

Pre-literate Māori knowledge frameworks as post-literacy strategies

This paper looks at the use of traditional Māori knowledge frameworks as valid approaches to tackle contemporary information challenges. It suggests the application of indigenous models of knowledge and information structures to a contemporary context where existing models of information communication appear to be failing. Post-literacy and secondary orality theories are introduced, and presented as potential sources for strategies that help literacy disadvantaged communities navigate the modern world. The marae, Kaupapa Māori and Mātauranga Māori are all modern information frameworks for Māori, and are indicators of possible connections between pre-literate Māori culture and an anticipated post-literacy. The post-literate application of concepts of whakapapa (a hands-on and collaborative non-linear approach to knowledge) and waiata (knowledge and history passed on through song) are examined. Although not necessarily compatible with Western taxonomies and approaches, it could well be that information and communication strategies from pre-literate societies will be the guide for the future. If this is true, it may also well be that historically literacy disadvantaged communities will have an edge that they have long needed.

Mā te whakaaro kotahi ka ora ai.

The cohesion of perspectives will strengthen the kaupapa (Animoa, n.d).

Introduction

This paper looks at the use of traditional Māori knowledge frameworks as an approach to help contemporary Māori process and tackle current information challenges. Current and potential applications are evaluated in the light of theories of post-literacy and secondary orality, seeking to present the use of traditional information frameworks as relevant to contemporary society, as well as to suggest the use of frameworks not currently widespread.

The period of post-literacy is what Walter Ong (1982) calls 'secondary orality', and Marshall McLuhan (1967), Thomas Pettit and L. O. Sauerberg (2013) identify as a period after the 'Gutenberg parenthesis' we are currently in, and when text based communication will no longer be privileged. These thinkers see the mass literacy initiated by the Gutenberg printing press as an anomaly in the development of human civilisation, and see our increased use of audio-visual, electronic and internet technology as the beginnings of a return to a more aural/visual communication. While this post-literacy has many elements of pre-literate culture, it is affected and transformed by a historic literacy.

Jane McRae (1998) observes that the main genres of Māori literary tradition were whakapapa, karakia, whakataukī, waiata and kōrero. Timoti Karetu (1992) introduces a similar list in his essay on the language of the marae, including haka, waiata, tauparapara, karanga, poroporoaki, paki waitara, whakapapa, whakataukī and pepeha. These lists, while not necessarily comprehensive, provide indications towards understanding the cultural contexts and mind-maps (Roberts, 2012) of Māori. Concepts from the marae and the whareniui have successfully been adapted to contemporary knowledge contexts, as have concepts such as kaupapa Māori and mātauranga Māori. Is it possible to also use other traditional Māori concepts to build information structures in a post-literate age?

It is not the intention of this paper to fall into the assumption that Anne Salmond critiques (McLean, 1996a), of unduly equating 'traditional' Māori with pre-European contact culture, or to try and crystallize Māori culture in a romanticised orality. Rather, it seeks to look at indigenous models of knowledge and information structures, and to suggest the application of these to a contemporary

context where existing models of information communication appear to be failing. The concepts surveyed in this report are not meant to be comprehensive or conclusive, and will at most be indicators of possible connections between pre-literate Māori culture and an anticipated post-literacy.

For the purposes of this paper, post-literacy and secondary orality will be used interchangeably.

Secondary Orality, Gutenberg parenthesis

Walter Ong's (1982) exploration of orality and literacy discusses how the two are essentially different, and not variants of each other. He describes orality as operating on a different consciousness from literacy, intellectualising mnemonically and basing more in tradition than in innovation. Secondary orality is a condition brought about through contemporary technological change: an orality that is based on literate culture, however rejecting the privileging of text. James Scott's (2009) studies in south east Asia suggest that such a condition of post-literacy has precedents, and he gives examples of tribal groups that appear to have rejected script and writing in favour of a deliberately oral way of life.

In 'The Gutenberg Galaxy', Marshall McLuhan (1967) introduces the idea that the printing press and the subsequent mass production of text was an anomaly in the history of human civilisation. He advocates that further technological development will soon move us beyond this anomaly, back to a communication environment that is dependent on aural and visual elements, and not on writing. Writing is often described as a technology (Gnanadesikan, 2009), and since McLuhan made his predictions, newer technologies such as the World Wide Web have both re-emphasised and simultaneously de-emphasised the use of text.

