

“ASK THE ACADEMIC ADVISOR” about ... ENGAGING MĀORI STUDENTS

Pātai: (Question)

Are there any specific classroom techniques that particularly engage Māori students? ... and any that do not?

Matiu Ratima replies:

Before answering this question, we need to examine some underlying assumptions.

The first and most apparent is the assumption that Māori students are a homogenous group of learners for whom some ‘culturally grounded’ pedagogical technique or set of techniques will work more effectively than others in a reasonably uniform manner. If this were the case, life might be a whole lot simpler for educators. Alas it is not. Each Māori student cohort (like any other) is unique and diverse and therefore a certain pedagogical practice or technique is unlikely to have the same effect or be received in the same way for all.

A second, perhaps less obvious assumption, is that culture, of the learners in this particular framing of the question, has an impact on effective engagement. There certainly is support for the notion that culture, of teacher and students, counts when it comes to effective engagement. This should not come as any surprise to educators in Aotearoa / New Zealand. However, we need to be aware as educators that cultural difference is not a barrier to engagement. In fact, it may provide educators with a rich opportunity for more effective engagement.

Russell Bishop (1999) has offered a model of the discursive classroom where learners sense making processes (cultures) are incorporated and enhanced. A key pedagogical technique to achieve this goal is the use of open-ended questions. This requires the courage to ask our students questions to which we may not know the answer. These questions invite the learner into the conversation on what constitutes valid knowledge. Students become co-creators of the knowledge and as a result have a higher stake in the learning.

So the short answer to the question is: although there are no pedagogical tricks that will uniformly engage Māori learners. There most certainly are some pedagogical techniques with the potential to engage all learners more effectively by inviting them in as co-creators of knowledge. Culture in the classroom remains important, in the sense that we can allow our students to use their cultures to participate more fully in the learning process.

In future issues of MAI Review we will discuss culture in the classroom further and explore some examples of the use of open-ended questions in seminar and small group teaching. Here are some other questions from university teachers that have been received and they will be addressed in future issues:

1. What is the best way to deal with behaviours that signal nervousness or 'not coping'?
2. How much leeway do we give Māori students (other students resenting “special treatment”)?
3. Once students have drifted off – tangi, personal crises etc – what strategies can be employed to bring them back?

Bibliography

Bishop, R. (1999). Investigating culturally relevant pedagogies for Maori. *Innovations for Effective Schooling Conference: The New Zealand Experience* Retrieved, 25 February 2008, from http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl3849_v1/investigating.doc

Write to Matiu Ratima at: m.ratima@auckland.ac.nz

Māori Academic Advisor, Centre for Academic Development, The University of Auckland.