

# Tapu-gogy: Confining profane pedagogy to a new sacredness beyond the educator's reach

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## Abstract

*This paper is situated around a small exhibition installed in the classics museum of the author's institution, called Tapu-gogy, in November and December 2022. This work explored what a classroom might be like if pedagogy was locked away from the educator, shelved behind a glass case—too tapu (sacred) for an educator to touch. Following the exhibition's intent, this paper argues that teaching pedagogy itself—once the most profane element of teaching life for any educator—is now too sacred for the educator to touch. As a sacred object can be to a museum, teaching pedagogy is a hijacked item now resting in a glass cage, untouchable by the experts most adept at handling it—the educators who designed it.*

*The paper clings to Māori understandings of the 'sacred,' and as such, interpretations may differ slightly from those this readership may have seen before, if they have seen any at all. In Māori society, we define the sacred as that which is tapu. To aid the reader's understanding of this particular interpretation of the sacred, the paper uses well-known discussions around neoliberalism, the pandemic, and digital teaching pedagogy to make its arguments. It further hovers around the most recent literature on these topics from 2022, as the pandemic weighs so heavily upon the topic in the paper.*

*Keywords: sacred; Māori; neoliberalism; panic; pedagogy*

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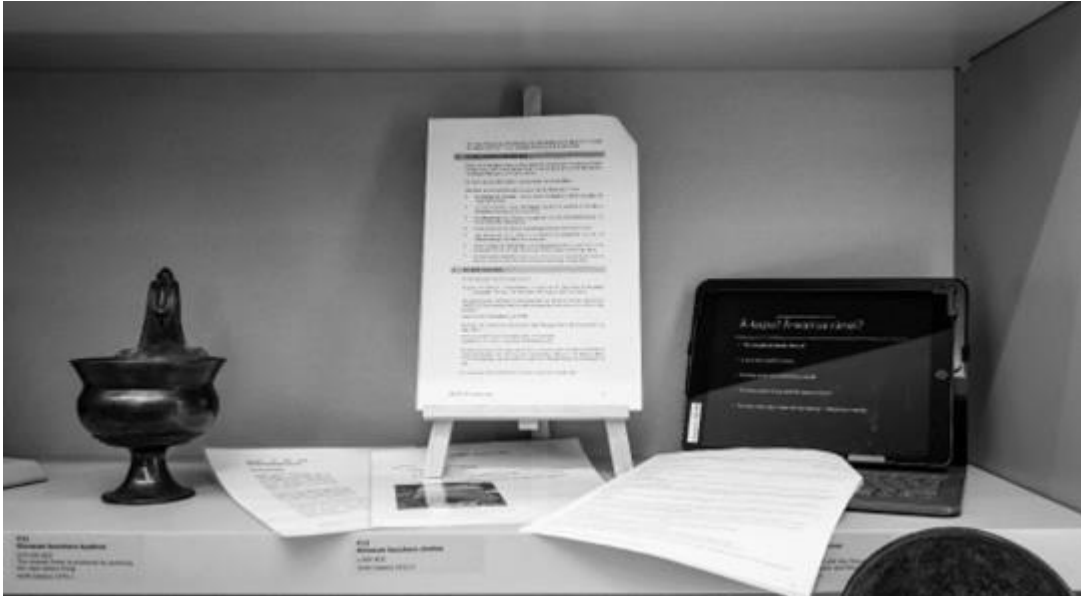
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## Introduction

On the fifth floor of a building central to the author's campus, there is a small classics museum. The museum's collection houses a number of artifacts that tell stories of Ancient Greece, the mythology sacred to them, and objects (such as vases and nail clippers) that were once, perhaps, not so sacred. All of these objects are, correctly, worthy of reverence now.

On one of the shelves is a space the museum's director kindly gave over to the author, who is a teacher of a language indigenous to New Zealand, the Māori language. There is a printed course syllabus from 2015 placed on a pedestal—the author's first syllabus written in Māori when they first began teaching. To its side is a lecture recording, continuously playing a lesson on the art of written translation, captured in 2022. There are other items nearby: a bilingual syllabus from 2022 and two assessments that were administered in 2016 and 2022. At first glance, nothing will seem particularly interesting here—these are, after all, merely pieces of paper. Once one inspects the language of these pieces, however, and places them within the context of a museum, a picture emerges of a pedagogical shift that has occurred in the classroom. The syllabi, once monolingual in Māori, are now bilingual in Māori-English. The assessments move from the translation of a full poem to a short critique of a bilingual sign, already translated. Together in a museum, all of these items suggest a shift in pedagogy: the language of the classroom has changed, the teaching methods have also changed, and they have been locked in a museum case, away from the educator.

