

A Bespoke Life

By John Lawry, Michael Park Steiner School

Kia Ora Koutou
Tihe mauri ora!

“Kia Ora, Koutou, Tihe mauri ora!” is a Maori form of greeting. I have chosen to use this form of address not only because it is culturally appropriate for me to do so, as a New Zealander but also because of the tone it sets. It does not make appeal to socially polite forms of introduction which dance around the edges of encounter. It is spoken out of a deep respect for each of you and what it is you bring to this meeting and my thanks for making me feel welcome.

It means “I wish you good health and I greet, or acknowledge, your vital essence” It expresses the intent of seeking a genuine connection and relationship. It acknowledges that at a conference such as this, that when we meet, the space that stands between us is, as it were, a threshold: a doorway to new possibilities.

Traditionally, in a context such as this I would follow this greeting with a “Mihi”; the full form of greeting which includes a “Pepeha” or description of my family tree, my kith and kin, and the significant geographical markers of my origins; my mountain, ocean and my river.

In Maori mythology the features of landscape arise out of the union of the Earth Mother (Papatuanuku) and the Sky Father (Ranginui). The highest places, the mountains, are where we are closest to the Sky Father and the rivers or bodies of water are the bodily fluids of our Earth Mother. Just as we know “like the back of our hands” and can fondly draw, out of memory, the facial features and bodily characteristics of those near and dear, these geographical features express profound spiritual connection with the source of all life. By such means are the features of our heart and homeland described.

Expressed in “whole language” form as animated chant entirely from memory, these feats of great oratory can take hours to unfold. I have heard of a case where one elder, who in a court of law, was asked to describe his familial and tribal connection (his birth right) to a plot of land, spoke, unaided by notes or prompt, for three days outlining his connection to the land.

The scope and purpose of our conference spares me (and you) the need of such a labour of recitation. But I do want to cast, a verbal net into the space we have made for each other, in the hope that hitherto unsuspected or unknown links between us may be revealed. However unlikely this endeavour may seem and to lend some credibility to this process, I would like to present my “Pepeha” in the form of an anecdote.

Six years ago the pupils of my class, supporting adults and I were canoeing down a section of the Whanganui River. It is one of the main rivers of New Zealand. It has its origins in the centre of the North Island and achieves the sea on the southwest coast. Due to unexpected heavy rain we were forced to take shelter in a Wharenui (“Meeting house”) on the Marae of a small river town named Pipiriki. After we had been formally invited on to the Marae by the Kaumatua (elder) and were gratefully partaking of the food and drink customarily provided on such occasions, “Uncle Joe”, the elderly, genial Kaumatua, came over to me with two cups of tea. I knew what was to follow: we were to share not only the tea but also our genealogies in an attempt to establish a link between us.

I must declare that my expectations that such a link existed, were not high; in fact extremely low. How could there possibly be a link between myself and this Maori elder whom I had never met before?

He asked from where and from whom I was descended.

I replied that I was born on the slopes of Mangakeikei (One Tree Hill) in Auckland but grew up with the view of Mangere Mountain. My body of water was the Manukau Harbour. Protocol dictated that I begin with my father’s line; the five generations of my South-Pacific Celtic heritage. My father and my grandfather were both born in the South Island whereas my great-grandfather was born in the mining village of Zennor, in Cornwall.

My grandmother was of Irish decent (the Kane's of County Cork) and my great-grandmother on my father's side, was a Scot, from the north-east of Scotland (near John o Groats). Her family left Scotland under the clearances, eventually settling in the Hollyford valley on the west coast of the South Island.

"Umm" he said, with searching eyes. "I may appear to be a full-blooded Maori, but I too have Scottish blood in my veins: on my grand-mother's side. She was born of a Scot. What was your great-grandmother's clan?"

"Gunn" I replied.

Well, long story short, we discovered we were distant cousins!

Maori, not unlike Hobbits, love genealogy and share it with the same intent as they share their Pepeha—to establish a link, a bond of connection.

The term Maori use for these genealogical nets is "Whakapapa". "Whaka" means "Layering" and "Papa" is a foreshortening of "Papatuanuku" (our Earth Mother). When we share our whakapapa we are exploring "our common ground". The process is not unlike an archaeological dig. Penetrating, layer by layer reveals what is both substantial (solid) and sacred.

