



Understanding the needs of Maori learners for the effective use of eLearning

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Background and objectives

Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics of The New Zealand (ITPNZ), has been responsible for a project entitled *Critical Success Factors for Effective Use of eLearning with Maori Learners*. The project has been designed to:

- provide information on critical success factors for Maori eLearners
- disseminate findings to educators within the tertiary education sector.

The project's wider aim is to enable tertiary educators to develop effective eLearning programmes for Maori. The Tertiary Education Commission's eLearning Collaborative Development Fund (eCDF)¹ has funded the project.

This report contributes to the project by summarising the focus groups held with Maori tertiary students who have, in some part, undertaken studies by way of eLearning. The overarching objective of the focus groups was to gain an understanding from these students of their experience of study through eLearning, and what they believe to be necessary for the effective use of eLearning in their studies. In addition, with regard to these students, the focus groups were designed to ascertain:

- why they undertook studies online
- the support systems available
- positive and negative aspects of studying online
- the relevance of tikanga Maori in their courses
- any changes that could enhance their studies.

¹ The eCDF is a contestable fund designed as a strategic initiative to support the implementation of the government's Tertiary Education Strategy. Further information is available from:

<http://www.tec.govt/funding/strategic/ecdf/ecdf.htm>

Methodology

The approach

Maori have a way of looking at the world, talking about the world, and making sense of the world that is uniquely their own. At a very simplistic level, elements of educational experiences and elements of tikanga Maori combine to create a unique response. Typically, it is unlikely that there will be a single Maori perspective. Rather, diverse Maori realities or “nga matatini Maori” (a term coined by Professor Mason Durie in 2004) are as applicable to Maori students as they are to the wider Maori population. The focus groups were intended to take account of this diversity.

Focus groups were conducted with Maori students in urban, provincial and rural areas. Each group had six to eight people — this was large enough to generate interaction, and small enough to enable everyone to have their say. The fieldwork for the groups took place between May 2nd and May 4th 2005. The focus groups comprised only Maori adult learners but were of mixed gender.

Sample demographics

Students n=	Location	Gender
21	7 urban	18 female
	7 provincial	3 male
	7 rural	
	1 group in Auckland	
	1 group in Gisborne	
	1 group in Tokorangi	

Selecting and recruiting participants

To select from the target audience (Maori tertiary students who have experienced study online), a number of tertiary providers throughout the country were approached to find Maori students who participated in eLearning courses. The selection of appropriate students was then the responsibility of the participating institutions.

The providers approached were institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), private training establishments (PTEs), universities and wananga. This process proved difficult for the project team, as a number of institutions either declined to participate or were able only to send out a notification to their students. The project team then relied on interested students making contact with them to express an interest in participating in the focus groups. This method of recruitment resulted in very few responses. Recruiting participants for the focus groups therefore relied mainly on the project team using their own networks to find participants.

Recruitment incentives

Participants received \$50 in vouchers as a koha or token of thanks for participating. In the case where a focus group took place on a marae, a koha was also given to the marae. The presentation of that koha took place during the powhiri (formal welcome) to the two facilitators.

Research process

Focus groups were held at a university, an ITP and on a marae. The focus group on the marae accommodated students who were taking part in a noho marae.² Each focus group session was approximately 1.5 hours. At the start of each session, a karakia was held, followed by a mihi (process of greeting). This ceremony acted as an introduction to the focus group, the facilitators, and the project. Participants were then given an outline of the project and of the process for the focus groups.³

² Noho marae – marae stay. It is a requirement of this particular course that students must spend some time in an environment of total immersion in the Maori language.

³ See Appendix 1: Focus group guide.

Overall insights

Overall response to studying online

The focus groups proved to be very similar in their responses, despite the different geographical locations of the groups. The key messages from the groups were:

- Students felt positive about the flexible nature of studying through eLearning.
- Adequate student support is necessary to ensure sustained student motivation.
- Smooth access to the Learning Management System (LMS), the institution's network and Internet service provider facilities are a priority.

Most respondents had little or no comment to make on the influence of tikanga Maori. Respondents preferred to say that tikanga Maori was part of them and had limited influence on their study online.⁴

⁴ Note: None of the respondents were 1st language speakers and only one respondent appeared to be comfortable with speaking te reo, although most respondents were either learning or had learnt some te reo Maori.

