Uncovering buried treasure

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UNCOVERING BURIED TREASURE

Digging deep to decolonise research and teaching practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

Anne Bradley

Introduction

On an overcast British summer day in late August 2019, enjoying their favourite hobby of metal-detecting in North Somerset farmland with a group of friends, Adam Staples and Lisa Grace discovered one of Britain’s largest ever treasure hoards buried deep in the earth. The cache of 2,600 coins dates back 1000 years and is worth millions—a life-changing discovery for the couple and also for the wider community: Historians, archaeologists and members of the public will now have access to this rare and historic find.

On a quest to improve my teaching practice as a beginning teacher 23 years ago, I embarked on a metaphorical treasure hunt that has continued throughout my career: a journey of self-examination and reflection-in-action, scanning the landscape of the classroom with its multi-dimensional interactions, interconnected beliefs, assumptions and learning opportunities, searching for the treasure buried within.

What began as a process of self-study has developed into an ongoing autoethnographic academic practice situated within the evolving cultural context of postcolonial Aotearoa New Zealand. Just as the ancient golden coin may at first appear as a lump of worthless mud to the treasure-hunter, the autoethnographer learns to pay attention to seemingly innocuous interactions and small details, knowing that they may yield worthy data weighted with meaning. This chapter seeks to articulate the transformative and empowering potential of autoethnography, its principles and impacts on my research and teaching practice, specifically as a means of challenging pākehā (white) dominance, power and privilege against a backdrop of Māori and Pasifika poverty, inequality and institutional racism, which continues despite attempts to redress the balance in recent years (Terruhn, 2019).

As a white, British immigrant in a land colonised by my ancestors, autoethnography provides me with a methodological framework to facilitate the decolonisation of my research and teaching in an ongoing process of investigation and critical reflection leading to transformation.

Autoethnography as research methodology and mindset

Ethnography is a qualitative approach to research, situated within the field of Anthropology, with a particular focus on culture. Autoethnography involves the examination of the researcher’s
own role in creating and perpetuating cultural narratives and norms. The autoethnographer is both researcher and participant, situating the self at the centre of the research process, observing and evaluating what they notice (Ellis, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2008).

Whilst there are interconnections between autoethnography, narrative inquiry and self-study, it is important to note key differences that distinguish each approach. As Hamilton et al. (2008) discuss, autoethnography is a relative of narrative inquiry, with its focus on the layered stories of personal experience, but the lens of the autoethnographer zooms in on the socio-cultural narratives surrounding the researcher. They also note the connection to self-study with its emphasis on critical self-reflection; however, autoethnography specifically interrogates the practitioner’s role in relation to their socio-cultural setting.

Autoethnography is proactive and change-focused, echoing aspects of practitioner-oriented action research methodology (Acosta et al., 2015), but the focus of the research is the cultural context rather than change in general. For the autoethnographer, the purpose is in the unfolding meaning, the challenging of cultural assumptions and the resulting transformative change, illustrated by works such as Diversi and Moreira’s Autoethnography as an Act of Resistance Against Narratives of Hatred (2019).

The person-centred, nuanced and contextual design of autoethnographic research, with its focus on uncovering the unique richness of the researcher’s own socio-cultural narratives, challenges assumptions about the nature and purpose of research. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), traditional, positivist research methodologies are Eurocentric and represent a global “Grand Narrative” (p. 22), in which the quantitative and the formulaic are seen as superior, and the validity of alternative research paradigms is dismissed. Little has changed two decades later, with New Zealand academics such as Salmond (2018) describing a problematic attitude which reflects “ethnocentric bias and outmoded dualisms (and the power relations embedded in them) at a time when new ways of thinking about socio-environmental challenges are urgently needed” (Salmond, 2018, p. 1).

Autoethnographic research design is layered. Beginning with the empirical – what can be observed, what is noticed; continuing with the cognitive – what data and theoretical approaches can be gathered from existing research that provides a basis for an informed response; and ending with the pragmatic – the ways this new knowledge can be applied to transform practice through confronting existing norms (Acosta et al., 2015; Ellis, 2007).