Thomas Pettitt and L. O. Sauerberg (2013) of the University of Southern Denmark go a bit further with their theory of 'The Gutenberg Parenthesis', tracing much of the cultural elements of contemporary modern society such as individualism, permanence and the perceived authority of the text back to Gutenberg's 15th century invention. They celebrate the coming of the digital, and associate it with a move to more fluid and interconnected pre-literate

communications and lifestyles. They also see the use of text-based communication via phones as conforming increasingly to characteristics of orality, with the speed and informality of speech, as well as a desire to 'get it through' rather than 'get it correct' with respect to spelling, punctuation etc. (Tom Pettitt, 2014).

In the immediate context of Aotearoa New Zealand, what might this secondary orality or post-Gutenberg parenthesis period look like? What associations might it have with pre-literate Māori culture?

Modern Māori information frameworks

1. The Marae

Ranginui J. Walker (1992) situates the marae as the focal point of Māori culture. Tracing the development of the marae through history, he describes it as an institution deeply rooted in the foundations of Māori culture, evolving over time to changing human needs. The urban marae, while not 'traditional' in the sense of being associated with one tribe, have helped fulfil deeply felt spiritual and cultural needs of Māori displaced and distanced from their home marae.

It is not inappropriate, then, to try to use the marae and the carved meeting house as a metaphor for conceptual constructs of information structures. This has in fact been done very successfully by Ngā Ūpoko Tukutuku, the Māori subject headings project sponsored by LIANZA, Te Rōpū Whakahau and National Library of New Zealand (National Library of New Zealand, 2013). The framework for Ngā Ūpoko Tukutuku is the whareniui or meeting house, with the terms woven into its structure (Amey, 2012). This creates pathways for cataloguers, archivists and reference librarians to describe and access Māori material.

While the marae and the large meeting houses go back to mythical Hawaiiki (Walker, 1992), the use of this concept by Ngā Ūpoko Tukutuku is still very solidly in the context of literate culture. The structure of the whareniui is used as a way to navigate the library, that bastion of literacy, and it may not yet be appropriate to try and re-purpose this to apply to post-literate strategies.

2. Kaupapa Māori and Mātauranga Māori

Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (2012) contrasts and compares these two popular terms, looking at their perspectives and their overlap of meanings. 'Kaupapa Māori' is understood to be a broad plan of action created by Māori, expressing Maori aspirations, values and principles. Kaupapa Māori anticipates 'tikanga Māori', cultural behaviours through which kaupapa Māori is expressed and made tangible. Mātauranga Māori, on the other hand, is understood as a modern term for a body of knowledge that was brought to these islands by the ancestors of the Māori. Mātauranga Māori refers to the general body of knowledge, while Kaupapa Māori suggests a 'plan of action'.

One of the clearest examples of both principles is Kura Kaupapa Māori, who use the term 'kaupapa' in an educational setting. These Māori language immersion schools are based on a foundation of understanding and knowledge created by Māori, and express Māori aspirations. This is achieved through the emphasis on the use of te reo Māori as a medium of instruction and operation in accordance with Te Aho Matua, which emphasises a Māori worldview to all learning (Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori o Aotearoa, n.d.).

Kura Kaupapa Māori, through its focus on applying historical cultural Māori methods of learning in a contemporary scenario, has a clearer connection to post-literacy strategies than Ngā Ūpoko Tukutuku. This is not intended as criticism, but as recognition of the different purpose each approach was created to serve. While Kura Kaupapa Māori was created to deliberately celebrate and develop Māori knowledge, Ngā Ūpoko Tukutuku is a structure to enable connections between a Western literary tradition and a Māori one.

Potential post-literate Māori information frameworks

1. Whakapapa

There is ample documentation of the role and importance of whakapapa in Māori consciousness. Lachy Paterson (2010) calls it 'the most important' division within Māori society, and Mere Roberts (2012) calls it 'the significant construct on which information is both spatially and chronologically located'. Elsewhere, Roberts also discusses the relational nature of whakapapa that emphasises complementary relationships rather than oppositional ones. There is no distinction between spiritual and material worlds, and we see connections not made in Western taxonomy, such as between a kūmara tuber and the kiore rat (Roberts, 2004).

