



## ACTIVATING AKO: CRITICAL CONTEXTS FOR CHANGE WITHIN ONLINE LEARNING CONTEXTS

*This is a set of personal responses that come from the experiences of the Poutama Pounamu team who have engaged in facilitating online learning. These responses should be facilitated and understood in conjunction with our materials about the **Ako: Critical Contexts for Change**.*

### **Adaptive expertise driving deliberate professional acts**

Reframing our initial thinking to privilege pedagogy over the 'shiny newness' of the online space in Te Kotahitanga, teaching and Blended Learning was liberating. The principles of cultural relationships and responsive pedagogy became our starting point.

A key learning was the KISS principle: keep the technology as simple as possible. For some, becoming comfortable with online learning is enough. We realised that when we introduced new online tools we couldn't, at the same time, expect everyone to have enough head space left to engage in deep theoretical conversations. This came with increased familiarity with the new contexts and tools.

Although online hui are scheduled events, posts within forums and online discussions can happen at all sorts of times. In an effort to be responsive, we set up and tried to respond as quickly as possible. This became unmanageable not only for us but also for some of our learners who felt pressured by the pace. The impact was that the thinking became superficial and the focus became transactional, task completion rather than meaningful learning.

I need to make time to get up and move so I am not sitting at the computer all day. Yes, it's the physical need to stretch and get some fresh air but it's also a safeguard against no longer hearing what people are saying and simply responding to get through the list!

Working collaboratively continues to be important in developing our understanding and practice as online kaiako. We regularly reflect using evidence of engagement, learner voice and examples of our practice. We always come back to the principles of the pedagogy ie, what can I say, at my end, to get them thinking about 'their' potential next step, rather than just telling them what I think they should do and checking they have followed my instructions?

### **Home, school and community collaborations**

Opportunities to engage face to face via online meeting platforms can support the creation of mutual trust, influence and interdependence. There is a need to think carefully about these hui as you are effectively stepping into each of your learners' personal contexts and therefore can be seen and heard by their whānau as well.

One of the challenges is in ensuring a connection between the online component of the learning and the lived experiences of our learners. We explicitly invite learners to share their own experiences and resources such as texts, pictures, poems, or songs that they see as relevant and connected. This opens up the space for learners to bring their own prior knowledge and experience to the emerging learning.

In providing a range of resources for our learners to choose from, and encouraging them to bring some of their own, we are ensuring that, especially in virtual spaces, they have agency and power to make choices themselves and can direct their own learning. Such learning is more likely to result in creating connections between people and places associated with a sociocultural view of learning, and from a Māori cultural perspective it also demonstrates the process of 'ako': the reciprocity involved through shared and interdependent learning relationships.

### **Building cultural relationships**

Rather than spending time focused solely on relationship building, relationships of mutual trust and respect can develop from a deliberate focus on building connectedness through the learning.

Online discussion forums are not necessarily a space in which people feel safe to take risks as learners - even when the same people are comfortable to learn alongside one another in a physical space.

I use greetings and farewells in my written online interactions. I also try to share of myself by making a connection to

something I have just read, seen, or been wondering about related to what the learner has written. Similarly, making connections back to previous online conversations is an effective way of demonstrating my ongoing care for the learning of that person.

It can take me ages to craft an appropriate written response sometimes. I need to think about who I am responding to and how they might receive it. I used to feel this was a frivolous use of time but I've realised it's an important part of what it means to respond from within a relational space. Cut and pasted comments are not only impersonal, but it's only a matter of time before you miss a name or personal pronoun that highlights your lack of engagement with the learner and 'their' learning.

There have been times when a response I have made has landed heavily and I have received push back. This has mostly happened because I have misunderstood or made assumptions about what has been written and failed to seek clarification. When this happens, it's vital I repair the relationship immediately - either by apologising directly to the person offline or, if that isn't possible, doing so online.

## Enacting responsive pedagogy

When we posted a single resource with a set of questions and waited for people to respond, more often than not they didn't! This type of instruction, followed by checking up, seldom works well face-to-face either.

Planning is a deliberate action; thinking firstly about content – 'What am I putting up and why?', 'Does it connect with my learners?' It's then being deliberate about how I set up what happens next. It needs to be more than just 'Engage with the content and answer these questions'. That's a transmission, instruction/monitoring kind of interaction. I'm looking for how the content and task will excite the learner and provoke their engagement and learning. For example, 'How do these two readings/resources spark curiosity and stretch my learners' thinking?', 'What questions can I pose that invite my learners to make links to their lived experiences?', 'What questions will support them to make connections between the theory and their lives?'

I remember a conversation with one of our learners who said that engaging with written text was challenging for him and was it possible to have audio versions. This really challenged us to think far more broadly about the type of resources we used and how we used them.

Providing a written response to work posted online, even when this has been in private spaces, has taken a bit of time to develop. As with all feedback, it has to respond directly to what has been posted in a way that affirms the contribution. Whilst feedforward questions are useful, too many questions can overwhelm people and also undermine confidence and make learners hesitant to post again.

Responding in a tone that is not only conversational but sometimes colloquial is really important. I use emojis to support the intended tone and read my response aloud before hitting 'send'. It's a useful way to check that what I've written not only makes sense but also sounds like me talking. Without the physical cues and tone of voice, face to face interactions provide written words that can land heavily, quickly undermining feelings of learner safety online.

A really useful self-reflection question is – 'Whose voice is loudest?'. It's often hard to let an online written conversation unfold without jumping in. At times I've unintentionally created a space in which the conversation became very me-centred. This constrains the dialogue **between** learners and the opportunities for them to take the thinking beyond where I thought it might go.

Silence is an interesting form of feedback. Often it says more about our teaching and our need to do something different than it does about our learners. When it becomes deafening, I'll go back over the conversation and ask myself questions such as: 'Have I unintentionally silenced this learner in what or how I responded to them?', 'Has the task or our resources missed the mark for them?'

It's important to value learning that is not directly witnessed and assessed by us as much as we value what is visible online. There are ways to set things up so that learners are active participants in their learning rather than recipients of what we think they need to know. This kind of learning can find its way into conversations with other people and in other places and is far more likely to inspire learners to use their learning within their everyday lives.