The installation, titled *Tapu-gogy*, is an exploration into why such a shift in pedagogy has occurred, and asks if pedagogy is the educator's domain and whether the educators themselves caused this change. It invokes viewers to consider the implications of confining pedagogy to the museum. As an educator, a classics museum seems like an ideal place to house 'pedagogy' itself, a word that shares the same origins as the Ancient Greek objects also housed there. On the other hand, placing pedagogy in the museum also places it out of reach of the educator. Museums have been vehicles by which dubious 'ownership' of items has changed from Māori to non-Māori hands, through rather questionable means (Tapsell, 2012). For a Māori person then, there is an added discomfort around housing something special to them in such a space.



**Figure 1.** *Tapu-gogy*

*Note.* Photo credit: Image Services, Victoria University of Wellington

These notions are what the author is asking the viewer to consider in *Tapu-gogy*, and in this special issue, I reinterpret the intentions of this exhibition in a more scholarly way. I argue here that the pandemic, digital education and neoliberal teaching requirements have created a scene where educators control very little of the teaching space. Because so much of this revolves around the pandemic, I have chosen to limit my scholarship review of some aspects of this paper to 2022 only. In this way, Māori teaching pedagogy in post-pandemic life appears to be more sacred today than I, a language teacher and scholar, am permitted to access. This is a new kind of ‘sacred’ for academia—a kind of pedagogy that is not for handling, but for being encased behind a locked door. That is what I call, ‘tapu-gogy.’

### **Context: Tapu, and Māori notions of the sacred**

First, an explanation of the word ‘tapu’, as it relates to the sacred and profane theme of this special issue. The nature of tapu ‘continues to puzzle the [Western] scholars’ even today, but we, as Māori, do not find discussions around tapu difficult (Shirres, 1982, p. 29). While tapu can be a large ontological conversation in itself, it is enough to say in this paper that Pacific languages, of which Māori is one, generally describe tapu things as things to wary of be, to be careful to protect, or in some cases, to restrict from view or touch.

In English, we use the word ‘sacred’ as an insufficient translation of tapu. This means that if readers have encountered this word before, outside of Māori spaces, they may interpret it as something different from this writer’s intention. As a translation, sacred is certainly inadequate, but it is all we have. The word ‘taboo’ is already an occupied English corruption with a diluted meaning, and so, English users are bereft of room for a more apt meaning for the same transliteration. This is where confusion likely occurs—not because the notion of tapu is at all abstract or unclear, or because it is entirely different from sacred, but because a related word, quite whimsical in meaning, already exists in English. It is likely easy to attach the same whim to other words that share an etymology. However, it is enough to say here that Māori-English bilinguals treat tapu and sacred as somewhat similar in meaning, and by extension, something that is profane, is less tapu, or barely tapu at all.

A Māori-English speaker such as myself might deem a tangible object sacred, because I deem it to be tapu. This is not unlike a scholar of Ancient Greece who might feel reverently drawn to an ancient artifact in a museum. Expertise too, is sacred in a Māori context (Mitchell, 2021). To Māori, knowledge is the realm of the expert and is born of the divine and therefore, is sacred. Knowledge itself was obtained through the climbing of the divine entity Tāne (Tāwhaki, to some tribes) to the heavens. Receiving there three baskets of knowledge, Tāne returned and gifted those baskets to humans (Papesch, 2021). The ontological lesson here is that humans are to handle knowledge, but must handle it in a divine way, caring for its tapu. Every sitting of a language class then, is a representation of that transmission between the humans and divine beings. So long as things are done correctly, this tapu is cared for. In real terms, care for this divine tapu is executed by acts such as the beginning and ending of classes with appropriate (unreligious) prayer, for example. These prayers place the class into tapu for the lesson, so that knowledge can be obtained. We remove the tapu at the end of the class through prayer, to alleviate any tension from learning and return us into the busy world of other things. Not doing these prayers would be a ‘pedagogical mistake.’ Oftentimes, the lecturer deliberately ‘forgets’ to do these (or even forgets outright!), and is corrected by the student body for the mistake. That is student care for the tapu of knowledge. There is nothing ‘puzzling’ or whimsical about this—it is simply a necessary execution of Māori praxis.

Experts constitute a large part of Māori culture. I must therefore assert that I am not arrogantly positioning myself as an expert of all things Māori—we do have those, and I am not one. I am, like all scholars, merely an expert in my discipline of Māori language study and acquisition. As such, I am also qualified to point out that in Māori philosophy, one should not merely strip praxis decisions from a teacher.

