



## The Wave: A Teaching Tool for Minimising Resistance

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The Wave can be applied to a range of educational settings and subjects. It is particularly effective when the subject matter is controversial and requires learners to consider various viewpoints or contexts different to their own.

### What is The Wave?

The tool provides a reliable, easy-to-deliver, easy-to-understand, easy-to-remember learning experience that highlights two main ideas:

- everyone has knowledge, people have different kinds of knowledge from different viewpoints and
- individuals and groups have different realities.

### Why use The Wave?

Students are encouraged to share their own understanding and to look at the underlying reasons for different viewpoints instead of being preoccupied with defending their own positions and/or shifting the viewpoints of others through argument. Understanding differences in perception make it easier for learners to engage effectively with different viewpoints. It also assists teachers to encourage participation and to manage difficult situations without resorting to positional power.

The tool addresses several factors that slow learning:

- learners lacking confidence about their own knowledge and experience; this discourages them from participating in discussion or even asking questions because, for example, they might be seen as being 'wrong' or 'stupid'
- the converse of this: learners' conviction that their own knowledge and viewpoints are the only legitimate ones; this inhibits them from listening carefully to different points of view
- learners feeling inadequate, for example, about their ability to defend their views
- learners feeling anxious that discussion of controversial subjects will become confrontational
- learners feeling uncomfortable about examining their own assumptions, values, and/or worldviews

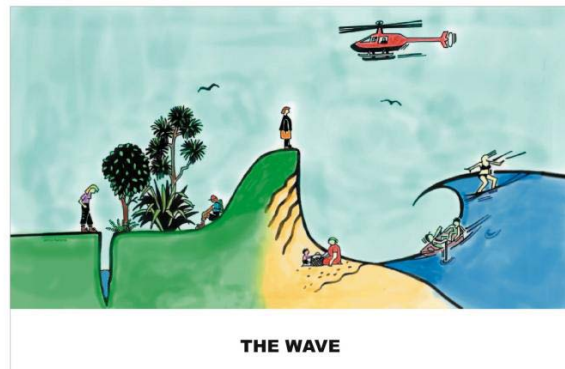


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- learners feeling unsafe to engage, for example, because of differences between their own viewpoints and particularly those of the tutor and/or the course materials, but sometimes even differences with classmates (this relates to the much larger topic of the impact of power relationships in a learning situation)

## How do I use the Wave?

This practice is relevant to any tertiary education context where the characteristics of the learners and/or the subject matter may generate resistance, as described in the previous section (also see limitations section below).

We have used this tool effectively in a wide range of teaching/learning contexts:

- formal (e.g., courses) and informal (e.g., conversation);
- at primary, secondary and tertiary levels (including community education)
- the first idea (everyone has knowledge) is particularly important when the learners lack confidence about the validity of their own viewpoints
- the second idea (people have different realities) is particularly effective when the subject matter
  - is controversial (e.g., Treaty of Waitangi)
  - requires consideration of different viewpoints (e.g. ethics, inter-cultural communication)
  - requires understanding of behaviour in contexts different from one's own (e.g., social services)
  - is being taught in a different context from that of some/all of the learners (e.g., Western psychology to those from non-Western cultures)

### When should I use The Wave?

At the beginning of every initial session with a new group. Sessions will usually be 2 hours or longer but the Wave can also be used in 1-hour presentations):