Why Maori students undertook studies online

Reasons for undertaking tertiary studies

All but one of the respondents who took part in the focus groups were currently enrolled in a course of study at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The one participant not currently enrolled had recently completed part of her studies but had decided not to return.

Most respondents undertook tertiary studies as a means of gaining qualifications to enhance their employment prospects. Respondents acknowledged that with better educational qualifications they have better opportunities, the potential for higher incomes, a better chance of career progression, and employment stability.

I wanted a change of direction and a new career and the only way I could get that was to get some qualifications through a polytech or university. (Respondent)

Other reasons why respondents undertook tertiary studies were:

- timing (the children were now at school)
- an opportunity to “go off the domestic purposes benefit” (DPB)
- personal development
- an opportunity to be seen as a possible role model for whanau.

Reasons for undertaking study courses online

Although the respondents in the focus groups were enrolled students, only two were studying fully online. The other respondents were completing one or two courses online and the remainder of their studies were in the classroom. The flexibility of working from home, and within the hours that suited the student rather than in prescribed times for study, were the two main reasons given for taking online courses. Respondents said that they were able to manage study time more easily around their family commitments. For example, respondents who were mothers of young children and (typically) the primary caregiver were able to study while their children were at school,⁵ or at night when their children were

⁵ Includes kindergarten, day care, te kohanga reo, te kura kaupapa Maori and primary and secondary schools.

asleep. In some cases these respondents were able to study when members of their whanau were home to take care of the children.

In terms of flexibility, respondents said that studying online enabled them to enrol in courses at major tertiary institutions without having to be located in the same city as that institution.

I could do the course at Waikato University and still be here with my whanau...it [the online study course] just suited me better, otherwise I probably never would have done it.
(Respondent)

In addition, the mothers in the focus groups said that this form of study enabled them to be closer to their families and provided flexibility of study around family matters such as childcare, and drop-off and pick-up of young children at schools, te kohanga reo and kindergartens.

I'd never be able to do this [study] if it wasn't for the online course. I drop the kids off at school and kindy then I've got some time to do my assignments before they get back.
(Respondent)

Other reasons for studying online were:

- the online component was part of course requirements
- having an interest in computers and wanting to take advantage of courses conducted online.

In relation to course and study material retrieved online, respondents said that once they were used to downloading material their confidence in using computers grew, and the exercise actually became empowering and enjoyable. Respondents did say that some of their course material could only be retrieved online, and so the activity was compulsory. In addition, respondents said that they were encouraged by their tutors to use email and organise chat rooms with students taking the same course.

Considerations for studying online

In the opinion of the focus group participants, people considering studying online need to be:

- well disciplined and organised
- self-starters
- competent and confident with computers
- persistent and committed to studying.

In terms of discipline and organisation, respondents said that when studying online (usually at home) they faced more distractions (such as family crises, home chores taking precedence, and the temptation to “just give up”) than they would if they studied in conventional ways. According to respondents, organising a set study routine — and maintaining that routine — were critical for achieving their study goals.

Just studying is hard but when you're at home it can be even harder so you have to be disciplined to do your work — it's not easy! (Respondent)

As well as discipline and organisation, respondents acknowledged that students had to be “self-starters” to successfully study through eLearning, as it was more likely that the self-starter student would have the necessary discipline to complete their studies. Respondents said a certain level of competency and confidence with computers was critical. They felt students with limited computer skills invariably struggled or simply discontinued their studies.

Positive responses by Maori students regarding eLearning

Positive responses

The most consistent positive feedback given by focus group respondents was that eLearning:

- is convenient
- is flexible
- is financially appealing
- enables real-time feedback.

In terms of convenience, respondents felt positive about having the chance to study for a tertiary qualification, online, with a reputable tertiary provider and, in some cases, from a remote location. They remarked that if it hadn't been for the opportunity to study online they wouldn't have been able to study or even consider the possibility. Respondents added that study through eLearning allowed them to seriously believe they could obtain qualifications without the stress of relocating their whanau or being separated from them for lengths of time. Another aspect of convenience for respondents was the availability of course and study material online. This accessibility meant they didn't have to go to classes or the library, or have materials couriered or sent by mail.