The gathering of data involves observation, noticing, conversation, questioning, recording notes, experiences, events and ideas and existing research in relation to the interplay between the culture of the researcher, the cultural context, and the cultural background of those with whom the researcher interacts. The variety of data provides a useful form of triangulation contributing to academic rigour. Le Roux (2017) discusses the complexities of evaluating the quality of non-traditional research, proposing a context-specific approach to assessing rigour that aligns with the philosophy and goals of a particular research paradigm. She proposes that criteria such as worthiness, resonance, contribution, ethics and meaning should be situated alongside methodological rigour and academic credibility. Ellis (2007) comments that good qualitative researchers focus on honesty, authenticity and integrity in research, work and life.

The autoethnographer chooses to be curious, a research mindset described by Thompson (2019) as a “commitment to inquiry, (an) unshakeable enthusiasm for the as yet unknown” (p. 317). Jousse (2000) defined this as “the laboratory of awareness” (p. 25), in which long-buried issues are uncovered, dusted off, and brought into the light to be examined. At the heart of the process is critical reflection, which Oswald et al. (2020) characterise as a fundamental tool for recording, evaluating, challenging and ultimately transforming hegemonic research discourse.
Autoethnographers may present research results in a variety of formats, from formal written reporting to creative non-fiction narrative, and other forms of storytelling, poetry, performance and works of art. They also enjoy the luxury of using the first person in research writing (Hamilton et al., 2008). In my experience, however, the primary means of disseminating the results of my research is through disruptive self-expression, and the continuing evolution of practice: a living, breathing embodiment of research findings manifested in a quiet activism of altered attitudes and behaviours facilitated by the research process.

Far from conquering the summit of knowledge and attaining a position of certainty or proof, which is the focus of traditional methodologies, the autoethnographer views the research process as infinite. There are many more peaks to climb. Valuing a state of ‘not knowing’ (Trahar, 2009) and embracing uncertainty, a mindset described by Freire (1998) as an awareness of our own incompleteness, motivates the researcher to continue their exploration of the ever-evolving multi-dimensional layers of the cultural landscape. Thompson (2019) highlights the value and complexity of figuring out the unending possibilities of “a twisting, braided rope of intersecting narratives” (p. 316).

Research findings are intended to create debate, discussion and court controversy as they challenge and resist the hegemony of deeply held value systems and entrenched socio-cultural norms. Jones (2005) describes the purpose of autoethnography as agitating, disrupting and contesting commonly held views, which may inevitably elicit polarising responses by confronting controversial topics such as racism, sexism and discrimination.

The autoethnographic research process has focussed my attention specifically on the colonial ideology implicit within western research traditions (Smith, 2012), resulting in my recognition of the need to pursue research methodology which is congruent with the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where I live and work. Lee (2009) identifies that indigenous research favours qualitative narrative approaches which give a voice to indigenous communities, and ensure their lives and realities are heard. She notes a revival of traditional storytelling modes in contemporary indigenous research around the world: “Storytelling has always been one of the key ways knowledge was sustained and protected within Indigenous communities” (Lee, 2009, p. 2).

Pūrākau refers to traditional Māori storytelling; a uniquely Māori narrative paradigm with its roots in ancient Polynesian oratory tradition, spanning a variety of forms and methods, including myths and legends relating to historical and cultural origins, philosophy, and epistemological ideology (Thompson, 2019). Pūrākau is a form of narrative which has historically been adapted by Māori speakers and writers for a variety of contexts and purposes, including, more recently, a narrative approach to research (Lee, 2009), which is well-suited to autoethnographic research practice, recognising the interconnectedness of people with their environment, a concept which is fundamental to mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) (Salmond, 2018).