Anecdotal evidence from Auckland Libraries' Central City Library Makerspace¹ suggests that while elements of that makerspace are separate from each other, people react to and interact with these elements together, emphasising their relational nature. For instance, while robotics and 3D printing are not obviously related, people try to 3D print pieces that can be used for the robots. It has even been suggested that the subject of a workshop on making mobile phone movies be robotics. This cross-pollination of elements is based on experiential relationships between elements of the makerspace, rather than on a 'linear trajectory' (Roy, Lilley, & Luehrsen, 2011) approach to knowledge. The hands-on and collaborative models of makerspaces are quite different from the individualised, competitive models of traditional literacy. Knowledge in a makerspace is collective, and most learning is lateral rather than top-down. This makes makerspaces a good example of a post-literate strategy, where the knowledge is no longer based on a text, but on hands-on skills, though in a highly intellectual atmosphere that needs to understand complex concepts of design, geometry and materials science.

Whakapapa appears a good conceptual model for makerspaces, and by extension, other post-literate strategies. Seeing things through the eyes of whakapapa breaks down the intellectual and disciplinary silos and specialisations that have been a feature of our academic and professional lives. The use of this framework helps to clarify both the historical understanding of the nature of makerspaces/post-literate strategies, and thus to propose new directions. Could whakapapa be used to explain and communicate the multi-modal nature of important information skills?

2. Waiata

Writing on Māori music, Mervyn McLean (1996b) identifies waiata as "the most frequently performed songs, accounting for more than half of all songs recorded and an even larger proportion

1. The Auckland Central City Library Makerspace is a public space that provides infrastructure to encourage digital and technological creativity, without the boundaries of teacher-student relationships or traditional divisions between disciplines. This space currently includes computers running open source software, robotics kits and a 3D printer.

of songs whose texts have been published". In the preface of her introduction to *Ngā Mōteatea*, Jane McRae (2011) calls waiata evidence the ancient and historical Māori tradition of composition, also calling them a storehouse of knowledge for a student of Māori language, poetry and culture. Further afield, Rachael Te Āwhina Ka'ai-Mahuta argues in her PhD thesis that Māori waiata and haka were archives, preserving important historical and cultural knowledge. She takes specific Māori cultural knowledge like the history of the kumara, and demonstrates how this history has been saved and passed on in the form of a waiata (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010).

While these references establish historical relevance, there is also current evidence to point to the importance of song and music in contemporary Māori (and Pasifika) society. Andrew Shaw, Executive Producer, Season 1, NZ Idol, was quoted in 'Global Television Formats' as saying the music industry and music in New Zealand was dominated by Māori and Polynesian rhythms (de Bruin, 2013). The World Internet Project report findings for 2013 found that while Māori and Pasifika New Zealanders were less likely to use the internet, they were however leading the way in the use of music streaming services such as Spotify (Wilkins, 2013).

To apply Rachael Te Āwhina Ka'ai-Mahuta's thesis, could contemporary music and song be as much a store of culture and knowledge as waiata once were? If 'One Day A Taniwha' can be used to teach stranger danger to pre-school children (Archer, 2009), and research indicates that music can help teach literacy (McIntire, 2007) and mathematics (Graziano, Peterson, & Shaw, 1999), could waiata be a model to teaching more complex ideas and concepts? Current developments at Auckland Libraries includes exploring the possibilities of makerspaces in South Auckland. Discussions with local communities are increasingly suggesting that music and media

production are a possible entry point to digital literacy and the maker culture, helping people learn skills that are genuinely useful, in ways that are comfortable to them. While it is still early days, this initiative could well throw up some very interesting data.

Conclusion

It has been noted that traditional indigenous knowledge systems are not necessarily compatible with Western taxonomies and approaches (Roy et al., 2011). Yet it is the common experience across the modern world that Western systems of information and knowledge have become dominant and primary ways of accessing modern information. It is also a common experience across the world that many indigenous and tribal colonised groups struggle to adapt their cultural and historical instincts to contemporary Western values, and this struggle is reflected (though not necessarily solely responsible for) educational participational and performance statistics (Ministry of Education, 2012).

If contemporary society is moving quickly to a post-literate state, it could well be that information and communication strategies from pre-literate societies will be the guide. If this is true, it may also well be that historically literacy disadvantaged communities will have an edge that they have long needed, if not ever had. The question is, will we take it?

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