It's just so [much] easier to get our course stuff off the net [Internet] than having to send away for it. I've also learnt to surf the net more and I'm just learning more! (Respondent)

Respondents also agreed that studying online offered them far more flexibility in terms of what, how, and when they studied. Respondents felt that they had more opportunities for choice; for example, studying at night or in the early hours of the morning allowed them to spend time with whanau. Respondents were also able to set up informal study groups with other classmates and, in some cases, to do this from home. For most respondents, having to interact with other course members (such as participating in tutorial chat rooms) was a requirement of their course of study.

Studying from home and downloading resources also helped respondents to manage their study expenses such as travel and accommodation, and class resources like topic readings. This made eLearning financially affordable and a viable study option.

It's far cheaper for me this way otherwise I'd have to travel to [institution] at least two or three times a week and I just wouldn't do it. Through this way I will become a teacher!
(Respondent)

In terms of real-time feedback, respondents said that having immediate feedback from tutors and other class members motivated them to continue with their studies. Focus group respondents compared online tutor feedback with feedback received during set class periods.

Getting feedback from our tutors straight away is good because we're able to work on our stuff pretty straight away too. (Respondent)

Other positive aspects of eLearning revealed in the focus groups, but not consistently present over the three groups were:

- There are opportunities to build networks with other students around the country (one of the focus groups shares class time with another group of students from another city through video conferencing).
- It's convenient to send assignments online rather than through the mail.
- You can get a sense of empowerment and control from working with computers.

For one focus group, the use of video conferencing as part of course work added another positive dimension to their studies. Respondents said they were able to compare classes in terms of course progress. More importantly, respondents said that they were able to establish networks and relationships between the two classes and so support each other.

At first it [video conferencing] was hard because it kept cutting out on us but once it was up and running it was awesome. We got to see other students and we're just as good as those townies! The only downside was that sometimes you couldn't hear people and you had to be facing towards the camera otherwise it wouldn't pick up your voice.
(Respondent)

Negative responses from Maori students regarding eLearning

Negative responses

The negative responses common to all three focus groups were:

- feelings of isolation
- discomfort with a style of learning that may not suit Maori
- inadequate computer resources.

For most respondents, one of the downsides of eLearning was the isolation of studying alone. For some, studying alone felt unnatural, because they were used to studying and working in groups. This was especially significant for respondents who had little or no experience of studying online. The sense of isolation often got in the way of respondents' concentration and, in some cases, caused periods of anxiety for the students.

When you're by yourself studying, it can be lonely and it's even worse if you know that there are no classes to go to — that's why you have to be a self-starter and you have to be disciplined. (Respondent)

To overcome these anxious periods, respondents said that they simply focused on why they were studying, and on their study goals. As well as isolation, respondents said that in some courses there is an inconsistent and limited level of information technology (IT) support available to them. This was particularly evident in areas such as advice on computer crashes, viruses and software. For some respondents this lack of support exacerbated their concerns about feeling isolated.

Respondents also felt that studying online was not how they, as Maori, typically liked to study because they preferred the company of other students. They found study easier when they were able to interact with and provide peer support to other students. Respondents said that this gave them a sense of whanaungatanga with other students undertaking the same courses.

That's not natural. We [Maori] need face-to-face contact...kanohi-ki-te-kanohi that's what we are like!" (Respondent)

In terms of resources (specifically computer hardware and internet access), respondents said that in some cases they had to wait some time (approximately 2–3 weeks after the study year had started) to receive their computers. They then felt pressured into extra study time to make up for the time they had missed. In some cases this pressure led to respondents having a negative view of their courses, and of their study in general. They also commented that Moodle, the learning management system used by their institutions, was difficult to understand and sometimes hard to access. These respondents were critical of the support they received, saying that it was either non-existent, did not go far enough, or was not prompt enough to help them with their inquiries.

The respondents who were unable to access the Internet for financial reasons expressed similar concerns. In addition, students in rural areas where an Internet service was not yet established were excluded from some of their studies. However, their tertiary institution was dealing with this situation internally.

Apart from concerns about isolation, most of the negative responses related to resources such as computer hardware, software and access to the Internet. Other, less significant negative responses, from focus group respondents were:

- Tertiary institutions provide little training for students to become accustomed to the software used.
- Access to the course website is slow, and sometimes there's no access for lengthy periods of time.
- Students have limited confidence in eLearning technical support.