Autoethnography also connects with feminist research philosophy (Taylor & Coia, 2020), which encourages a reflexive and critical mindset, evaluating research aims and questions, theoretical conceptualisation, research design, and methods to identify issues and inequities. As Ackerly and True note, “The insight from feminist theoretical reflection on epistemology is that it is possible, and indeed essential, to reflect on the epistemologies that inform our own work” (2008, p. 695). Aligned with feminist research theory, the purpose of autoethnographic research is not only to stimulate transformational self-reflection but also to encourage action through identifying and addressing social issues.

As an autoethnographer, I become vulnerable (Acosta et al., 2015). I open myself to criticism as I expose my weaknesses, examine my impact on the cultural setting, and identify ways in which I need to change and grow. I am a participant in the transformative process facilitated by
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autoethnographic methodology, proactively seeking change and open to alternative perspectives as I attempt to see the world through others’ eyes. Being willing to sit with the tension that exists between being a so-called expert in my field, and at the same time to hold on to ‘not knowing’, is an essential state of discomfort noted by Trahar (2009) who describes autoethnography as an ever evolving and fluid process.

Holding my own hidden assumptions and biases up to the light in a critical and creative process of identifying, evaluating and interpreting what is happening and my role in constructing it is a humbling and confronting process, with no place for ego. If awareness is the precursor to change (Smith, 2015), I must face the idea that my own lack of awareness has made me an unconscious participant in a racist system. Autoethnography creates intentionality and improves emotional and cultural intelligence and that perhaps is why autoethnographers make excellent teachers.

The role of an academic offers vast and varied opportunities to challenge cultural norms and expose inequities, through both research and teaching. Autoethnography provides a vehicle for systematically and intentionally examining the nuances of culture embedded in my interactions, teaching practice, choice of subject content and research philosophy: it is both practical and personal.

Autoethnography and models of culture

Geert Hofstede, an authority in the field of cultural studies, describes culture as a collective identity which distinguishes one group of people from another (Hofstede et al., 1980). Other literature highlights the shared values, beliefs, rules, social norms and rituals or customs that make one group unique from another, noting that these are present in national, ethnic and organisational cultures and contain hidden underlying assumptions which are rarely re-visited or evaluated.

Contemporary models of culture build on Schein’s theory (1985) that layers of culture grow in response to environmental conditions and that people develop patterned reactions, solutions and feelings that eventually become embedded beliefs and behavioural norms. Schein (1985) argues that the intangible layers must be exposed in order to understand the tangible – the resulting behaviour and opinions.

Uncovering these hidden values, beliefs and assumptions in the context of the classroom is therefore vital if I am to understand what is really going on. I refer to a model developed by Bradt (2011) that identifies five dimensions of culture. This is a practitioner-oriented model useful for analysing culture in organisational settings, which I have adapted as a framework for examining the cultural context of my classroom. Using the five dimensions I have developed reflective questions (Table 4.1) which create a platform for ‘noticing’, uncovering issues and inequalities. I revisit these questions regularly, creating a cycle of continuous evaluation and re-evaluation as I experiment with ideas and strategies identified during my research.

Autoethnography and the Aotearoa New Zealand context

Having emigrated to New Zealand in the 1990s, I applied for a teaching job and was advised to inform myself about Māori issues for my interview. I read a history book and discovered a dark side to my new country’s colonial past. It seemed clear to me that the British settlers had drawn up a treaty and then lied, cheated and stolen their way to dominance. Far from the British stereotype of New Zealand as a peaceful paradise, I became aware of a very different
narrative beneath the surface, and uncomfortably conscious of my place as an uninvited guest benefitting from a colonial system which had subjugated and dispossessed the original inhabitants, who had settled the land via ancient Polynesian migration routes hundreds of years earlier (Thompson, 2019). As Thompson (2019) and Smith (2012) note, the historical European concept of ‘discovering’ a land which has already been discovered and inhabited by its existing population is problematic, to put it mildly.

