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TE AKO TĒTAHI KI TĒTAHI LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER: THE POWER OF AKO

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TE AKO TĒTAHI KI TĒTAHI LEARNING FROM ONE ANOTHER: THE POWER OF AKO

Terri Brian and Jody Takimoana

Ko Poeura te Maunga (Poeura is my mountain)
Ko Waitangi te Awa (Waitangi is my river)
Ko Ngātokimatawhaorua te Waka (Ngātokimatawhaorua is my canoe)
Ko Oromāhoe te Marae (Oromāhoe is my Marae)
Ko Ngāti Kawa te Whare (Ngāti Kawa is my meeting house)
Ko Ngāpuhi te Iwi (Ngāpuhi is my tribe)
Ko Jody Takimoana tōku ingoa.

Ko Rangitoto te Maunga (Rangitoto is my mountain)
Ko Hauraki Gulf te Moana (Hauraki Gulf is my sea)
Nō te Motu o Waiheke o Tāmaki Makaurau te tūrangawaewae (Waiheke Island in Auckland is where I'm from)
Nō Whangārei ahau (I live in Whangārei).
Ko Brian, ko Wilson, ko Thomson, ko Adams, tōku iwi (Brian, Wilson, Thomson, Adams, are my family)
Ko Terri Brian tōku ingoa.

INTRODUCTION

References to te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) are common in education policy and strategy in Aotearoa New Zealand (for example, Education and Training Act, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2026; Tertiary Education Commission, 2025). The practical application of the treaty agreement in this context, however, requires thoughtful translation of high-level strategic commitments into everyday educational practices (Severinsen et al., 2025). Superficial implementation lacks meaning, and an approach is necessary that ensures the development of understanding, capacity, and capability (Came et al., 2020). This article seeks to acknowledge and support the responsibility to enact te Tiriti, by focusing on the intentional application of ako and whanaungatanga as examples of treaty partnership in tertiary education and, specifically, within learning design practice.

As co-authors of this article, we position ourselves as tangata whenua (Ngāpuhi) and tangata Tiriti (Pākehā). Our respective roles as Tumuaki Whakaako and Learning and Teaching Specialist within Te Ama Ako | Learning and Teaching Development at Otago Polytechnic reflect the collaborative and cross-cultural nature of our work. Central to our practice is the recognition of the foundational role of te Tiriti in facilitating partnership and establishing relationships where power is shared

while preserving distinct status and positions (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). Our diverse backgrounds inform our approach, bringing together multiple perspectives while upholding our commitment to Tiriti obligations within our professional context. We recognise that our positions as academic and professional staff within Otago Polytechnic influence how we engage with this work, and we remain mindful of both the responsibilities and limitations that this entails.

Our methodology is grounded in critical pedagogy, which acknowledges power relations in educational settings and conceptualises education as a means for transformative action and change (Freire, 1970). We also draw on approaches that seek to challenge Western academic models and create space for indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being (Smith, 1995; Tawhai, 2020). In this article, ako is used to describe a te ao Māori epistemology in which learning and teaching are reciprocal and deeply interconnected (Berryman & Eley, 2017). This is distinguished from Ako (styled with an upper-case "A") as a pedagogical approach, which is positioned and discussed as forming a foundation for effective learning design in the tertiary education context.

The broader basis from which this article emerges is work by the Te Ama Ako | Learning and Teaching Development team to co-construct an understanding of ako and what it means for their practice. Beginning in 2021, under the guidance of former Tumuaki Whakaako, Ron Bull, a framework or "learning and teaching philosophy" was co-created to support the team's intentional application of ako in learning design and facilitation and, specifically, within Otago Polytechnic's newly designed Postgraduate Certificate in Learning Design. More recently, the authors have been evolving our own mahi in this space, and in November 2025 facilitated a workshop at the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) conference in Wellington. The kaupapa for this workshop supported the embedding of ako in online learning environments across a range of educational contexts. It focused on whanaungatanga and included and modelled ako in its design and delivery, allowing space for the sharing and co-creation of knowledge to occur. Much of the following text is transcribed from a recorded kōrero in which we begin by reflecting on our personal understandings of ako and whanaungatanga. We then consider how we see the tuākana-tēina relationship informing and shaping our roles and practice at Otago Polytechnic. Finally, we discuss how we think ako can be truly embedded in effective learning design, and how this might ultimately contribute to supporting Treaty partnerships and meaningful enactment of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The conversational format is not intended to provide primary 'data' for autoethnographic analysis. It is based on our own opinions and understandings and, through our interactions, we see it as a way of modelling and enacting the concepts discussed in this article.

