

Visual whakapapa: An arts therapy experiential

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Abstract

The Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design Arts Therapy Postgraduate Programme offers a compulsory course, 'Social Aspects of Arts Therapy', that is shaped around the social and cultural aspects that are relevant to the field in Aotearoa New Zealand. As part of this course, students learn about significant Māori concepts, one of which is whakapapa. Course participants are invited to create and share artwork that reflects their whakapapa. This paper outlines the meaning of whakapapa and describes the visual whakapapa experiential process.

Keywords

Whakapapa, Māori, mihimihi, connection, visual art.

A glossary of Māori terms is provided at the end of this paper.

Whakataukī

*Hutia te rito o te harakeke,
Kei whea te kōmako e kō?
Kī mai ki ahau;
He aha te mea nui o te Ao?
Māku e kī atu,
he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata!*

If you pick out the centre shoot of the flax,
Where will the bellbird sing?
If you ask me;
What is the most important thing in the world?
I will reply,
It is people, it is people, it is people!

Introduction

Arts therapy in Aotearoa New Zealand requires an awareness of the social and cultural aspects that underpin our bicultural heritage. An understanding of key Māori concepts can inform culturally safe and responsive practice. Whakapapa is one of the fundamental defining concepts within Te Ao Māori. Learning about this concept through an active process gives participants practical experience that they can use to grow their cultural understanding and support their therapeutic work with people.

This paper defines and outlines essential aspects of whakapapa and describes its purpose. A rationale for learning about whakapapa in this setting is provided. The design of the visual whakapapa experiential is explained, along with the justification for changes to the usual process of whakapapa, that includes a space for the arts and a time for reflection.

Then to conclude, the workshop process is detailed from start to finish.

Whakapapa

Whakapapa is a fundamental concept within Te Ao Māori. It provides an epistemological template that is central to a Māori way of knowing and being (Rameka, 2016). In the purest sense, it can be defined as genealogy (Barlow, 1991) but the concept is more profound and broader than a family tree. It can be understood as a framework that connects all things, human and non-human (Roberts, 2013). This can include places, creation, and atua who have influence over specific domains (Taonui, 2013). This interrelatedness of people, land, sea and beings is also acknowledged by Curtis (2016), with an emphasis on the spiritual connection between the living and non-living. Relationships between these aspects are mapped and organised within the structure of whakapapa. As a system, it presents a taxonomy with a cosmogonical basis that describes the genesis of life and matter (Haami & Roberts, 2002). Origins are traced, and the narrative that lies between the layers tells the story of how things came to be.

The second part of the word whakapapa stems from the Māori name for earth mother Papatūānuku. Not surprisingly then, in te reo Māori papa can be used to mean ground, earth, surface or layer. As a prefix, whaka is a particle that causes something to happen. So in combination, whakapapa is a layering of one upon another (Barlow, 1991). This explanation presents imagery for how we might

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