The effects of colonisation in Aotearoa were immediate. Land confiscation followed by rapid population decline as a result of poverty, disease and war had a cataclysmic impact on Māori, the effects of which are still felt in the present day. In 1860, Māori owned 80% of the land in the North Island. Within thirty years that number had halved, and by the year 2000 the figure was less than 4% (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021). Wolfe (2006) discusses the wholesale destruction of indigenous societies and their replacement with colonial societal systems: describing colonisation not as a single event, but as an invading system with far-reaching and long-term consequences for indigenous inhabitants. The colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand was no exception. From the outset, the pākehā settlers’ actions were at best ambiguous and at worst “destructively double-edged” (McCreanor, 2012, p. 290) when it comes to Te Tiriti O Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi, which promised the Māori tangata whenua (people of the land) joint sovereignty and the same rights as British Citizens.

### Table 4.1 Reflective questions adapted from Bradt’s (2011) BRAVE model of culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Behaviour</th>
<th>What are the cultural norms and expectations?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does my behaviour reinforce or challenge cultural norms?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How does my behaviour create or hinder equity?</td>
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<td>How does my behaviour empower or disempower?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are students active or passive?</td>
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<td>2. Relationships</td>
<td>Are relationships formal or informal?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who belongs?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do people connect with each other?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there an in-group and an out-group?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How is diversity valued?</td>
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<td>3. Attitudes</td>
<td>What do ‘success’ and ‘failure’ look like?</td>
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<td>Who is winning or losing and why?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who has a voice?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who is silent?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who speaks and who listens?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How are learners encouraged to experiment or take risks to aid learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Values</td>
<td>What is seen as important or valuable?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What values are embedded in my interactions?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How does my teaching enhance or hinder critical thinking?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is my highest intention as a teacher, and how am I demonstrating this?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Environment</td>
<td>How does the physical/learning environment enforce or resist hidden cultural assumptions?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How does the physical/learning environment foster a sense of safety?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the system and structure of the educational environment impact learners from diverse cultures and what am I doing to resist or maintain the status quo?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Whilst it is tempting to separate oneself from the actions of early settlers, even a brief examination of the current state of affairs in modern Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrates that little has fundamentally changed for Māori treaty partners: Cochrane et al. (2017) describe a society where almost a third of the Māori population live in poverty caused by unemployment or insecure employment and unstable living conditions, compared with just over a tenth of the pākehā population. Census data from 2018 identify that whilst the median income for men was NZD$40,400, the median income for Māori men was NZD$30,000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). Following the release of data from Statistics New Zealand in 2021, Children’s Commissioner Andrew Becroft noted that whilst child poverty statistics had improved in the nine months to March 2020, the statistics for Māori and Pasifika were “profoundly disturbing” (Carroll & Maxwell, 2021, p. 1), with one in four Pasifika and one in five Māori children meeting the criteria for material hardship.

In a study of bicultural attitudes amongst the pākehā population, Sibley and Liu (2004) found that although most will agree with the principles of fair treatment under the treaty, they most often dispute allocation of resources to rectify disparities. Among their findings is the conclusion that this unexamined, unstated, underlying distinction promulgates a culture of inequality in New Zealand; an inequality which, according to Moura-Koçoğlu (2011), is barely acknowledged by the general population. I notice that many of my pākehā peers cling to the popular misapprehension that colonisation somehow benefitted indigenous people, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, a belief also identified by Smith (2015) amongst the Australian population.

In 2019, the Ministry of Education reported that “Māori, Samoan and other Pacific students are far more likely to report discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity from adults than from their peers, with unfair teacher behaviour the most frequently reported issue” (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 1). It would be offensive to suggest that the average New Zealander is racist; however, Doyle (2020) suggests that racism is more like pollution: it’s in the air we all breathe – much like second-hand cigarette smoke. We’re so used to inhaling it, we don’t even notice it. In the same way we don’t notice white privilege (Smith, 2015). DiAngelo (2018) proposes that we are all shaped by the racism embedded in colonial societies, a view supported by Terruhn (2019), who notes that the continuing sovereignty of settler states in colonised nations perpetuates the structures and systems that cause inequality. DiAngelo (2018) highlights a common conceptualisation of racism as being an individual issue belonging to a few ‘bad people’ rather than a systemic issue.