AKO

In a tertiary education context and building on the work of Dr Rangimarie Rose Pere (1994), ako has developed as a te ao Māori framing of learning and teaching, encompassing a variety of understandings and interpretations focused on the concept of reciprocity. Within this reciprocity, learning and teaching are shared and encouraged, and learners support, teach, and learn from one another (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013). In this way, ako is distinguishable from Western expert, or transmission, models of education (Bishop et al., 2001), placing a strong focus on understanding learning from the ākonga perspective and adapting practice accordingly. Card et al. (2022) explain that ako defines the learning and teaching interaction while also describing the dual role of ākonga in the learning process. In this process, there is firstly the uptake of new knowledge (ako, in the role of learner) and secondly, the connection and integration of this knowledge with

existing cultural understandings and prior knowledge through self-reflection (ako, in the role of self-teacher). There is much discussion, however, as to what this means for pedagogy and praxis (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

TB: In your role as Tumuaki Whakaako, Jody, you play a key role in cultural leadership and advancing learning and teaching excellence that aligns with Māori aspirations, values, and worldviews. I'm interested to learn more about ako and how you understand it. How does it inform your approach to your role?

JT: From my perspective, there are a lot of nuances to ako. It's not just that kaiako are teaching or that ākonga are learning, but that at times those positions shift and change.

TB: Sometimes, maybe we have the idea that ako only relates to the knowledge or the content being taught at the time. We think, how can ākonga teach kaiako? How can that be ako? But can't kaiako also be learning other things from ākonga?

JT: Absolutely. It's all about the prior knowledge and experience that ākonga and kaiako bring with them to the learning experience. Sometimes ākonga are the experts. Kaiako might have a certain level of understanding of what they're teaching but ākonga might have a different background or perspective that they can add. That mātauranga, or that knowledge, needs to be utilised otherwise it's just not reflective of ako.

TB: So, we need to recognise the power dynamic that says, I'm the kaiako and you're the ākonga and I'm here to fill you up with my knowledge. We have to ask: how do I find out about ākonga and what they already know? How can I encourage them to share their knowledge and experience?

JT: Yes, and for that to happen and for a true representation of ako, there also should be a strong sense of whanaungatanga, because without that, ako isn't going to occur.

WHANAUNGATANGA

In practice, whanaungatanga is the nurturing of relationships, through care, connection, and common understandings and associations (Metge, 1990). These relationships can be based on things such as such as kinship ties, connections to places, interests, the environment, and shared learning experiences (Macfarlane et al., 2024). Bishop et al. (2013) explain that whanaungatanga in an educational context means that ākonga are treated as whānau, and this means creating learning experiences and interactions in which meaningful and reciprocal relationships can be built and sustained. Research clearly indicates that these kinds of relationships are integral to authentic learning for tangata whenua and tangata Tiriti alike (Alton-Lee, 2003; Macfarlane, 2004; Smith, 1995).

TB: Can you talk about how you understand whanaungatanga? What is its connection to ako?

JT: The direct translation of "whanaungatanga" is "relationship," but within ako it's about how that relationship is enacted. If there's a strong sense of whanaungatanga and connection, then the reciprocation of learning and teaching becomes much more fluid and valuable. Without whanaungatanga, kaiako have all the knowledge and power to impart and learning becomes more of a transactional experience. It can be very one-way. But also, if ākonga don't have a relationship with kaiako, then the knowledge can be lost, or the learning doesn't have the value that it should. Building whanaungatanga takes time, though, and needs the space to happen. We can't just expect it to be there straight away.

