

On the role of ‘digital learning designer’ for non-indigenous designers collaborating within culturally grounded digital design settings

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This is a conceptual inquiry into the nature of the role of learning designer from mainstream cultural groups working within culturally-grounded digital design settings. This paper stems from the co-design of an online transition-to-study resource developed specifically for Māori and Pacific students about to begin postgraduate study at the University of Auckland in Aotearoa New Zealand. The resource is the culmination of an extensively planned design project amongst primarily non-indigenous designers in partnership with both indigenous and non-indigenous academics. These reflections from both non-indigenous and indigenous members of the project team are offered for other tertiary-sector designers as reflections and potential sparks - theoretical “seed sowing” (Bihanic, 2015, p. vi-vii) - about the inherently positional and necessarily culturally-grounded nature of the role of digital learning designer.

Keywords: role of digital learning designer, positionality, indigenous, social justice

Introduction

This paper represents the reflections of designers and a project leader from mainstream cultural groups (i.e. as New Zealand European/Pākehā) and an indigenous academic staff member involved in the creation of culturally-embedded digital resources designed to support potential postgraduate students. This contemplative ‘conversation’ stems from our reflection on an 18-month collaborative pilot design project in the University of Auckland in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). The intended users of the design project outcomes are applicants who are Māori and Pacific. In NZ these groups, though having different backgrounds, are frequently considered together as the target of a range of equity provisions designed to reduce educational disadvantage. Māori are the indigenous people, or tangata whenua, of NZ. The Pacific population in NZ, known collectively as Pacific peoples, reflects a diverse group made up of people who, at an earlier time, immigrated to New Zealand from many different Pacific nations (Pacific Perspectives, 2013; Wright & Hornblow, 2008).

The term *indigenous* is used here to refer to both Māori and Pacific students and reflects the status of both Māori and Pacific peoples within their own respective ancestries and nations. As Smith notes, we acknowledge that the “term ‘indigenous’ is problematic in that it appears to collectivise many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different.” (1999, p. 6). As co-authors of this paper we use this term to broaden the discussion beyond Māori and Pacific communities given that the issues are likely to be relevant among designers who are also working within other indigenous cultures and nations. Similarly, we use the term “non-indigenous” as a global term to denote the broad mix of people, significantly of European-descent, living within these nations. The term “digital learning designer” is used here to link the role of tertiary-sector designers to a broader, multidisciplinary community of designers exploring design problems and “design for design empowerment” via technology-mediated solutions (Vardouli, 2015, in Bihanic, 2015, p. 15). This includes a community of designers working digitally across the public sector as well as private sector service and product industries. An aim of this paper is to offer a conceptual starting point for future inquiry into this topic, particularly for designers who seek, like the authors, to co-design digital learning objects, and spaces, from a more culturally-framed, culturally-safe, centre.

As academic staff committed to equity and social justice in digital spaces, we initiated a design- thinking (Brown, 2008) approach to conceptualising the issue of *transitions* – trying to comprehend and plot points along the journey of Māori and Pacific postgraduate students in our faculty from pre-enrolment through to study completion and beyond. Analysis of focus group and pre-pilot survey data, suggested that ineffective transitions into postgraduate study is a significant barrier for these students. Thus transitions became a focus around which we sought to improve these students’ experiences. We did this through a pilot digital design project, [PG Poutama STEPPS](#) (Student Tools for Effective Preparation for Postgraduate Study). The aim of the pilot project resource was to offer better-supported, culturally-framed transitions to postgraduate study via online self-access tools.

The argument: for, and within, complex cultural spaces

As tertiary-sector designers who support the development of diverse online resources and communities of learning, we also work within inherently complex (Urry, 2003), uncertain (Campbell, 2016), and yet also necessarily culturally-bound, globalised and technologically-mediated spaces (Verbeek, 2011, discussed in Bihanic, 2015, p. 36). Exploring these themes Campbell posits:

... education for complexity must always examine and reframe the reflexive question of what constitutes education - and it must teach each learner ... [so they may participate in] examining and reframing that question for themselves (2016, p. 2).