The autoethnographic research process has led me to the realisation that, aside from the calamitous effect of colonisation on the socio-economic status of the Māori population, the ongoing intellectual colonisation has been equally corrosive, a view highlighted by Smith (2012). The hegemony of European ways of knowing, and providing evidence of that knowing, is self-evident in the education system, in particular in the measurement of educational achievement. It is the educational equivalent of Clandinin and Connelly’s Grand Narrative of research (2000). Salmond (2018) notes the ethnocentric bias in the discarding of Pacific knowledge systems, an attitude also highlighted by Thompson (2019).

The narrative of Māori underachievement in education is well-documented. Studies such as Krzyżosiak (2019), Marie et al. (2008) and Alcorn’s metanalysis One Hundred Years of Educational Research in New Zealand (2020), largely attribute the ongoing issues to inequities resulting from colonisation.

Motivated by my desire to be part of the solution rather than continuing to maintain the status quo in my role in tertiary vocational education, coupled with an organisational aim to uphold principles of Te Tiriti, I began to question the cultural assumptions behind my teaching
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philosophy. If Māori learners experience significantly poorer educational outcomes as a result of colonisation (Cochrane et al., 2017), how is my research and teaching practice addressing these issues? What aspects of my research and teaching practice are perpetuating institutionalised colonisation? How can I decolonise my methodology?

The Great White Teacher: decolonising my classroom

The scene is familiar to everyone in tertiary education. The teacher stands in the spotlight, facing rows of students in a lecture theatre. A powerful symbol of knowledge and expertise, ready to impart their wisdom to eager ears. When the teacher is white and British, and the students are indigenous, the image reeks of colonialism.

Smith (2012) describes decolonisation as “a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic & psychological divesting of colonial power” (p. 101). My research has led me to the conclusion that colonial power manifests in the classroom in pedagogy, subject content and assessment practices.

Decolonising pedagogy

Decolonising pedagogy for me means identifying ways to devolve power from the front of the classroom. I seek to resist the concept of the Great White Teacher by giving students the whiteboard pens, sitting with them during discussions, and implementing inquiry learning techniques, small group discussion and other student-centred learning activities.

Over recent years a new wave of research has identified ways to engage and support Māori learners, providing teachers with valuable resources to draw from, such as Webber and MacFarlane (2020), who identify specific learning conditions that enable Māori learners to succeed.

Context and connection therefore provide the foundation upon which all other learning and discussion take place. Encouraging students to share stories about their own experiences is fundamental to meaning-making (Dewey, 1938). Whilst I discovered the concept of pūrākau (traditional storytelling) whilst developing narrative research methodology for my doctorate, I have also begun to experiment with the idea of storytelling in my teaching practice.

Whakaakoranga Māori (Māori teaching) was customarily person-centred, active and creative. Just as fairy tales, rhymes, songs and other art forms have been used to disseminate important information throughout human history, traditional Māori cultural activities such as waiata (songs), carving and basket-weaving were imbued with layers of meaning and cultural knowledge, and important information was preserved and recounted through evocative pūrākau (Thompson, 2019). Finding ways to incorporate more storytelling and other creative strategies in my teaching is an area of future development I have identified.

It should be noted here that any one class may include learners from nationalities as diverse as South Africa, India, the Philippines, China and Europe as well as Māori, Pasifika and pākehā New Zealanders. The challenges for international students are well documented. Leaving behind families and support networks creates a sense of displacement and disconnection. The Ministry of Education sees “educationally powerful connections” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 2) and a partnership approach to learning with the learner at the centre, as being intrinsic to a high-quality educational environment that values diversity. Thus, student-centred strategies
which situate the focus of learning amongst the learners and their experiences, strengthening relational connections and social learning opportunities are of benefit to all learners, not just Māori. Practitioner-oriented studies such as Kachani et al. (2020) underline the benefits of a classroom climate that fosters a sense of belonging. This is a secondary outcome of my research – I create an inclusive learning environment for all students.