TB: So, how do we build whanaungatanga?

JT: For me, whether it's in a learning environment, my whānau, the community, or wherever, I'm building relationships. If you don't have good relationships in those spaces, it's very hard to move forward. In my role here at Otago Polytechnic, I work with various teams and at all levels. The key to my role is whanaungatanga. If I don't have those relationships, then the mahi doesn't move, it just stays the way it's always been, so I see whanaungatanga as being critical to that.

TB: When I think about whanaungatanga, I think about a sense of belonging, having shared goals, or finding things in common with other people.

JT: For whanaungatanga to really work, there needs to be a connection. When someone does their mihi, in a Māori sense, they're saying this is how I'm connected to where I'm from, my whakapapa, the whenua, the moana. It creates those common threads. Whanaungatanga is about finding those threads. Not just individually, but how you're connected collectively.

While whanaungatanga is central to the design of Ako-based learning experiences, there should not be an expectation that it is taught directly as a concept, philosophy, or practice. The goal is to create learning environments in which everyone experiences whanaungatanga and where ākonga feel welcome, respected, and supported (Harris et al., 2025). This requires the embedding of opportunities for kaiako and ākonga to meet, connect, and share information about who they are and where they are from. Supporting authenticity and modelling power-sharing in this way demonstrates willingness to learn with, from, and about each other (Macfarlane et al., 2024). Building whanaungatanga in a learning environment requires purposefully including spaces in which risk taking is encouraged, where there is no shame in "not knowing" and where it is understood that everyone brings with them knowledge and experiences of value to share. Ako-based learning design therefore requires making space for whanaungatanga and creating opportunities for the sharing of knowledge. According to Berryman et al. (2018), these pedagogies emerge from within a relational dialogic space; however, to engage in that dialogue, we must first respect diversity and understand the potential for learning and growth through the exploration of differences.

TB: How do you see ako and whanaungatanga influencing your role as Tumuaki Whakaako at Otago Polytechnic?

JT: A good question this one. If you look at my job description, it's very structured, but really, my role is entrenched in whanaungatanga and the building of relationships. As an example, when we designed the workshop for the ICDE conference, if you and I didn't have a relationship, didn't have whanaungatanga, and we'd just come together without a shared understanding, the whole experience would have been so different. I don't think we would have come to the same place with that mahi, if we hadn't been engaged in whanaungatanga on a regular basis. We know each other and what we're trying to achieve, and we can talk to that. But we can also disagree with each other as well, and that's an important part. There's always going to be sticking points and contention, and that's sometimes necessary for growth. Ako and whanaungatanga provide a safe connected space to work things out together and achieve a shared understanding.

This approach aligns with the notion of partnership that has emerged from contemporary interpretations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Bishop, 2003; Hudson & Russell, 2009). Macfarlane et al. (2024) for example, propose the metaphor of he awa whiria (a braided stream) as an appropriate description of the ways in which the Western and te ao Māori understandings can converge, diverge, and run together in alliance towards the same destination, linking cultural perspectives.

TB: We weren't intentionally teaching each other anything, but we were using our sense of a common goal to get to a place where we were both happy with the outcome. It wasn't a traditional, transactional exchange of knowledge, where one person passes knowledge to another. We were both equal participants, but we had different perspectives and areas of understanding and expertise that we brought together to create something new.

JT: In our mahi, we reflected on a whole lot of different areas and talked about it, and as a result some new knowledge has come out of that. Creating new knowledge and understanding is central to ako. But it doesn't have to be directive, and it doesn't always have to be one, or the same, more knowledgeable or experienced person making all the decisions.