Nor should one strip from the teacher and student the shared nature of transmitting that expertise because it risks breaking the tapu of the exchange, and the tapu of the exchange is entirely the point of teaching in Maoridom.

### **Chaos has no time for tapu**

What takes a Māori language teacher away from their pedagogy? We can explicate the aspects of higher education (HE), such as digital learning and neoliberalism, to draw us closer to the notion of ‘tapu-gogy.’ Before the pandemic, information and communication technology (ICT) had already become a core part of university life (Potter et al., 2022; Schalk et al., 2022; Wekerle et al., 2022). The pandemic forced HE settings into the online space, *en masse*, and significant changes have occurred across all facets of higher learning as a result (Lester & Crawford-Lee, 2022; Li & Yu, 2022; Udeogalanya, 2022; Vishnu et al., 2022). Teaching staff has not had time to think deeply about how the new nature of their online work fits best with the pedagogies of their fields, but there is a want to do this. In some countries, 100% of surveyed teachers have realized the need to upskill their ICT knowledge post-pandemic, to provide quality teaching to their students (Li & Yu, 2022). Likewise, it is also possible that students themselves have become more aligned with neoliberalism than we would have traditionally thought (Olsen-Reeder, 2022a).

Such large-scale change has added ‘a further layer of chaos and uncertainty’ (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022, p. 22) to the already precarious neoliberal education context. Institutions, as employers, have used the chaos of a pandemic to serve their own neoliberal goals of cost-cutting, restructuring and forced change to employee job profiles and tasks, to the point there is language for it—referred to as the ‘pandemia’ (Watermeyer et al., 2021), or the realization of ‘panic-gogy’ (Dean & Campbell, 2020, as cited in Lester & Crawford-Lee, 2022). Institutional acts, such as shifting to online teaching and learning, have not escaped the realm of ‘neoliberal chaos,’ and digital teaching is part of the ‘labour-based transformation that deepens existing inequities, and which is further injurious to [employee] occupational welfare’ (Watermeyer et al., 2022a).

Academic staff around the world have long been voicing their dissatisfaction with the over-extension of neoliberal control into the classroom, and there appears to be a connection to the online shift and other aspects of the increasingly neoliberal university life, as ‘... demonstrations, and strikes in various countries’ (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022, p. 197) have occurred alongside this shift. There has been a ‘... struggle for decent living wages in Kenya and the UK’ (Loyola-Hernández et al., 2022, p. 571). Aotearoa, too, had its first nationwide

university strike action on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October, 2022.<sup>1</sup> It seems very much that the pandemic, the lowering of pedagogical quality, online teaching, neoliberalism and staff health are congruent at some point. As I will conclude later in this paper, these are indicators that the tapu of the classroom has been the cost of that congruence.

### **Profane ‘Uber-isation’**

Neoliberalism is not new, nor is its presence in HE. According to França et al. (2022) in keeping with

market-oriented logics, neoliberal academia is characterized by the intensification and extensification of academic work, expansion of auditing and control mechanism, exorbitant competitiveness, and rising casualization. (p. 36),

Loyola-Hernández et al. (2022) follow this by defining

the neoliberal model in HE as the global push to privatise learning (less public money and more private investment) in which education (a human right) is commodified via tuition and accommodation fees. This model turns students into consumers of a product delivered by staff. (p. 562)

As such, Collins et al. (2022) report studies that seemingly conclude academic institutions ‘as communities of intellectual integrity are in crisis’ (p. 205). The neoliberal objective of the institution is a contributor to that crisis, and ‘... is having a counterproductive effect on the high quality and autonomy in research and education that it is missioned to protect,’ thereby ‘derailing itself further and further from its societal function and orientation’ (van Houtum & van Uden, 2022, p. 204). In this time, educators cease to be proponents of free thought and scholarly advance, but are rather redefined as ‘managed professionals’ (Collins et al., 2022, p. 204) or ‘classroom worker[s]’ (Ball & Grimaldi, 2022, p. 294). These definitions seem to pull away from the Māori understanding of the ‘expert’—who would more aptly fit the description of free scholarly thought, which would most certainly impinge on their ability to make care for sacred knowledge the core task they execute in the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup>For more, see: <https://www.nz.co.nz/news/national/475972/universities-union-members-vote-to-strike-over-stalled-pay-talks>