As tangential as all this "digging into our past" may sound, it does have a direct bearing on the themes of this conference and my presentation: making a bespoke life. I have taken the time to elaborate the world view which stands behind my greeting because it represents something which is of critical importance to our work; it is a connected world view.

When the material world is perceived and experienced in terms of the linked series of authenticated connections this world view upholds, profound feelings of respect for the life processes and material substance of the world is engendered.

As an artisan/educator I know that conversations which encapsulate and proceed from this connected world view are like the seedbeds of our work. The nature of our work makes these conversations possible and having these conversations is an essential ingredient in making futures possible.

Apprentices and masters alike need to understand the beaded tracery of intergenerational skills present in their hereditary streams. They need to be conscious of skill-based influences in their formative years.

Anecdotally we know that there is a kind of magic which crosses generations; grandparents are revered as the "experts". A timely, "What would your Grandmother/Grandfather do?" asked of a struggling student, can open doors to embedded knowledge the student don't know they had.

Collectively, these conversations provide a means to address the pressing need of our time: that out of our deep longing for connection we rediscover what it is to be human.

But this quality of conversation cannot be forced or contrived. It requires the positive use of an ingredient fundamental to both the creative process and the development of the capacities and disciplines that engender, enable and form making. The fundamental ingredient is time.

The relationship between time and making has an interesting cluster of seeming paradoxes.

On one hand, skill development, quantitatively speaking, takes time, yet on the other, qualitatively, it gives it back by saving it.

The mastery of skills which manifests as "effortless competence" are the result of thousands of hours of practise; not one experience repeated a thousand times, but an experience approached a thousand times anew. The reciprocal relationship between practise and competence was clarified for me in a meeting I had with Chatchawan Thongdeert. He is the Founder and Director of the Lanna Wisdom School located in the northern, cultural centre of Thailand, Chaingmai.

The Lanna are the indigenous people of this region, renown throughout Thailand for their proud traditions as craftspeople. The school he has created ensures the continuance of these craft traditions, acting as a process of cultural renewal, by connecting the young students of Chaingmai with local master craftspeople.

Students in the state schools in Chaingmai get to work alongside master craftspeople of a comprehensive range of local craft traditions, in a series of structured programs. In recent years these relationships have blossomed into apprenticeship schemes.

His explanation of how they are achieving cultural renewal and the task of the teacher in this process was very interesting. Here I quote from notes of my conversation with him:

There is an essential unity of the spiritual life of the school (Buddhist) and the developed understanding of our intimate connection with all living things; the birds, animals, plants and the raw elements of our world, and the way we use them in our work. How we play music, sing, and move as we weave, beat, carve etc. is infused with this understanding of the spiritual foundation of life: it transforms the work done.

The role of the teacher and the person of the teacher are to be upheld and respected when the teacher is understood to be the repository of the skills and conduit of the tradition of the craft they are imbued with. Each generation “hands it on” or “passes it forward” to ensure not only the continuance of the tradition of the skill but also the opportunity for its refinement and development in the lines of succeeding generations. If the skills are just copied the tradition becomes mechanistic. The skill tradition requires the living reality of the life of the person to be nurtured, grow and develop as a tradition of skill and the person needs the discipline of the craft tradition to be nurtured, grow and develop as a person.

It therefore follows, and here we approach a fundamentally important “law” of making, that what has its origins in the realm of creative thought (the spiritual or super-sensible) finds its reflection in physical form (the sensible, that which is perceivable via the senses). Furthermore, and to be logically consistent, it follows that physical forms are the sensible evidence of their super-sensible origins.

In other words the object of making and its genesis are inseparable- at least in a human / natural world context. Therefore we find that when the act of making and the object of making both express the “Goldilocks Principle” i.e. the, “not too little: not too much, but just right”-ness: an aesthetic sense forms.

We need be wary of the contemporary tendency to set the machine and the machine-made as the hallmark standard to which we aspire as makers. In doing so we are allowing, in my opinion, the tail to wag the dog. The mechanisation of the means of making, especially in the formative stages of learning, only acts to entrench our disconnection from the acts and products of making. It is my experience that the student/apprentice seeks and can work with assessment which directs their attention to the “Goldilocks Principle”. Appealing to the inherent aesthetic enables assessments to be made that are based on sound judgements which are not artificial or contrived.

