgrounds.

The process of making a tukutuku panel requires weavers to work from the front and from the rear of the panel. The weaver at the front of the panel is responsible for the big picture and for quality control. The weaver at the rear of the panel is responsible for securely tying off each stitch. As the pattern grows, it becomes more easily discernible from the rear of the panel. The process of passing of fibres back and forth to create tuhi (tuitui) requires constant communication and clarification to ensure that the design is accurately executed. The weaver at the front is analogous to the role of the content tutor who has the overall picture of the subject, while the weaver at the rear symbolises the learner who has the responsibility for securely tying off new knowledge and skills. Together they engage in the tuitui process of communication, clarification and feedback to ensure that the student thrives. And, just as weavers swap roles, the process of continuous reciprocal lifelong learning (ako) frequently involves learners and tutors reversing roles to utilise each other's expertise.

This ako process is also evident in the relationship of content tutors and Learning Advisors, not only as we co-tutor, but as we engage in moderation, curriculum development, professional development and assistance to staff engaging in post-graduate study.

The tukutuku panel is deliberately woven with no top edge symbolising that the learning is a lifelong journey. This also offers us in Poutama Academic Learning Services the opportunity to reflect upon and evolve our own service and provision to students and staff. It is an ongoing journey and one which will involve further formal research into the co-tutoring model and involvement in staff development. It is an exciting prospect for us, our students, staff and the New Zealand tertiary environment.

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