### **There's no time (to waste on thinking)**

The neoliberal 'classroom worker' problem has been compounded by the pandemic, and this has added to the work carried out by educators. Li and Yu's (2022) work has illustrated 'that teachers' professional roles changed complicatedly' during that pandemic and '... were assigned more tasks in the online teaching process' than they had prior to the pandemic (p.12). This has negatively affected the health of educators, and teachers have experienced an 'increased workload and workflow disruption due a high load of communication, which can hamper productivity and cause stress,' alongside job competition, unstable employment, 'heightened surveillance' and overall, 'decreased amounts of time to complete work' (Potter et al., 2022, p. 74). Collins et al. (2022) further state that 'fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts' and '[n]arratives of a multi-tiered academic "marketplace" are sprouting, alongside untenable workloads and a higher education gig economy,' and conclude this to be the 'Uber-isation of HE'(p. 202). It will not surprise anyone to note, then, that teacher job satisfaction is low, morale has disappeared, workloads are higher, mental health issues have become more dangerous, and inclusivity and equality have suffered alongside wages (Li & Yu, 2022; Loyola-Hernández et al., 2022).

To put this into a context relevant to teachers on the ground, an onslaught of adrenaline-filled pandemic responses has thus meant that teachers built and developed immediate solutions for teaching online, in real-life contexts. There has been no time to strategically plan for the labor change this would create, to protect physical and mental health, or to examine the quality of the pedagogy. For Māori educators, there has also been no time to critique and reject the parts of this eventuation that are incompatible with Maoridom or the bespoke needs Māori language classes might have, nor to battle for flexibility within faculty-wide directives that are geared toward English-taught classes.

There is a relationship between the pandemic, educator workload, and digital entities in the classroom. 'Now, the pandemic is further driving digital growth in the education sector and cementing the significance of this issue' (Potter et al., 2022, p. 73). Such cementing comes with the sheer amount of added tasks that every individual educator has had to take up in the digital space, and there are many. Li and Yu (2022) note that

[m]ore was to be conducted by a teacher-led model in online teaching and learning processes, which was different from the student-centered method. Teachers played a more crucial role in monitoring students' learning effects, and their psychological or technical problems [that] appeared in online teaching platforms. (p. 8)

There is more, however. Li and Yu (2022) further note that ‘teachers needed to positively influence their students who had problems with self-regulated learning ability, attention, and computer literacy’ (p. 8). Trying to keep students happy and healthy from a distance is a critical part of this new job, because ‘students were inclined to fall into depression or frustration when they met difficulties with distant learning’ (Li & Yu, 2022, p. 8). Further still, is the data management: ‘[e]ducators are increasingly enabled and expected to: draw on ‘big data’; to analyze patterns and trends in student behaviour and learning progress’ (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2022, p. 25). The role of the educator is to teach and engage, but providing remote mental health services and analyses for the new data online classes create is a particularly difficult new ask. Educators are not trained in remote social services, and the tasks involved in the analysis are so disassociated from teaching they detract from the real effort at hand—to pass out knowledge.

As well as the onslaught of new labor and tasks associated with digital teaching, there are the things that are no longer happening in a classroom, which also require labor. There is very real absenteeism caused by online learning, with Udeogalanya (2022) noting that ‘[o]ur profession cannot survive empty classrooms if the student enrolment declines are not addressed’ (p. 63). All of these occurrences add labor to the ‘classroom worker’ who is forced to try and engage people who are enrolled in a course, but are not necessarily actual ‘students.’

Finally, there is also the immediacy of digital expectation. As Collins et al. (2022) point out:

There was a growing awareness that with digitisation comes expectations of real-time responses. Teachers were aware that they could not always meet expectations on a practical level and that feeding this need was not always in learners’ best interests. Tutors aimed to build learning skills and resilience in students, and so responding to needs rather than immediate wants should be balanced. However, response times were highlighted from student surveys, and tutors were aware of potential impacts of perceived negative student feedback on their precarious contractual situation. (p. 211)

All this is coupled with the ‘expectation to remain reactive in addition to other work tasks’ (Potter et al., 2022, p. 81), such as publishing, faculty service, and community service. These tasks present an intense, and immense, amount of change to the work life of a post-pandemic educator.

In summary, universities are neoliberal. Classes need to be taught. Teachers need to teach. Students need to learn. These points are so indented into the life of the institution that they are surely not for debating. What is worthy of exploration,



though, is how they intersect at a post-pandemic point where educators are solely responsible for navigating every classroom aggravator presented here, in addition to teaching their content in the classroom itself. There are elements of the job either discarded in this process or which are assumed by new decision-makers. Readers will note that we have not yet discussed pedagogy, and that is because there is no real room for pedagogical planning while all of the above is going on. This is how I come to articulate a shift in tapu to rest not with the expert, but elsewhere in the institution—a centrally-held museum case object an educator may not touch.