Because the aesthetic is an embodied one, the creative deeds of the maker are transferred, via the objects made, to those who use them.

One only need allow a knife made by a master craftsman, to slice a tomato by its own weight, to experience (by reverse) the skill of its maker; to know experientially, the point I am trying to make here.

It is also by this means that the evidential trail of demonstrated skill improvement from apprentice to master is established.

Nestled within this observation lies another seeming paradox: motivation. For the practitioner, who is also an educationalist, an appreciation of this dynamic has immense value. I’m talking about the effect and inspirational value of the perception of effortless competence on someone hitherto not involved or connected or interested in the event.

Dr Frank R Wilson, in his article, [The Real Meaning of Hands-on Education](#) cites a number of examples of individuals who suddenly, and with no determinable precedent, “discover” their future in the presence of an effortlessly competent demonstration of skill. For example, one young man who, when he went to a live circus performance was so entranced by the demonstration dexterity and balance by the clown, that from point forth, he knew what his life- path was; to become a performing clown.

A common way that people express an experience like this is to say things like, “this is what I want to do!” They then go on to do it, often in a manner that defines their social/economic identity: that magical blend of “who I am and what I do”.

Cognitive moments such as these are not achieved by means of deductive thinking. They are felt more than reasoned, as “right and true”. They are a form of “knowing” perceived tacitly, through movement and sympathetic connection rather than antipathetic, dispassionate “scientific” observation. They are observations we perceive in our guts, bones and blood: whole body/being perceptions.

A friend of mine, who works with weavers and dyers in North Vietnam (seeking to discover the secrets of indigo), shared with me her experiences of a remarkable craftsman she has formed a friendship with. He has a comprehensive set of skills including cast silver jewellery. A source of metal for this work is “old” coins. Coming from various and often unknown sources, he has no objective reference as to their composition.

So how does he determine which coin to choose and use? He does so by means of a disarmingly simple method: he balances each likely coin on the tip of his dominant index finger to assess its weight, “tings” it for sound and then heats it for spectral colour display (vis a vis spectro-scope analysis), to identify its constituent elements.

To weigh and measure, judge and call: these are the capacities of discernment.

The splitting of a log with a single, well-judged, blow; fingers fluidly plating multiple strands; a pot, gracefully rising from the potter’s wheel; all of these and the abundant examples that you have all experienced, illuminate qualities of being human which give rise to confidence and a commitment (by the entranced young) “to be like that”.

These moments do not require the young person’s sophisticated enunciation to make them “right”. Nor are young people overwhelmed by the high level of skill being demonstrated. These moments are both aspirational and motivational.

They can be expressed as simply as “wow” or “That is so “cool” / “sick” ... (or whatever the contemporary variant of “goodness” is).

Knowing that the novice’s journey of learning ahead is not a simple or straightforward path does not negate or minimise the value of these awakening moments.

In fact, the challenges which lie ahead are indispensably important for learning to occur. It is where engagement occurs. We meet, novice and experienced artisan alike, at the doorway of opportunity to the home of learning. And here another seeming paradox is revealed. Schooling models which are predicated upon the notion of competition and “the survival of the fittest” profoundly miss this vital dynamic in learning.

As Kirkpatrick Sale (Coperthwaite 2002) puts it, “The Darwinian notion that ceaseless competition promoted the survival of the fittest individual has by now generally given way to the understanding that evolutionary success was due to the survival of the fittest community through interlocking cooperation”.

These paradoxes are knots to be untied; disguised openings or doorways. When posed as questions (rather than set as statements) they invite; a quest along pathways with a destination (affirmation and comprehension) and yet evoke the desire to learn more (intuition and inspiration).

A paradox within a paradox, they are inviting because they are pervaded by a feeling of being on a pathway that leads home, a sense of return and yet are also imbued with the inspirational glow of stepping out on a great adventure!

As practitioners, it behoves us to realise (i.e. make real) the extraordinary opportunity inherent in these moments. As a traveller on this learning journey we are not alone.

