

# 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

understand the architectural form of whakapapa. As an example, the earliest ancestors in time would form the foundation generation and the next generation would be layered above this, and so on.

Whakapapa serves a variety of purposes. Tau (2001) describes it as a bonding agent that affirms and reinforces the solidarity of kin ties. Roberts (2013) foregrounds the way in which whakapapa stabilises interrelationships, making room for the shifting balance and harmony of all things including people and place. Swann (2012) outlines the significance of the whakapapa narrative, seeing it as a context that provides three purposes: meaning making, connecting, and identity shaping. These three aforementioned perspectives are reinforced by Rameka (2016), who also points out the purpose of connecting people to the past, present and future.

The act of sharing whakapapa with others can enable people to make links and can establish or enhance already existing relationships. This process of sharing whakapapa in a group setting is often referred to as mihimihi, an opportunity to meet and greet. The experience is as much about listening and making connections as it is about informing. Fellow group members can listen for commonalities, including names and places. It is common practice for people to be positioned in a circle, standing to share their whakapapa one at a time. Usually, this is communicated in te reo Māori.

## Rationale

The broader social and political justifications for the acknowledgment and promotion of Māoritanga within education will not be discussed in this paper. However, in respect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi we are in a period of redress, which takes into account the impact of colonisation, land loss and language loss on Māori ways of knowing (Rameka, 2016). Learning about and using a concept like whakapapa protects and supports the flourishing of such Māori understandings. It also affirms and validates the unique status of tangata whenua.

With low numbers of Māori therapists in the workforce, practitioners need to ensure that their cultural knowledge is adequate for their work with Māori. In psychology, cultural knowledge has been highlighted as an essential factor in order for the field to be responsive to Māori (Levy, 2016). Knowledge of whakapapa is one element of cultural knowledge that can support a therapist's understanding. There is also a therapeutic justification for whakapapa being used as a tool to empower, and to nurture strength. Te Rito (2007) says that whakapapa has a major role to play in

supporting the resilience of Māori. By learning about the whakapapa concept through the visual whakapapa experiential, group members will be growing their cultural knowledge and also learning a tool that they may be able to use with people in a professional role.

## Visual whakapapa experiential design

In Māoritanga, whakapapa provides order for the understanding of the universe (Salmond, 1991) so it is vital to include it as core teaching content in the course Social Aspects of Arts Therapy. In the facilitation, it makes sense to allow participants to experience the process of whakapapa at the same time as learning about it. In this way, the experiential method and style of delivery complements and enhances the content. It is taught with purpose and meaning, having authentic aims and intent. One of the critical intentions is for the participants to experience what it feels like to explore and express connections with the land, water, and people, and to listen to other people doing the same, making links where possible. The experience needs to uphold the integrity of whakapapa and be culturally responsive and safe (Ministry of Education, 2011). Ideally, people communicate their whakapapa in te reo Māori, but constraints on time restrict this, especially for people who have a limited grasp of the language. Te reo is encouraged, but participants are free to communicate their whakapapa in whatever language they feel best reflects their message.

## The introduction of the arts and a space for reflection

Using visual arts as a means to explore and portray aspects of whakapapa is a natural addition to the process. Although it presents a change to how whakapapa might typically be shared during mihimihi, it seems appropriate given the arts therapy context. The art-making may serve to support exploration and may also provide a safe focal point when sharing. The visual image can be a helpful prompt for sharing. Creating the image also allows time for the artmaker to be present with the elements of whakapapa they are working with which may add breadth to any meaning making.

A further addition to this process is to finish with time for reflection so that people can look back on the entire process, what they have learnt, and discuss anything significant or interesting that has arisen, as well as consider the potential therapeutic value.

## The workshop process

The process begins with the facilitator introducing the concept of whakapapa and stating the purpose of the session. The intention is explained so that participants are clear that it is an opportunity to experience the essence of whakapapa. Group members are asked to consider it as a way to introduce themselves in this particular setting. The facilitator avoids simplistic assumptions and acknowledges that within the group there will be a range of experience in relation to whakapapa; Both Māori and non-Māori within the group may or may not know their whakapapa.

They are reminded that safety is paramount and are asked to be mindful of their safety in regards to what they choose to include and share. Activities exploring family dynamics can raise fractures and hurt. If anything arises during the activity that they think needs to be explored in further depth they are asked to talk to their supervisor about it.



Figure 1. Heleina Garisau, *Untitled*, 2018.

*As a Māori woman, sharing my whakapapa is a vital part of who I am... This, for me, is the essence of pepeha and what it was designed to do. To situate ourselves in our environment. It is not only about our ancestors. They are a vital part of who I am. And where I situate myself in life is also what can give me a firm and steadfast foundation from which to live out of.*

Participants are then invited to create an artwork that represents their whakapapa. Land, water and ancestry are highlighted as key elements to take account of. There are no expectations placed on how literal or abstract the artwork should be. Their usual art resources such as pastels and collage materials are available to them, and they are free to use any media they want. A time frame is negotiated with the group. This is usually around half an hour.



Figure 2. Susan Margaret Knaap, *Untitled*, 2018.

*I thoroughly enjoyed this exercise and liked the way that the artwork paved the way for the introduction... I thought this was a really thoughtful way to allow non-Māori the chance to 'own' their own mihimihi and feel accepted within a different cultural context at the same time.*

After the artworks are created, the group is asked to reassemble sitting in a circle. One by one they take a turn at sharing their visual whakapapa. All group members are prompted to share time respectfully when they talk about their visual whakapapa so that all voices can be heard with balance. They are encouraged to use te reo if they can. As they make connections with what other people share they are asked to imagine a red thread running across the circle to symbolise the connections made.

When this part of the process has finished, the floor is opened for reflective dialogue. Acknowledgements, learnings, connections and insights are expressed. The therapeutic value is discussed, and people are invited to record the experiential process through a log or journaling. Participants are thanked for their contributions to the process.

## Conclusion

Visual whakapapa is an experiential approach that was designed for those studying arts therapy. The process was extended to accommodate the use of the arts, and reflection. Travelling through this process provides an opportunity for group members to understand whakapapa from a practical perspective. It provides a vehicle for connection, meaning making and identity shaping. In this respect, it can prove to be a valuable exercise professionally and personally. Ultimately though, it will strengthen cultural knowledge and inform therapeutic work with people. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.

## Glossary of Māori terms

<i>Atua</i>	Ancestor with continuing influence, supernatural being, deity, guardian, god
<i>Māoritanga</i>	Māori culture, practices and beliefs, Māori way of life and being
<i>Mihimihi</i>	To greet, introductory speeches at the beginning of a gathering
<i>Papatūānuku</i>	Earth, Earth Mother
<i>Tangata whenua</i>	People of the land, indigenous people born of the land
<i>Te ao Māori</i>	The Māori world, the Māori worldview
<i>Te reo Māori</i>	The Māori language
<i>Te Tiriti o Waitangi</i>	The Treaty of Waitangi
<i>Whakapapa</i>	Ordered genealogy
<i>Whakatauki</i>	Proverb

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