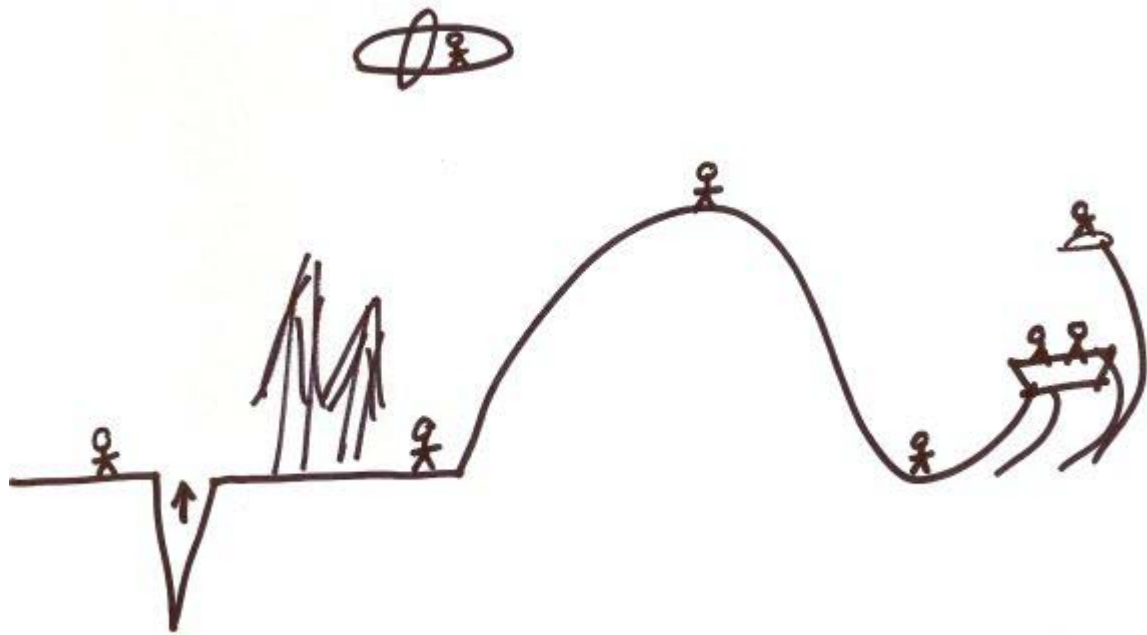
- so that it takes effect as soon as possible (e.g. in reducing anxiety, encouraging participation)
- if it has already been explained whenever we want to refer to either of the two main ideas it represents (e.g. for learners having difficulty listening to others' viewpoints, when unproductive debate is developing); if it is not introduced until a problem is emerging, some participants are too preoccupied with presenting or defending their own positions to be able to think about the ideas the Wave represents

### How much time is involved?

- the basic presentation is 15–20 minutes
- it can be reduced to 5 minutes – the facilitator quickly describes the picture and asks the second question about how big the wave looks
- it can continue for up to an hour if it is developed (e.g., in relation to use in conflict resolution – see below) or particularly relates to the content of the session (e.g., ethics)

All that is needed is a way of showing the picture to the group.

We have often done this using only a ballpoint pen and a scrap of paper (for a small group); it certainly doesn't have to be a work of art, as you can see in this example!



There are many other options, all of which are demonstrated or available for copying at <http://www.awea.org.nz/introducing-wave>.

- Most commonly, we draw the picture on a whiteboard or blackboard.
- It can equally easily be shown with an overhead projector using an OHT made from either a black and white or a colour version of the image.
- In the demonstration video, we used a poster we had made from the colour version.
- Flash animation format versions of the picture can be inserted into a presentation or e-learning course.
- In some situations, it is possible to have a kinaesthetic learning experience by involving the learners in a physical enactment, as shown in the photos.

We usually hand out photocopies of the standard drawing or of one adapted to a particular topic such as the Treaty of Waitangi.

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### Introduce the picture

The tutor's initial description of the picture may seem superfluous, but it helps anyone with sight impairment and gives clues to those for whom this is a very new idea (e.g., noting that the person behind the hill can hear the wave). It is also essential if your drawing skills are as basic as those of the tutor who made the illustration above!

### Introduce the first idea: everyone has some knowledge

Usually someone will say that all the figures in the picture have relevant information, but if after a long pause they haven't, the tutor can prompt about what one or more of the remaining figures could

contribute. If someone says 'all' very early on, then the tutor can summarise what each figure contributes (if time is short) or ask the group to do so. It's important to emphasise that even the figure by the blowhole has potentially useful information

### **Introduce the second idea: why people have different viewpoints**

It is important to use the **exact** wording of the question: 'how big does the wave look?' (not, for example, 'how big is the wave?' which can generate deep philosophical debate). It is also important to point quickly to the person on the beach; otherwise discussion begins before the main point is made.