**Decolonising course content**

A scan of the common texts associated with my academic field of Management and Organisational Psychology quickly revealed a strong bias towards white, western, middle-class, male American theories and models – or, as one colleague describes it, “pale, male and stale”. Muthukrishna et al. (2020) highlight the prevalence of the Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) worldview in psychology research, but psychology is not the only subject in which WEIRD theories, worldview and attitudes dominate the academic landscape. A group of students in a class I taught recently were lamenting a lecturer’s reliance on American clips and case studies taken from YouTube, which were meaningless to them. They commented that they couldn’t relate to or recognise themselves in the material. They shared their sense of frustration: they couldn’t connect with the theories in the cultural format they were presented. Marie et al. (2008) identify a “systemic failure to actively recognise, transmit and reinforce Māori cultural values” (p. 183).

Instead, I present traditional/textbook (i.e., WEIRD) theory as just one part of the course content, alongside alternative perspectives including a specific focus on Māori perspectives, integrated throughout. I invite students from all cultures to interrogate the relevance of each theory in their own cultural context. I continue to search for relevant, current Māori stories, case studies, role-models and concepts into the content of my teaching. Perhaps I am fortunate in my subject area, but there are many ways I can draw from kaupapa Māori (Māori principles and ideas) to teach Management and Leadership – for example, *Kaitiakitanga*, which relates to the idea of stewardship of resources, perfectly connects to social responsibility and environmental sustainability. I am careful about how I do this. I do not presume to teach Māori students about their own culture. Instead I ask questions – I ask them to explain to me what a particular concept means to them, or how it might relate to the topic. I use phrases like:

“I’m wondering if this relates to that? Can you tell me what that might mean to you?”

“How does this connect with kaupapa Māori?”

“As an immigrant, I notice … How would you interpret this?”

The learner-centred teaching and questioning strategies I have developed create space for valuing and acknowledging different cultural perspectives, inviting all learners to engage with theoretical material, creating meaning which reflects their own unique contexts and world views.

**Decolonising assessment practices**

Another impact of autoethnography has resulted in an evolving approach to assessing student achievement. The very act of measuring and judging performance is intensely Euro-centric (Groot et al., 2018). The current system in New Zealand is based on outdated British industrial
era educational aims embedded in western imperialism (Smith, 2012), an underlying colonial doctrine we share with Australia (Smith, 2015). Students from all cultural backgrounds can learn to play the game. Some crack the code of assessment writing and get good grades. However, this does not, in my experience, mean they have gained or learned anything meaningful or useful at all. Nor does it result the kind of transformational learning that it is my aim as an educator to facilitate. I have come to view assessment practices as one of the keys to creating the kind of educational environment that enables my diverse student cohort to succeed, and a practical way to decolonise education.

Translating information from one language to another has its challenges. Translating knowledge from one culture to another is a different thing altogether. Thompson (2019) identifies a profound gap between European and Polynesian ways of knowing. One way she illustrates this is to compare the sequential, precise clarity of written European historical accounts with the “densely poetic, elliptical, evocative, and occasionally obscure” (p.158) accounts of Polynesian oral narrative, of which traditional Māori kōrero is an example.

Thompson (2019) highlights differences between oral and literary cultures – that the act of writing down what you know (the most common requirement in assessment) changes how information is constructed, viewed and valued. She proposes that oral cultures focus on knowledge as it relates to, and finds purpose in, experience and life, conserving and passing on information considered essential to the wellbeing of the listener. Knowledge is a fluid living concept rather than the static, concrete precision preferred by European logic. She notes that Europeans and Polynesians have historically had “two completely different knowledge systems, both of which placed the highest value on information about the physical world but constructed and deployed … in entirely different ways” (Thompson, 2019, p. 94), an epistemological gap it is still difficult to cross despite a century of research.

