

Māori knowledge in education: Revisiting terms and their concepts

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There have been notable attempts to broaden Māori knowledge so that it fits with a Māori worldview. However, most discussions about Māori knowledge in government policy already assume what that knowledge is and instead suggest how it can be properly accessed in education. Māori knowledge is, for the most part, assumed to be dealt with in its essence, and it simply needs to be divvied up equitably or given prominence in schools and universities. As such, it is understood as socially determined. The same may be said for the term 'education', which has been given a Māori gloss of 'ako' but nevertheless shares close quarters with many of the assumptions that 'education', in its dominant Western sense, suggests. Consequently, 'knowledge' is still overwhelmingly a transmissible item, and 'education' is ultimately about the transmission of, or saturation with, knowledge for the edification of a learner.¹

Māori philosophy understands the relationship of the human self to the world quite differently because it has the capacity to transcend the Western drive to make everything sensorial. In other words, where in Western thought both 'knowledge' and 'education' must have a perceived effect in order to be those things, Māori philosophy allows for events to take place that are not necessarily sensible to anyone.² In this thinking, things have their own form of self-arrangement that also interconnects with every other thing in the world, including the self. This vast reach, which includes voidness, darkness and other unseen realms, cannot necessarily be experienced by the human self (although sometimes it may be). The Māori existence of things in the world is underscored by the co-constitution of all those things. Consequently, the terms 'knowledge' and 'education', and those terms' states of being, should reflect that complexity and infinitude.

According to Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, there are two ways to look at knowledge: either sociologically or philosophically.³ One necessary role of a Māori philosopher, therefore, is to revisit terms such as 'knowledge' and 'education' that have been overly based on the social. This decision may be driven by a scepticism of a sociological approach. That is, why have we decided not to think about those terms' ontologies, their first principles, their relationship to our first understandings about language and so on? Or it could more positively evolve because those terms ask for a philosophical reinterpretation in their own right. In both instances, the Māori decision is perhaps provoked by that same phenomenon I outlined above – the indeterminate pervasion of the self by the world. Already, then, both 'knowledge' and 'education' have reached their limits, because they assume the human self is central to their process. It would seem that the Māori philosopher is never free from that incursion from the world, and must account for it even while their revisit takes place.

In my own work, there is a mixture of those two reasons for reassessing these terms, depending on which ones we are talking about. My scepticism steps in when I think of the word 'knowledge' and its gloss 'mātauranga'.⁴ 'Mātauranga' gained popularity as a translation for 'knowledge' during the rise of the knowledge economy, when it was seen as an equivalent that would give Māori the ability to participate in this 'new era'. 'Mātauranga' seems to be etymologically unremarkable, but 'knowledge' is hugely significant for the assumptions it makes about a Māori world and also for its origins.⁵ It would seem that its Old English root, 'cnawan' – roughly 'to perceive, identify' – always indicates a 'dawning' or a cognitive state.⁶ For that reason, for those of us who prefer to deal in the transphenomenal philosophy of murkiness that we see underpinning such terms as 'whakapapa' and 'whakaaro', 'knowledge' may be an inappropriate term. I am not asserting here that Māori have not always had the thing that 'knowledge' implies – just that it is reductionist for the overall Māori philosophical event (for which 'knowledge' should not be seen as the final step or the preferred outcome). In other words, there are bigger things at play with the Māori existential reality than just 'knowledge'.

Those Māori philosophers who do prefer a philosophy of obscurity will instead try to position the human as an entity that ultimately feels uncertain about a thing or idea. 'Knowledge' does not convey that mystery particularly well. A highly abstract concept – 'being' – could be a useful substitute but only if it does not diminish the world's co-constitution of the human self. By 'co-constitution' I mean the presentation of the world within one thing, evident in 'whakapapa', for instance.⁷ One's 'being' is therefore not one's being at all but instead the self is commissioned in conjunction with the rest of the world.⁸

In the discipline of education, the fact that the Māori self is always commissioned within/as part of the world (along with other things) has several consequences. The self is no greater than any other thing, and those things which can't be accounted for through experience must be given equal space to those that can. This deference to the unseen itself has one massive consequence: that education is far less about transmitting a cognitive state (of 'knowledge') and much more about speculating on how the world *imperceptibly* interplays with all its elements. Even more materially, education represents one way in Māori of talking about the *fact* – not just the *concept* – of one's worlded co-constitution. Both teacher and learner are hence thrown into a world that cannot be understood, can only be vaguely represented, but may be unwittingly *presented* as a mysterious phenomenon through the fact of its relationship with the self.

This proposition of mine relates back to my second stated reason for revisiting terms: some terms do beckon through their possibilities for further thinking. 'Ako', which is taken to mean 'teach/learn', is similar to 'whakapapa' and other abstract Māori terms because it can indicate uncertainty, if we decide to think about it from that angle. If approached as a sign for the mystery of the world, ako dethrones the self, reinvokes the infinitude of the world and all its participants, and throws the self (not just a teacher or learner, either, but all things) into full citizenship with all other things. Alongside 'to teach/learn', 'ako' means 'to move or stir' and 'to split'.⁹ With that in mind, in the same way that we can understand 'land' and 'placenta' as inhabiting the phenomenon 'whenua', we can approach this state of thrownness as a mode of transformation with/from the world.¹⁰ In other words, we are fragmented ('split') through our interconnection with the world, and our inability to fully account for that process through the discourse of knowledge is what moves or stirs us onwards. The self is at the mercy of his/her relations, through being part of them. Ako highlights that all things have their limits in relation to the whole.

What could all this mean for education as a concrete discipline? Currently, dominant education is not particularly aware of the Uncertainty Studies that the term 'ako', together with a moderated version of 'knowledge', advocates. Admittedly, I'm not the right person to ask for a final determination on anything Māori – apart from proclaiming confidently that we humans don't know as much as we think we do. I recently attended a philosophy conference where, after presenting on self-uncertainty as a philosophy, I was asked by a participant whether I was just 'beating myself up', to use their words. I have thought about this question frequently; it was a good one, and fed directly into self-uncertainty itself. I responded that to constantly undermine one's understanding of the world was in fact liberating *for one's relations*, that is, for the world. It keeps things intact by refusing to place the self in a position of 'eternal knower'. But alongside that, education as a discipline may need to take note of its own limits on knowing as a discipline and then reflect its uncertainty in what it encourages. What should be 'led out' – if we are to continue with education as a formal discipline – is the fact of one's deep participation with the world, beyond the perceptible and beyond the human, yet including both those. The return to a perception and the profound incursion of the world on it, and hence our lack of understanding of that thing, should ultimately be our inquiry within ako. This decision to revisit ako as both thing and way of approaching things is also vulnerable to its own inquiry: ako is therefore (appropriately) ongoing.

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