The ancients travel with us. These are pathways that have been trod by many feet. Accordingly we find ourselves involved in a “conspiracy of goodness” because we have the combined intelligences of the human and natural worlds behind us, supporting our endeavours. We acknowledge this when we share our belonging stories. I have stood in the ancient workshop at Skara Brae and there realised, with every cell of my being, that we as human beings have always been wise. To apprehend these dwellings is to be humbled by the wealth of experiential knowledge they reveal and make manifest from our ancient past. This realisation enabled me to face the shadow of our collective relationship with the natural world; something we need must face as educators of the young. It once seemed to me that nature would be better without us. Realising how to refound and reconnect has been transformative.

At these moments we can experience the threshold of being both an artisan and an educator.

It is one thing to have this (ancient founded) knowledge within one as a practising craftsperson/ artisan and another to awaken to the fact that one has a task in life to “pass forward” this knowledge.

As grounding as this insight may be it does not necessarily grant the means to articulate this knowledge. This being the case how do we communicate this tacit knowledge?

What do we place our confidence and trust in for this task? Do we rely on formula and receipts? Does repeating the known automatically produce the same outcome in new and unfamiliar circumstances?

Of course not: the principles espoused above hold true. We are on a path that has as its origins in the wealth of human understanding, but, by definition, always verges on the unknown. How do we find the tracks, the pathways that lead us forward on the pathway of learning?

We must pay attention to and have trust in what it is we do well.

Each subject of knowledge has a generic pattern of development: from the simple to the complex. So too do we human beings have in common the same generic patterns of growth and development, within the spectrum and complex variety of human experience and ethnic/ cultural propensities,.

Individually and collectively we too are evolving from something simple into something complex. Careful observation reveals that the healthy development of every human being has a corresponding alignment, or connection, with each phase and development of every aspect (subject) of our collectively acquired and mastered skills (technology); an “inner curriculum”.

For example, a common capacity acquired by means of experiential knowledge is the drive and determination to, as Ray Meers observes, “Not give up”. By this means we build resilience that stands the test of time. In other words what we demonstrate, what we enact in terms of our craft skills is, in terms of general human development, intimately and in-separately connected to the patterns and sequences of human growth and development which assure our survival. An Old Maori proverb states, “As the sapling is bent, so grows the tree”. What we do as educators sets into play forces that continue to manifest in the lives of our pupils as they grow and develop as adults. As the themes of this conference clearly acknowledge, theirs is an uncertain and probably turbulent future. How do we best prepare them for the journey ahead? For most first world economic societies “school” is seen and experienced as something which takes place indoors. An effect of this is the institutionalisation and commodification of citizenship because the contexts of learning are removed and separate from the natural world. This separateness acts to reinforce a cultural prejudice towards exploitation of the natural environment. It reinforces relationships of imbalance between human society and the natural environment, whereby taking need not be balanced by means of giving. “More is never enough” would seem to be the motto of this profoundly imbalanced world view and so it is that we find ourselves on the brink of ecological collapse. Yet, despite its catastrophic effects, modern consciousness requires us to be conscious beings. It is no longer appropriate, in terms of our capacity to survive, for us to experience our world/universe and each other as a removed, sentimental, distant, virtual (dream-like) sequence of events. We need be awake. We need to be in relationship. And yet somehow, we need to proceed from a position linked with the past that empowers our future.

It seems to me, as an educationalist, that the cultivated, popular use of contemporary “virtual” technology, (and its marketing using the addictive devices of introversion and fixation) with its frightening potential for human-robot manufacture, is problematic, producing one-sided, imbalanced overgrowth.

The young whose primary, sensory experiences of the natural world are via this virtual media, experience only the ghost of the world.

This lateral spread, this overgrowth is problematic; it seems to me, because it creates a vacuum: a vacuum in our balanced, well-rounded growth and development as human beings.

The vacuum is the gap developing between our capacity to think and our capacity to grow and make: feel and do.

The scale of the problem is overwhelming yet the response of inertia, being “frozen in the headlights”, according to Richard Louv (author of The Last Child in the Woods) is worse. In his opinion it is the greatest hurdle we need to overcome.

A conceptual picture which is a variation on the imperative to “think globally and act locally”, is that of the existential lemniscate: that ordinary, yet extraordinary relationship between the micro-cosmic / macro-cosmic, the intimately personal and publically collective nature of the will (in this case acts of making)(Lovelock’s Gaia principle).

If we were to seek a model of successful survival strategies, developed in infinite detail and product tested over millennia, then we only need look to the natural world. “Natural design” is the genesis pathway of our survival. How do we enable our students to connect with and perceive the natural world this way?