To start to ‘examine and reframe’ the role of the non-indigenous digital learning designer participating within indigenous collaborations requires a move beyond an academic exercise in role definition. Rather, a careful unpacking of *the act of being a designer* is required. We position this work within wider explorations about what a typically euro-centric, culturally positioned space might look like, were digital designers’ roles refined and reimaged. We argue that what is required is a culturally mediated and defined conceptual space firmly situating the role of being and becoming a digital designer within the theoretical frames of positionality (Merriam et al., 2001), design for empowerment (Vardouli, 2015, in Bihanic, 2015, p. 16) and reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1997).

The re-framing: situating ourselves as culturally-grounded designers

To start to conceive of a ‘re-framing’ of non-indigenous design roles requires acknowledgement first, that we are *all* culturally-grounded beings. As such, the act of design - and therefore, the role of all designers - becomes an inherently positional, contestable, fluid, multivariate and potentially uncertain space. This complexity applies equally across indigenous, and across non-indigenous communities and designers; however, design within indigenous communities may require additional reflections and conceptualisations about culture from non-indigenous designers. This needs to be substantively explored, unpacked and understood for non-indigenous designers to be able to engage in more purposeful, culturally-grounded and appropriate design. It may involve (but is not limited to):

- scrutiny of power relations based on historical and contemporary marginalisation and colonisation;
- examination of personal explicit and implicit assumptions and/or biases (van Ryn et al., 2015; van Ryn & Saha, 2011); and
- defining what collaboration mores and norms are in play within differing groups and how participation may unfold.

We advance the notion that through self-reflection on the nature of the learning designer role itself, specifically through a lens that views all technology, and designing, as inherently *non-neutral*, we may as designers begin to interrogate how best to realise a genuinely participative design “cultural interface” (Nakata, 2003, p. 285) – a digital design space within which indigenous and non-indigenous designers and learners might co-construct knowledge and ultimately thrive together.

Origins of a design project: design thinking meets the cultural interface

Reedy and Sankey (2015) highlight a growing body of research that speaks to the impact of culture on the experience of indigenous learners in online learning spaces. They identify barriers concerned with aspects of relatedness, connectedness and identity. Research from Māori communities as well as Pacific peoples echoes similar themes of dis-connection and lack of identity or ‘cultural place’ in varied learning spaces (Airini, Rakana, Curtis et al., 2009; Curtis, Wikaire, Kool et al., 2014). Additionally, analysis of pre-pilot evaluation data identified disparities experienced by Māori and Pacific postgraduate student cohorts. These included: quality of learning experience, retention in postgraduate programmes, academic achievement and experiences with implicit and/or overt racism throughout their study journey (Faletau, Wikaire, & Curtis, 2014; Curtis, Wikaire, Kool et al., 2014).

Problem definition

We asked ourselves the following questions initially and throughout our design process:

- How could our team best develop an environment where Māori and Pacific students could feel ‘at home’ online – i.e. a deliberately culturally-constructed digital space where students could build meaningful cultural networks and personal connections within an indigenous-framed setting?
- To what extent might indigenous postgraduate students be able to access such online spaces (including, but not limited to, technical access barriers)?
- To what extent would they choose to engage with this type of digital cultural community, when much indigenous relationship building focuses on face-to-face connections?
- To what extent could this sort of space help mitigate experiences such as isolation, lack of relatedness and/or cultural alienation, which have been described by previous Māori and Pacific postgraduate students during their transitions into postgraduate study (Morunga, 2009)?