### **Digital teaching and neoliberalism**

Having related neoliberalism to educator work tasks, and work tasks to digital teaching, it is now necessary to come full circle and link digital teaching to neoliberalism. Digital teaching is a part of the neoliberal efforts of the institutions. Digital learning, taken by itself, is neither ‘bad or detrimental’ but it is ‘the cumulative expansion and the underlying totality’ of digital teaching in neoliberal education that is problematic (Allen & McLaren, 2022, p. 375). Digital revolutions in academia are an uprising of neoliberal ventures in industries such as those situated with ‘Silicon Valley’, and so, are the product of ‘disruption’ from other capitalist ventures who hold the ‘hopes of becoming the next billion-dollar unicorn’ (Allen & McLaren, 2022, p. 380).

It is no secret that ‘digital options for HE studies are increasing within a competitive, mass-market, neoliberalised environment... to maximise student numbers and promote competitive fee structures’ (Collins et al., 2022, p. 202). According to Watermeyer et al. (2022b) ‘[p]ermanent digital resettlement is [...] viewed positively and as a progressive step that coheres with the overall digitalization of the global economy’ (p. 149). For that reason, Núñez-Canal et al. (2022) suggest that digitalization could really just be a natural outcome of the institutions wanting to align its work to ‘innovation and the economy’ (p. 2). This would be fine, if digital teaching mechanisms that arose out of the neoliberal hunger to ‘disrupt’ sectors such as education also had a sound basis in ethics, but as a solely capitalist ‘unicorn hunt’, this feels like overt profanity. As such, the introduction of these entities to the classroom can hardly be immediately accepted as sacred, when they are not even inherently based in teaching and learning—but profit, singularly.

Further to the point, a teaching practice that is done often does not mean it is highly prestigious. Therefore, a neoliberal digital teaching practice done over the world, does not equate to a practice that will be of any value to a Māori classroom, especially if it rejects Māori praxis. It seems to be the case that digital classes consist

mostly of slideshows and lecture recordings, just as *Tapu-gogy* illustrates. Wekerle et al. (2022) observe that university educators tend

to very frequently use technology-supported presentations, followed by technology-supported demonstrations and videos [...] Constructive learning activities, such as the production of digital resources by students, an engagement in complex problem-solving activities, or self-assessment exercises were much rarer... (p. 3)

The high presence of lecture recordings is not because recordings are necessarily of any value, but because they are what is there to use. They are what is there to use because they are inexpensive.

Wekerle et al. (2022) note that ‘IT infrastructure that still mainly addresses a lecture-style and individual use of technology’ largely because of ‘the ignorance of higher education teachers about its [technology’s] capabilities’ (p. 12). Potter et al. (2022) also observe that

...universities often lagged behind society in providing technological infrastructure. A lack of resources caused frustration for workers across [their] universities, who are affected by outdated technology and inconsistent implementation. (p. 80)

It is not just outdated technology, but outdated thinking, that slows teachers down. Potter et al. (2022) further note that ‘it’s not the technology itself that contributes to or reduces stress but rather how it used or managed’ (p. 86). To a student, non-teacher or non-expert, ‘access to lecture recordings is a cornerstone of accessible education’ (Victoria University of Wellington Students’ Association, 2022). In reality, that belief exists only because that is all most people have experienced, not because that is what is possible, or what is of quality. It is further likely that these people are learning *in a* language, but not learning *a language*. It is undoubtedly true that proponents of the lecture recordings are also learning within a culture for whom lecture recordings were geared, and there is no thought given to that privilege, or the exclusion forced on other disciplines, educators, and students. The tapu expert is again usurped.

An expert knows that digital learning tools, such as lecture recordings, can be a mistake if not managed correctly (Olsen-Reeder, 2022b). In short, educators provided lecture recordings over the pandemic because it kept people alive, even though it was potentially a pedagogical mistake. It was a calculated mismanagement of technology, carried out because it curbed the possibility of

death. In the post-pandemic future though, the hours currently spent on managing those things should be spent collaboratively building digital solutions that are responsive to disciplines, inclusive of cultures, equitable, and easily updateable as technology improves. As Peixoto et al. (2022) summarize, this is not something one group of people on campus, such as management or students, can decide alone:

...new technologies can only act as a facilitator in the pedagogical relationship if the pedagogical principles that sustain it are worked out and defined together. It is fundamental to place the emphasis on the pedagogical process and to define the roles of each one of the parties in the construction of the knowledge process. (p. 525)

Moving forward, we should be looking to design our digital pedagogies with compassion, quality and precision in mind because ‘technology is advancing, and the world is moving on despite the raging COVID pandemic’ (Udeogalanya, 2022, p. 56). A key concern for institutions should be finding out how best to unlock pedagogy from its cage and repatriate it. For educators, it should be how best to spend limited time making the best possible decisions and using their disciplinary expertise to do so.