Over my 20-plus years in vocational tertiary education, I have noticed that students from diverse cultural backgrounds differ in their responses to assessment material in both perspective and style. Sense-making and meaning-making come from different worldviews and interpret the work of western theorists in sometimes unexpected ways. Many who have grown up connected to their own culture and language are writing, of course, in English as a second language. For indigenous communities, being forced to communicate in English rather than their own language is another relic of a colonial education system originally intended to wipe out all memory of indigenous language and identity. In Aotearoa New Zealand, te reo Māori (Māori language) is now recognised as an official language, alongside English and New Zealand Sign Language, and a number of initiatives in recent decades have seen a growth in the use and recognition of te reo Māori. Students are also entitled to submit assignments in te reo Māori if they prefer.

In some Māori students’ writing, I recognise traces of the poetic, elliptical style of traditional Polynesian oratory identified by Thompson (2019) – not always addressing the question directly, nor using the structure and style that meets standard marking criteria. The conceptual framework and descriptive vernacular of traditional Māori kōrero (discussion/narrative) does not fit such a prescriptive format, and I believe this may be one factor contributing to poor grades.

Educators and governments have been seeking to address what has become a well-known issue for decades: *How do we solve Māori underachievement in education?* But my research has led me to the conclusion that they have been asking the wrong question and therefore addressing the wrong problem. Studies have tended to focus on failure and fixes with a focus on ‘helping’ Māori succeed in the existing system. Simply put, the focus is more on the symptoms (Māori underachievement), not the cause (inequities resulting from colonialism), a view shared by
Krzyżosiak (2019). A wise person once noted that if a plant dies, you don’t blame the plant, you blame its environment. Requiring students to regurgitate westernised theories and models which bear little connection to their own worldview in order to get a good grade is at best a meaningless educational exercise. At worst, it upholds racist attitudes to different ways of knowing.

Past governments have funded various attempts to ‘bridge the divide’, notably with the creation in the 1980s of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, a Māori tertiary education provider run for Māori, by Māori. Providing Māori learners with the option to study in their own language and in a culturally familiar has become a popular choice for Māori learners (Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, n.d.). However, there is currently a trend towards increasing separation between cultures in Aotearoa, a focus on what divides us, rather than what binds us. Increasing connection and community is surely a healthier aim; as Thompson (2019) points out, “many of the most compelling insights have arrived at moments of convergence, when two different ways of looking at a problem … intertwine” (p. 314). All learners should, of course, have the choice to study at any institution without experiencing discrimination – that is a fundamental human right. All education providers are therefore responsible for examining and addressing systemic racism.

Critical reflection on the failure of innumerable historical attempts to address what I have come to see as ‘the wrong problem’ prompted me to change my own question. I started asking instead: What is useful and relevant to Māori learners and how can they provide evidence of this in a way that is meaningful to them and values their unique cultural context and ways of knowing? Instead of attempting to construct a bridge across an epistemological chasm, which maintains the “positional superiority of Western knowledge” (Smith, 2012, p. 62), why can’t different ways of knowing be valued as separate and equal?

I am currently developing ways to decolonise my assessment practice using two key strategies: The first is in journaling as an assessment method. With its roots in constructivism, a theory of learning developed by Dewey (1938), journaling encourages learners to make sense of, and respond to theoretical material in their own voice, evaluating the concepts in the light of their own experience and perspective. In many ways journaling can be viewed as storytelling. The writing is more personal and less formal than essay-writing. Students can incorporate drawings, quotes and other material that is meaningful to them. There is less focus on structure and more on the actual learning that is taking place. Literature, such as Walker (2006) and Williams (2018), highlights journal writing in a range of educational contexts as a way of promoting authenticity, increasing engagement and a critical approach to theory.

The second is in the development of flexible, project-style, practical assessments in which students undertake a particular project and then narrate their experience and critical reflections on their learning in a creative presentation which forms a major part of their overall grade. Far from ‘dumbing down’ assessment requirements, this approach widens the possibilities for students to demonstrate their understanding in a greater variety of ways.