THE TUĀKANA-TĒINA RELATIONSHIP

According to Winitana (2012), there are a number of possibilities within a tertiary education context for those more knowledgeable and experienced to model and mentor skills and behaviours for those inexperienced and less knowledgeable. Winitana suggests that one such possibility is what she refers to as the "tuakana–teina pedagogy" which draws on traditional Māori cultural practices where the tuakana is an older, more experienced sibling and the teina is a younger sibling, or novice. Within ako, the role of the tuakana is to guide learning, validate prior knowledge and experience, and maintain a balance of power within the learning relationship. The role of the teina is to learn through experimentation, creative thinking, and self-reflection (Ministry of Education, 2009). It is important to note, however, that these roles are dynamic and interchangeable at any time. Pedagogically, in a tertiary education context, the tuākana-tēina relationship can be interpreted as the learning and teaching interaction between kaiako (tuākana), and ākonga (tēina). It can also exist between ākonga as they interact and collaborate in pair or group learning experiences (Raumati Hook et al., 2007). From a Māori worldview, the tuakana holds the mana of their field of expertise; however, uplifting the mana of both tuakana and teina, is central to the tuākana-tēina pedagogy. This involves creating safe learning environments and learning experiences informed by ako and grounded in trust-based relationships (Winitana, 2012).

TB: To what extent do you see our approach to our mahi reflective of a tuakana-teina relationship or pedagogy?

JT: If we're talking about the embedding of te ao Māori perspectives, I would be, I suppose, the tuakana, but from a learning design perspective, I might be more teina. If I step into more of a leadership role, then I'm Tumuaki Whakaako in that space. To say you're always the tuakana, that's not realistic. It depends on the environment. But it shifts and changes so much, so quickly. It's important to recognise that we're all shifting and changing from being tuākana to tēina and back depending on what we're doing and where we are at the time. I think the beauty of ako, and whanaungatanga is that they help can create and support that dynamic.

TB: When I first started working with you on the PGCLD programme, and I was looking for answers about how to embed ako, I thought, I'll just have a meeting with Jody—he'll tell me what to do. But instead of explicitly teaching me how do it, the way you've purposefully modelled whanaungatanga and ako has helped me develop a deeper understanding. I think that was also reflected in the way we designed the ICDE workshop. I try to use this modelling approach with ākonga, so they can develop their own understanding. It can sometimes be uncomfortable as kaiako, though, because an ako-based approach is different from more traditional Western models of learning and teaching, and ākonga can get frustrated if they're expecting us to just tell them how to do it.

JT: I think the learning is actually in the process of doing it and being a part of it as well. Although some learning experiences do have to be very pragmatic; especially in vocational education, you can still weave concepts like ako, whanaungatanga, and tuākana-tēina through your design and facilitation.

AKO-BASED LEARNING DESIGN

Drawing on the idea that it incorporates the processes of both learning and teaching through dialogic practice, Ako-based pedagogies are aligned with socio-constructivist views and strategies that draw on kaiako-ākonga partnerships. According to Pere (1994), ako situates ākonga together at the centre of any learning and teaching activity. Hemara (2000) notes that it is important to distinguish this from Western educational models that place ākonga in the centre but alone as individuals in the learning experience. Bishop and Glynn (2003) explain that an Ako-based pedagogy

centres ākonga by ensuring they are in control of the learning process and the construction of meaning. Bishop and Glynn emphasise that learning should therefore be designed to embrace diversity and leverage the richness of prior knowledge and experience to maximise benefit. Zepke and Leach (2005) suggest that reflection makes it possible for ākonga to learn from their experiences. Card et al. (2022) also highlight the importance of reflection within ako as a means of connecting and integrating new knowledge with existing understandings. Additionally, reflection is fundamental to the modelling approach emphasised by ako (Hemara, 2000), highlighting the importance of creating opportunities for learning through demonstration, and for providing clear, effective, and ongoing, assessment and feedback (Bishop and Glynn, 2003).