I know, as a gardener and as a craftsman that pollarding a tree which has overgrown its reach prolongs the life of that tree by at least four times its un-pollarded span. Pollarding encourages the tree to set its roots deeper. How do we, as educators, go deeper? What strategies or methods enable us to reconnect with our technological roots in such a positively, growthful way?

In general terms, “whole process” pedagogical methods work. They can be either inductive or deductive in nature i.e. either beginning with raw materials and refining to finished object or, (using the methodology of experiential or experimental archaeology) beginning with the finished object and using authentic materials and processes, recreate the finished object.

The most potent pedagogical tool I know of seeks the vacuum (the gap developing between our capacity to think and our capacity to feel and do) and fills the gap.

It is this, that during the process of making tools or artefacts which are of core interest to students (e.g. making a knife, a bow and arrow, lighting fire by friction), ancient muscular memory wakes up.

The problems associated with making these core artefacts are as old as our humanity, our use of tools and knowledge of materials: very, very deep. If the student/apprentice is encouraged to live into the “problematic” moment and to feel their way, not only does the problem resolve but “the lights go on”. These moments of joy and wonder, these moments of insight and inspiration, last a life time, for they are founded on accumulative confidences which are unshakable. This is the pathway of learning.

As an educator we can be blinded by the light of these revelations and not see the most wonderful truth of all.

What the Zen sage Basho termed “upon discovering brass giving up our search for gold”.

It is that these insights can only be accessed by means of these playfully creative acts of making and their inherently cooperative nature: [and this is the really important bit] it is by this means that the student/apprentice literally makes their future.

The theme of our conference laid bare.

Specifically, as a pedagogical strategy in response to these needs the Outdoor Classroom has been developed as an integrated practical skill based learning initiative.

It employs Gardening and Traditional crafts to invigorate learning, enhance connection with the natural environment and instil rhythms of healthy learning.

It challenges conventional, post-modernist, behaviourist practice models that have learning as a highly contained and structured event with predetermined outcomes which students are managed to achieve and where their “success” is so rated: what Paulo Friere (in [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)) refers to as “...the banking concept of education”.

A conceptual image of the Outdoor Classroom is as follows; imagine a circle: a symbol of the unity of life, form and formlessness all in one. At the base of this circle, on the ground of experience we have gardening, set in the seasonal round and rhythms of the year.

Above, in the human realm, traditional crafts; core skills embedded deep as muscular memory, awakened by means of the activity each craft tradition enables. To the left, where crafts and gardening meet around campfire or hearth, we have cooking; chants, songs and stories fit naturally here. To the right, bush craft wilderness camps, where all the above skills find relevant and vital context.

Be it in the urban school I currently work in or a rural school (each provides contextual growth for “Genius Loci” development) students aged seven to fourteen years participate in outdoor classroom learning programs on a weekly basis. Initiatives developed here in England, such as Pyrites and Ruskin Mill have developed these to tertiary level.

The outdoor classroom learning programs acknowledge the connection between the phases of human development and the generic development of each subject. They engender intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivational capacities. The students’ experience of this relationship is made evident as their skills develop. Intellectual rigor, emotional maturity, cohesive social skills and physical nimbleness are mutually developed. Those students injured by schooling focused on deficit gain tremendous confidence when their skill development is objectified. Not only is the physical evidence of skill improvement before them, in their hands, but also the “inner” experience of previously unknown capacities waking up: encountering “problems” associated with making, especially in a traditional craft context, or experimental archaeology inquiry, are not new problems. Knowing this, they can come to trust their instincts and develop confidences which are subjectively and objectively “right and true”.

Accordingly, their high school years have a foundation both wide and deep for them to draw upon as they enter the workshops, studios, laboratories, theatres and halls of higher learning. Not only are they prepared to do well in formal study and examination, but also, and perhaps more importantly, (in a student's own words), the skills they have learned this way are "life skills". Like riding a bike, it is something they will never forget... a life bespoke.

Ki Ora
Tihe mauri ora!
John Lawry

Bibliography

Coperthwaite, WMS (2002) A Handmade Life - In Search of Simplicity, Chelsea Green Publishing.

Friere, Paulo (1996) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Penguin Education.

Louv, Richard (2008) The Last Child in the Woods, Algonquin Books.