One example of this in an undergraduate leadership paper I teach. Students complete a journal, responding to questions about the theoretical content throughout the course. They are also required to complete The Leadership Project, in which they lead a group of people through a change process over a period of 6–8 weeks. The beauty of this is its flexibility. Any group of people, in any organisational context, participating in almost any kind of change will do. Studies such as Wanner and Palmer (2015) highlight the benefits of increased control and choice that flexible assessment practices offer a diverse student body. The focus is the learning, not the setting, or even the outcome: quite often, the change fails for any number of reasons – that is
the reality of change leadership. The grade is achieved via the evidence of critical reflection on
the process and its connection to theory, which can be demonstrated verbally, visually and in
writing. It is this kind of flexible, ‘open’ assessment practice that provides the opportunity for
diverse students to succeed.

Developing approaches to decolonising pedagogy, course content and assessment practice
are examples of the profound impact of autoethnography on my academic role. The process
has challenged me to an ongoing engagement with my cultural setting and has been the cata-
lyst for continuous improvement as I seek to resist and challenge the status quo. The positive
feedback from students of all cultures has encouraged me to push forwards, even when the
system presents barriers such as inflexible assessment protocols, or so-called quality assurance
systems that limit creativity, and other pressures of the academic world that can distract from
the purpose of my being there in the first place.

That’s all well and good, but so what? What difference does all this personal/professional
development make in the wider context? Does one person’s noticing, changing thinking and
practice have any impact at all?

**Autoethnography and the impact of disruptive self-expression**

In September 1999, I went home to the UK to visit my family. The trip was not without
its dramas, not least my plane crash-landing in a typhoon in Bangkok. But that is another
story. A friend bought me a ticket to the All Blacks versus England World Cup Rugby
game at Twickenham for a treat. I proudly dressed in black to support my new country,
along with several thousand kiwis in the crowd. We were especially looking forward to
watching the awe-inspiring Jonah Lomu bulldoze the England team in his usual spectac-
ular fashion.

We waited excitedly to sing our national anthem. A woman stepped on to the podium
and the familiar music played. She began to sing. In Māori. Despite nearly a decade living in
New Zealand, I had never heard this version before. When she’d finished, we waited to raise
our voices for the English rendition. It never came.

I remember feeling disappointed and hearing outraged comments from other fans around
me. In a radio interview afterwards, the singer, Dame Hinewehi Mohi, said she had wanted to
raise awareness of te reo Māori and felt happy that she hadn’t sung it in English. It suddenly
struck me how wrong it was that, as an official language of Aotearoa, te reo Māori was used
so little.

That single act of disruptive self-expression sparked a huge debate in New Zealand and
ultimately resulted in a change of attitude to the national anthem. It is now much more
common for pākehā to know the Māori version, and it is now always sung in both languages.

The power of one person to create transformational change is well documented throughout
human history. The impact of disruptive self-expression in organisational settings has been
highlighted as a means to confront assumptions, practices, or values and create a ripple effect
of change, citing examples of how individuals simply behaving differently have become catalysts
for lasting change.

My team at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology see ourselves as a community of practice,
regularly sharing and discussing our critical reflections on our teaching and research. Other
strategies to promote my research findings can involve simply speaking up at meetings, as well
as challenging and participating in the redevelopment of organisational policy, presenting my
ideas to colleagues at education conferences, and in academic writing such as this book chapter.
I have illustrated the potential ripple effect of this process in Figure 4.1.
Autoethnography challenges us to dig deep, to become agents of change, unearthing issues and identifying ways to actively participate in decolonising the systems that oppress the original inhabitants of this land. I and my colleagues in the Tertiary Education sector have the opportunity to undertake research, and design learning experiences and assessments which recognise and embrace the unique ideological frameworks of Aotearoa New Zealand, to acknowledge and value kaupapa Māori in our research and teaching, and to become proactive in our stance against systemic racism.

Autoethnography facilitates a dynamic process of increasing intentionality, challenging norms and seeking solutions to problems, rather than maintaining the status quo. It is a way of understanding and knowing which leads to growing and being, as I become a living, breathing embodiment of my research results.

References

Figure 4.1 The autoethnographic ripple effect
Anne Bradley


Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (n.d.). He Raumaharatanga – Te Wānanga o Aotearoa/Our History. www.twoa.ac.nz