TB: So, my understanding as a learning designer is that applying an Ako-based approach means firstly providing space for building whanaungatanga, whether that's in an online or kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) learning environment. Without whanaungatanga, there can't really be an authentic exchange of ideas or co-construction of knowledge. Ako then needs to be supported by structured learning activities that include opportunities for reflection, two-way feedback, and regular evaluation of progress toward a shared learning goal. We need to create learning experiences that value the prior experience and ways of knowing that ākonga bring with them. And, by drawing on a tuākana-tēina pedagogy, we can acknowledge and leverage the idea that we are all learners and teachers at different times, and in different contexts throughout our lives.

JT: I always try to apply the concepts we've been talking about in my practice. That ako process: you have something that I can learn from you, I have something that you can learn from me. Fundamentally, I believe it's about upholding the mana of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and I think all these ideas and ways of knowing and being are connected to us being true partners. I want us to just keep moving the dial on this mahi. It's important that things keep happening like what we're doing here. It takes work for different ways of knowing and being to become the norm, and to me, ako and whanaungatanga are a big piece of enacting the tangata Māori-tangata Tiriti partnership.

CONCLUSION

Ako embodies the idea that we are all learners and teachers and are empowered to learn with and from each other. Within this reciprocal relationship, we are not expected to know everything, and each brings knowledge and experience from which we are all able to learn. Embedding and modelling ako means recognising and valuing ākonga diversity, while encouraging connection and validating existing knowledge and experience. Meaningful embedding of ako in the learning experiences and interactions we design and facilitate requires a commitment to understand ako on more than just a surface level. It demands the intentional and consistent enactment of te Tiriti partnerships and the application of pedagogies that acknowledge te ao Māori epistemologies. It involves examining existing paradigms of learning and teaching and facilitating relationships that support open and authentic dialogue. In this way, we can continue to grow our shared understanding and create new knowledge within our specific contexts.

The increasing diversity of learner cohorts amplifies the need to provide a range of options to support engagement and learning success. Learning designers must therefore advocate for and purposefully create spaces in all learning environments in which whanaungatanga and ako can authentically occur. The design of purposeful and effective Ako-based learning activities should acknowledge and leverage the prior knowledge and experience of ākonga, and involve elements of discussion, collaboration, and reflection. To enable authentic and productive te Tiriti partnerships, power imbalances also need to be acknowledged and addressed within the design of learning experiences. Failure to do so can produce inequities and significantly limit knowledge sharing and open dialogue, potentially limiting the transformative potential of an Ako-based approach.

By utilising the dynamics of a tuākana-tēina pedagogy, learning designers can help address the power imbalances inherent in traditional learning and teaching paradigms and encourage ākonga and kaiako to learn from themselves, and one another.

We are well placed in Aotearoa New Zealand to create culturally responsive tertiary education environments that respect diverse ways of learning and knowing. By purposefully seeking to develop our understanding of these different approaches, we can continue to connect with and learn from each other and ourselves. Ensuring ako and whanaungatanga are at the heart of what we do enables us to create and inclusive and equitable learning and teaching experiences. This in turn, supports us to work alongside each other, and to participate in, and create, learning and teaching environments as authentic Tiriti partners.

Born in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and raised in rural towns throughout Aotearoa, **Jody Takimoana** has a strong sense of connection with the whenua. His secondary schooling was split between Cromwell College in Central Otago and Hato Tipene (St Stephens), South Auckland. Jody's qualifications include a Certificate in Adult Teaching, Diploma of Sport & Recreation (Defence Force), Diploma of Business, Bachelor of Sport and Exercise with a Major in Management and Coaching (Massey University), and a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). He is currently completing his Master of Professional Practice at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin.

Terri Brian (https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4923-4874) is a Learning and Teaching Specialist at Otago Polytechnic. She supports academic staff in the design, development, and delivery of programmes of study. Terri also facilitates courses on New Zealand Certificate in Adult and Tertiary Teaching, and the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning Design. Her teaching background is in foundation, adult literacy, and English language education and she holds a Master of Contemporary Education, a Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education, and a CELTA. Terri's research interests are mostly related to the creation of inclusive and equitable learning experiences.

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