### **Old-hats and new hats**

[A]cademics are undergoing identity work to find out who they are becoming. They are experiencing new, forced identities projected on to themselves which they are either rejecting or accepting, using their own agency to adapt as best they can. (Collins et al., 2022, p. 212)

Teaching in HE contexts is changing, and it is only right that it be the educator’s job to enact new teaching pedagogies that come along. However, it is also important that the educator has, at a bare minimum, collaborative authority over their teaching pedagogies, without disruption from others on campus who have less experience in such matters. This will take time because honing quality in a new classroom is not something that will immediately come to every educator. As indicated by Schalk et al. (2022) ‘[d]igital educators have the responsibility for developing capabilities and putting them into practice’, but ‘the path to becoming a digital educator was [...] a process that requires time, self-reflection and some distance’, (p. 131), For Māori praxis, there is then the Maorification of these capabilities, so that they work well within the cultural setting we demand.

Time and distance are things educators are not afforded in neoliberal education settings. For that reason, it would be fair to say ‘that academics are less open or adept to using digital communication platforms’ (Potter, et al., 2022, p. 77), and that there is often ‘resistance’ to digital learning (Watermeyer et al., 2022b, p. 149). It is important to mention that this author shares the believe in well-developed, online student-centered learning (SCL). Humans are diverse, and there will, therefore, be academics who are not interested in digital moves, for a number of reasons. Aside from that ‘resistance’, Watermeyer et al. (2022b) note there is a ‘lack of confidence and capability in identifying and applying effective digital pedagogies’ (p. 149). Educators must also ‘feel empowered to question the rationale for change and engage in responsive ways to re-envision university teaching in a new mixed environment’ (Sadler et al., 2016, as cited in Núñez-Canal et al., 2022, p. 4). Schalk et al. (2022) present the gravity of this work:

Developing our digital capabilities at [an] organisational and educator level poses a fundamental challenge to the structures, assumptions, policies and procedures of our institutions, and importantly our underpinning epistemological and ontological beliefs and attitudes regarding the role and nature of knowledge and higher education itself. (p. 131)

Educators rushed to prepare something—anything—out of empathy for students struggling in a pandemic, and ‘in the case of the Covid crisis, this motivation was intrinsically joined to the emergency of the moment’ (Núñez-Canal et al., 2022, p. 4). Now, we need time to work through more than an emergency pandemic-induced adrenaline. Not as much time, perhaps, as an institution takes to change a policy—that could take years—but some time, nonetheless.

The lack of time afforded to educators also means that teaching staff are on a ‘psychological health erosion pathway’ (p. 81) as Potter et al. (2022) illustrate:

A particularly at-risk group for experiencing pressure to keep connected digitally after hours are teaching staff, due to student emails and expectations. Some participants discussed that universities are evolving to become more service-based to students (framed as consumers), ultimately changing the dynamic and leading to pressure to respond more quickly to student needs. (p. 81)

I have no doubt some will be quick to argue lecturers are 'too old', 'too lazy' or too busy yearning for 'the good old days' and that this new way of teaching is a necessary and enlightened improvement. I would suggest that argument is not as

important as one that places the mental and physical health of teaching staff at the forefront, before making presumptions about their work ethic. If forced against a wall, educators are well within their right, as humans, to set firm mental health boundaries around this issue. After all, humans are tapu, too.

### **What goes up must come crashing down**

As a final thought, even the most neoliberal of educationalists needs to understand the risk currently faced by a lack of thought given to online SCL. Allen and McLaren (2022), sarcastically yet brilliantly note that:

those enamored by efficiency and growth are running a race to the bottom of low-cost online classrooms and the promise of an infinite pool of new students no longer bound by parking or dorm limitations on campus. [...] If there were just a way to rid the university of students, the efficiency would reach its singularity! (p. 380)

In one literature review alone, Li and Yu (2022) found that while online learning ‘might be the main tool for making money,’ ‘it could not ensure a sustainable education system for better educational development’ (p. 11). They further pressed that ‘it might mislead students for lack of a supply cycle and a specific demand,’ and that ‘although the technology seemed to meet the requirements of sustainable education, it damaged [HE’s] reputation and essential nature’ (p. 11). This should worry neoliberal institutions given their reliance on online learning to make money, and students who are investing in a product should be concerned that it might be devalued because of online participation. Li and Yu (2022) state that:

The efficacy of online knowledge and skills delivery raised doubts, as students with better grades did not correlate with job readiness and real competencies. [...] Graduates’ academic success might not reflect the realities of the job market. Students’ credentials or qualifications did not completely indicate their job readiness. (p. 11)

The current lack of readiness for the job market is further documented by Didier (2022), who states that in forcing the ‘knowledge-to-digital’ turn on students, institutions also force students to leave the university qualified but undereducated, and they then become active participants in ‘educational mismatch’ (p. 76). The

mismatch occurs when the degree becomes meaningless, because degree holders do not possess any more skill than someone who has no degree. Such a misalignment lowers the overall value of the qualification, as well as the monetary value that qualification might command in terms of wages (Didier, 2022). In turn, this destroys the value the next generation places on attending the institution, and pillages future enrollment. The solution for this appears to be in the thinking and investment that goes into this work. As Núñez-Canal et al. (2022) state of digital SCL:

It is now a powerful, complex, demanding, and competitive business that requires continuous, large-scale investment. Curriculum design must be considered as if it were a strategic plan.’ Many of us, as educators, will be looking forward to that ‘strategic plan’ being released for consultation. Without the investment (which includes human investment) however, the revenue generated by degrees is at risk. (p. 3)

In addition to the revenue risked, there is the newly graduated student educators in the classroom care about deeply. Students who are qualified by our institutions to execute certain forms of labor, but who have not been to class enough to learn those forms, are certainly going to be challenged in the job market later on. In Māori culture, oratory is a significant overall marker of proficiency in the Māori world. Interestingly, one does not need to be adept as a speaker to handle oratory, though it certainly helps. However, one does need to understand how to execute oratory—the formulaic points that must be made, the physical reactions the listeners will carry out depending on what is said (such as standing, walking to a given area, pausing, sitting, singing, and even crying). One simply must know these things, and the only way to learn them is to participate in a highly tapu, regulated learning environment. They cannot be learned later, through a lecture recording, and they certainly cannot be practiced for eventual enactment in a work environment. Therefore, tapu as currency, is something we cannot afford to devalue in Māori settings—even if intuitions can justify devaluing the paper the degree is printed on.

### **Tapu as pedagogy**

Having now explicated the three key areas of digital teaching, neoliberalism and the pandemic, I can now come back to the tapu as pedagogy, or, ‘tapu-gogy.’ As I have indicated, the pandemic has instigated a long train of astonishingly profane mechanisms into university life. Some of the work educators do in higher learning

institutions might require careful nuance, a content warning, or medical sterilization. These are things that, as far as the author interprets, represent a need to control some kind of tapu. In a language classroom, this work is more likely to be centered around language anxiety, language trauma, and perhaps even spoken prayer. The tapu the expert once had in controlling the classroom is now replaced by other human needs, which ultimately deconstruct the nature of Māori praxis to something more profane. There is little room left for the teacher to construct pedagogy as they see it, and therefore, it has become too tapu for the educator to touch. In this respect, it has taken on a sacred form—the teacher can revere it and study it, but must not touch it, as an object in a museum case.

At the risk of jumping to a different timbre in this scholarly article, the reader may ask about what the movement of pedagogy to something beyond the teacher's reach actually looks like in class. And therefore, the author insists on providing an example here, and shall do so with prayer. In Māori philosophy, classes begin and end with prayer to respectively instill and alleviate tapu over the class participants. The kinds of prayers used differ in intent and scope. In contemporary times, they are occasionally Christian in origin, but in the main, the prayers are Māori. The words contain literal citations that link the divine to the class, and the class to the student and teacher, in order to induce tapu. In one such prayer recounted by educationalist and composer, the late Piri Sciascia (2003), there are references given to the divine being Tāne-nui-a-rangi, who gathered knowledge from the heavens in baskets, and instilled it into humans. At the end of class, an equivalent prayer to alleviate this tapu, and will often include literal usages such as 'hikitia te tapu o tēnei kōrero', or 'lift the sacredness of this discussion.'

The nature of prayer in most contexts is to invoke participation, and so, they are an ontological inclusivity tool, in that anyone who feels equipped and able can lead the class in prayer. They have complete agency over the prayer selected and whether it is one they recite alone (except for the final 'amen') or coax the class into participating in. While in a state of tapu, the students and teacher are bound to operate in a particular way, that is, to learn, teach, engage in dialogue. Simply, the nature of these prayers are pedagogy and praxis, and so is everything that occurs within their confines.