The importance of tikanga Maori in eLearning courses and its effect on studies

Tikanga Maori⁶ wasn't a major concern or issue for respondents during their studies. As mentioned earlier, some respondents commented that studying through eLearning didn't fit naturally with their way of learning and that they, as Maori, preferred the company of others in a classroom setting. These respondents acknowledged this feeling as whanaungatanga, or the need to be with other students in a physical sense. In addition, some respondents felt that the limited face-to-face contact in online courses was an aspect that affected them as Maori, and could affect their studies. One comment made by a respondent (and a consistent message throughout the focus groups) was that tikanga Maori was part of the individual and that eLearning had little or no effect on the results of Maori students.

Although they didn't actually say that tikanga Maori influenced how they studied through eLearning, the remarks about wanting to have some class interaction and opportunities to have face-to-face meetings with tutors are indicators that are typically associated with Maori people.

⁶ For most respondents tikanga Maori was about interacting and behaving in a Maori sense with one another, and using principles typically associated with tikanga Maori — principles such as whanaungatanga (*relationships*) aroha (*love or sharing*) and manaakitanga (*supporting others*).

Suggested changes to improve outcomes for Maori through eLearning

Respondents made several suggestions for changes to improve study outcomes through eLearning. The common suggestions were:

- Create opportunities for students to meet face-to-face with tutors during their study, because respondents felt more comfortable talking to tutors about their issues than trying to explain themselves on the Internet. Similarly, respondents wanted opportunities to meet with other students during the course of their studies. These respondents want to build networks and relationships with other students and so provide support and encouragement for each other.
- Provide opportunities for video conferencing and/or adding video clips to course studies to provide a semblance of a classroom setting, and to add variety to course content. A chat room made available on the system and promoted by tutors could create more interaction amongst students.
- Improve the level of IT and course support to students. Respondents remarked that the course support in some cases was poor and that they could wait for lengthy periods (2–3 days) before some of their requests were answered.

Other suggestions for improving outcomes through eLearning were:

- Institutions could negotiate with Internet Service Providers for discounted rates to students to lower the financial costs for those students studying remotely. Some of the discounts suggested were free broadband, cheaper rates for Internet connection, and reduced costs for computer hardware and software.
- Include more interactive material as part of the course work, and add colourful resources to stimulate student learning.

We want colour and interactive sessions so that it stimulates our learning otherwise it gets boring. Adding colour makes things more exciting. (Respondent)

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Preliminaries

Karakia

Mihi whakatau

Wa whakawhanaungatanga

Housekeeping

Time limit

Name tags

Confidentiality

Toilets

Use of tape recorder and note taking

Interview consent forms.

Focus group overview

Begin with brief overview of focus group (for example, the purpose is to understand people's experience with eLearning).

Opening question

Tell us your name (again) and what you most enjoy doing when not studying?

Introduction

What persuaded you to seek a tertiary education?

In what way (if at all) does Maori culture (tikanga) play a part in your life? (*Probe: for descriptions*)

Transition

Tell us about courses you have undertaken through eLearning. (*Probe: partially online or fully online*)

Main

What would you say to one of your whanau who was interested in finding out about your experience of eLearning so they could study this way? (*Probe: For reasons that make studying online an option to*

consider (e.g. better for whanau commitments, time and cost efficiencies/cheaper.) **Not to be mentioned in the group.**

What kinds of support would they need if they were to undertake a course through eLearning?

Can you tell me 3 positive things that stand out for you about your experience with eLearning (no matter how small)? *(Probe: what was positive about it? Need clear descriptions.)*

Can you tell me one of the not so positive experiences you have had in your studies through eLearning? *(Probe: what made this not so positive, reasons to not study online e.g. face-to-face contact, need for interaction with others?)*

In what way (if any) was Maori culture (tikanga) a part of your eLearning experience (this includes other content of the course)? *(Probe: effectiveness, if not included would its inclusion have assisted in your studies? What specifically?)*

If you could change one thing about studying through eLearning what would that be? What's the main reason that one thing needs changing?

Ending

Think about all that we have talked about today. What do you think is most important for tertiary institutions to keep doing for Maori with regards to eLearning? *(Probe for examples. Identify its importance.)*

Have we missed anything?

Summary (not more than 3 minutes)

- Important issues that came up in the discussion
- Common themes (try to use exact wording of participants then an interpretive view to add to understanding)
- Differing points of view (try to use exact wording of participants then an interpretive view to add to understanding)
- Things that were not said – therefore indicating lesser importance (question these)
- Is this summary complete?

Wa whakamutunga

Give out koha

Mihi whakamutunga

Karakia whakamutunga