Twenty years ago, there was often disagreement about the 'right' answer, today most groups quickly come to the conclusion shown in the video. However, if this does not occur, the tutor can summarise with 'you could argue that the figure on the beach is correct because s/he has flax roots/hands on experience or that the figure in the plane is correct because s/he has distance and objectivity, but the important point is to recognise that people in different positions have different realities: what you see depends on where you stand'.

## **Summary**

### **General points**

Although the learners experience this activity as simple, it has taken several years to refine the delivery to achieve the outcomes reliably. Basic use of the tool has four components. Please watch the video demonstration before reading the notes about each.

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An important aspect of creating a safe learning environment is emphasising to learners that they can use the Wave to remind the tutor, as well as classmates, to respect different points of view: the true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence.

You may want to create new positions in relation to the wave and/or create a new drawing altogether; for example, if the tool is used in a context where some participants might not be familiar with waves, the picture can be redrawn to represent a more relevant landscape.

Depending on the course and learners, it may be important to emphasise that the second idea (different realities) is not about 'all viewpoints are correct'; it's about remembering that you will be able to communicate/work with/understand others better if you take their realities into account.

Discussion and further notes about use of the Wave can be found at [awea.org.nz/wavenotesintro](http://awea.org.nz/wavenotesintro); please feel free to contribute questions, comments, and your own further development of its use.

### **The Wave can also be used in the following ways:**

- later in the same course in relation to the topic (e.g., a round of 'where are you in relation to the issue (wave) at the moment?')
- as a way to develop understanding of different viewpoints ('why might this person be feeling this way about the wave/topic', 'what might this mean about how they respond to ....')
- as a very simple introduction to post-modernity and related concepts
- as content for some teaching (e.g., social services, communications)
- to identify strategies for conflict resolution: The model suggests that arguing with someone who is standing in a different place is not likely to achieve the desired outcome. One option is for either or both to experience the other's reality to some extent so they can see the situation from the other's point of view (going to where the other person stands, inviting the other person to move to where they are standing, or both). Another option is for both to go to a new position to look at the issue, to acquire a common perspective. A third possibility is that both can look for the underlying issue connecting the different positions.

## **Further Information**

### **Background**

The Wave model is central to a collection of tools for social change called structural analysis. It was introduced in Aotearoa through workshops in the 1980s by an international educator, Philippe Fanchette from INODEP in Paris. It had a profound impact on those who took part in several of the workshops.

The underlying philosophy of structural analysis is based on the work of the prominent educator Paolo Freire. Like Sylvia Ashton Warner in Aotearoa/New Zealand, he found that people learn best from their own experiences.

### **Development**

Initially we used the tool with community groups and polytechnic classes wanting to learn about social change models. Their made challenges and suggestions resulted in significant modifications (e.g., deletion of an underwater rock representing empirical reality, addition of other perspectives). We found ourselves increasingly referring to the Wave model in other learning situations.

In the early days of Treaty education, it was very easy to provoke strong emotional reactions, but this tended to paralyse learners (with guilt, frustration, anxiety, etc.), which was counter-productive in terms of learning. Some educators adopted practices that avoided the emotive content, but this was not

educationally effective either. Over the years, we found the Wave was the single most useful tool in creating an environment conducive to learning about emotionally charged subjects.

### Effectiveness

Positive evaluations (written and verbal) from learners constitute the primary evidence that this practice is effective – and its effectiveness is long-term. We continue to receive feedback from learners many years later commenting on how useful the tool has been for them in dealing with difficult situations. The most recent example is a student from 19 years ago I met unexpectedly on a plane flight; without prompting, he described how he had been using the Wave with his brother as they explored their very different understandings of their Māori identities.

### Limitations

It may not be appropriate to introduce the second main idea (different realities) in teaching contexts where there are deemed to be answers which are 'right' regardless of context.

### Powerful

The simplicity of this tool is deceptive: it can have very powerful outcomes, especially if there is time to pursue points raised by the learners. As educators, the most interesting things about it for us are

- it has been effective in every one of the nearly 1,000 times we've used it
- it has evolved and been refined in response to feedback from learners in many different contexts over many years.
- by your pupils you'll be taught.



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