There are other things involved also, such as explicating complicated linguistic and cultural notions that exist within Māori philosophies for topics students are curious about. This might include gender and sexual identity, or deconstructing sociopolitical colonial myths that some students may have been raised in. Some things certainly need to be dethroned in Māori praxis, but that cannot happen in a way that simultaneously deconstructs the student's own tapu—their own sacred link to the divine. A student who is 'wrong' for example, can rarely

be told they are ‘wrong’ in these kinds of classes. Instead, we deconstruct, decolonize, and rebuild a more refined and culturally nuanced way of thinking and talking. In this way, the classroom has its own ontology, praxis, and pedagogy that the teacher—the expert—rightly has the authority to control. Until, of course, the other pandemic-induced concepts laid out in this paper limit, or usurp, that meaning.

The added labor involved in teaching a class is an unwelcome distraction from the more sacred aspects of teaching—taking care of those baskets of knowledge—and the lack of importance placed on attending classes means students are often late to arrive, early to leave, or absent entirely. There are students in my classes I have not met, or have met only once—I recognize their names over the years as their absence and non-engagement has caused them to fail the course. I do not blame them, however. Now that I do not control most of the content in the syllabus, I cannot tell them in advance that classes matter, and that in order to pass, one has to actually ‘tend to the baskets.’ Classes are recorded, but Māori praxis (and that of language!) is mostly useless if observed later and after the fact. If one is not learning within the confines of the teaching pedagogy itself, one is outside of that tapu. If one is outside of that tapu, there is nowhere else to learn except the next opportunity to enter that tapu. If one has already decided they will not enter it, or make that time up later, they cannot learn the language.

Of course, this is not to say one must always be physically present to learn through Māori pedagogy and practice. Nor is it to say digital learning cannot work for language learning, or for Māori. What I am saying here is that without an adept understanding of the expertise required to adequately teach through tapu, one cannot teach. If one cannot teach because their knowledge as an expert has been displaced to some museum case of the institution, it has become untouchable.

Without having some semblance of authority as an expert to decide how and when messages are delivered to students, and to deliver those messages under the tapu of the knowledge they are adept in, no longer can learning truly occur in Māori praxis. And with the neoliberal position institutions seem to have adopted in this mid- to post-pandemic era, we are mere shells of an expert, performing some kind of theater show that looks Māori, but has no tapu. The link to divine knowledge is made profane, and this is what I lament about at the start of this article: pedagogy, once profane to the Māori educator, has been made sacred by those untrained to do so—put in a cage and untouchable. This is not the kind of tapu an expert can navigate in real time, but merely something an expert could study in a museum. It can be studied, but it cannot be practiced or communicated with, or about. For a Māori language course, this feels, ultimately, futile.



## **Hope for the future**

Oliveira and de Souza (2022) define for us the role of the university today: ‘to equip students with cognitive, social, interpersonal, technical skills, among others, in the face of the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and global challenges’ (p. 283) In order for this to happen, Plotnikof and Utoft (2021) call for

a relational reconfiguration of academic labor and subjectivities targeted by the greedy organizing of academic work during the pandemic, in lockdowns which demands our everything; materially and affectively. This, we find, infuses our livelihoods with many conflicting and troublesome senses, behaviors and feelings, such as hyper-productive flows and paralysis, imposter syndrome, and ugly emotions like envy, shame and rage. (p. 1261)

For me, these things are intertwined with some guilt around delivering failing (but nevertheless directed) teaching pedagogy to my students, dealing with their mental health issues remotely, and still, somewhere, wanting to develop quality, online SCL that is produced collaboratively and meaningfully. All of this is done with the additional equity and learning needs my students deserve to have met. We need time to uncover

the shadow sides of the new normal (dis-) organization of academic labor during the pandemic, while staying critically aware of our relatively privileged situations (still healthy, still with a job, and living in a country taking clear actions to avoid deaths and secure the health care system). (Plotnikof & Utoft, 2021, p. 1261)

What all of this really means is that educators need to have the space to return to the tapu that needs to be in the classroom. If the current pandemic-induced work climate persists, and it certainly seems not to be exiting the educator’s gaze, this new way of working comes without room for the educator to truly teach.

For a Māori language scholar, the shadow sides discussed here are perhaps how I articulate the things about my teaching that are too tapu now for me to approach. I feel some angst about being in this position, as it is not one an expert should find themselves in, in relation to their own classes. It seems that only distance, and a little time, will tell. Until then, the classroom will continue to be more of a performance of the profane than anything else, and that is a lamentable fact for all. Into the museum it goes.

### **Author biography**

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