Designing a culturally framed digital design pilot project

A reference group of senior leaders from the wider university was established and they nominated a project team. This team met together, guided by the reference group, regularly over 12 months. This was essential to forge strong relationships, to define the conceptual foundations for the project and to develop a shared cultural framework to inform subsequent online digital tools development. After conducting an extensive literature review, we hosted a range of focus groups where both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The groups included Māori and Pacific current and former students, teaching, library and support staff and relevant employer representatives. From these, we forged a cross-university pilot project: PG Poutama STEPPS. Phase one of the pilot focused on developing culturally-grounded theoretical frameworks signed off by the reference group. While this phase was intensive, it was integral to the later project success. Phase two involved the project team exploring, developing, prototyping and user-testing an open access digital delivery platform. The tool was designed to accommodate a set of culturally-framed transition tools, to be self-accessed by prospective postgraduate Māori and Pacific students entering our faculty. Phase three of the project involved sourcing and developing a suite of related ‘preparation’ pages and tools. We have just completed phase four of the project where we have launched the online site in a small-scale pilot in pre-Semester 2, 2016 (with 17 pilot student users). As a collaboration, the pilot project has been successful in drawing together diverse expertise and experience across a wide range of Māori and Pacific academic, cultural, pastoral, library and support staff as well as non-indigenous designers and academic staff.

“Seed sowing” – future directions

The following areas delineate a few prompts for reflection with links to relevant academic research. They stem from our shared reflections about how our pilot project has been able to achieve our aims to develop a culturally-framed set of digital learning tools intended to reduce transition barriers into tertiary study. They may serve as springboards for others wishing to probe, debate or research more deeply their role as non-indigenous learning designers working within culturally-grounded indigenous settings. Indigenous designers entering into design work with non-indigenous designers may also wish to consider some of these same aspects with a slight reframing of the following points, exploring:

- Ways in which non-indigenous beliefs/practices around *communication* are the same/different from indigenous communication beliefs/practices (Orbe, 1996).
- Individual perceptions about the *role of a designer* (Bihanic, 2015).
- *Unexamined assumptions* held that might influence how effective co-cultural collaborations can be, especially around notions of *power* and legitimacy of Kaupapa Māori methodology (see, for example, Bishop, 1999; Smith, 1999; Smith & Ayers, 2006).
- Theoretical and practical *considerations* to take into account when working on design projects within indigenous communities i.e. ones that may be unique/distinctly different from those experienced when working within multicultural/other diverse cultural groups. Considering:
 - Significance of *time* – with regards to relationship building, required consensus-making process in indigenous communities and implications for project plans/deadlines as well as impact on notions of ‘agile design’ in cultural groups with longer-term orientations.
 - Significance of *scarcity of resource* – thinking about potential burdens placed on indigenous team members who may be the single representative for an entire community.
 - Significance of *relationship building* – identifying norms in western cultural group-building and understanding potential differing norms for indigenous groups; drawing on strengths of relationships from indigenous networks that can be tapped into once relationships exist. See Reedy and Sankey (2015) for more on significance of relatedness and connection building.

Conclusion

Central to this discussion has been signposting of relevant themes including the consideration of positionality in the role of being a designer, in recognising situated knowledges, processes and concepts of power, and the purpose of non-indigenous learning designers seeking to engage in critical self-reflection to better embody their role as designers. In outlining these thoughts, the authors hope to spark thinking (both theoretical and practical) around what design at the “cultural interface” (Nakata, 2003) might look and be like for non-indigenous and indigenous design co-creators. Nakata argues:

... that theoretically there are real problems with beginning from principles based in a duality between culture and mainstream (Luke et al., 1993). Not only do they obscure the complexities at this intersection, but they confine indigenous peoples to the position of ‘Other’ by reifying the very categories that have marginalised us historically and that still seek to remake and relegate us within the frameworks of Western epistemes (2003, p. 26).

Our intention, in this paper, has *not* been to further perpetuate such segregated dualities by presenting the discussion in terms of indigenous *versus* non-indigenous designers. Rather, the aim has been to sketch a preliminary vision of a supple, culturally-safe and culturally-capable designer; one who can inhabit, frame and realise “multiple ‘utilities’” (Bihanic & Huyghe in Bihanic, 2015, p. 4) through co-cultural collaborations across varied communities. The purpose of this paper has also *not* been to offer the results of ‘data’ analysis or of ‘solutions’ to questions raised. Rather our intention is to prompt consideration of theoretical and practical reference points by offering our own reflections about our roles in a digital design pilot project. Future work requires greater scrutiny of what crucial elements may contribute to an individual becoming a more reflective, culturally-grounded, culturally-safe digital learning designer – one who can co-create within varied indigenous, and other, design communities.

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