



Sustained Excellence
in Tertiary Teaching
Kaupapa Māori Category

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“Unlike dignitaries sipping champagne and admiring the art objects, we cry, we grieve, we scream, we look with horror at the public representations of colonial history. We fill the space with a soundscape rarely heard in a temple of western art. We create a different type of community music.”

Te Oti often sees objects from the Western cultural archive as public reminders of historical trauma. This reminds him that he is part of a collective that continues to experience the impact of colonisation and its associated trauma and motivates him to decolonise the spaces in which he teaches. He has implemented many teaching innovations in his time as a teacher on the voice programme at the University of Auckland and has been responsible for positive outcomes for all students and particularly for Māori and Pacific students, their families and communities. But it was his parents' models of pastoral care, indigenous activism and commitment to education that shaped his narrative as a creative artist and pedagogue.

Te Oti's mum, who grew up on her tūrangawaewae in South Taranaki, became a teacher, brought up four children and supported her husband's ministry. His dad, born in Rāpaki and descended from a family of Māori ministers, became the first Māori President of the Methodist Church and the first Tumuaki of Te Taha Māori o Te Hāhi Weteriana. He guided the decolonising of the modern church, articulating an indigenous understanding of the gospel in his book *The Māori Response to the Gospel*, drawing on liberation theology and heavily influenced by critical pedagogy. Te Oti's parents impacted the thoughts and political activities that shaped the radicalisation of many young activists in the Maori sovereignty and social justice movements from the 1970s to the 1990s, and beyond.

In order to understand what constitutes excellence in Kaupapa Māori teaching-learning, Te Oti says it is important to understand its problematic whakapapa. Classical performance entered our consciousness through colonisation and continues to contribute to the perceived superiority of Western knowledge and cultural archives. Ethnomusicologist McKinley states it is important to critically write and research back against conventions that sustain and benefit cultures of power and privilege. Te Oti teaches back, allowing Māori knowledge, culture and experience to 'find voice' in the academy and validate its use in higher learning institutions. A Kaupapa Māori framework allows him to include practices drawn from Māori epistemologies into the studio. He incorporates scholarship from Māori academics and education strategies developed for Māori by Māori. This ontological shift grounds the displaced pedagogical models specifically in Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Oti says socio-political changes over the past 50 years have created artistic spaces where all voices can contribute to nation building and all New Zealanders can explore Te Ao Māori. He designs culturally safe learning contexts that allow non-Māori to engage with Māori worldviews and te reo Māori, offering students different ways of thinking about music and conceptualising singing.

“I nurture artistry, explore a singer’s musical identity, discover their unique voice and integrate all aspects of their learning culture into a personalised studio experience. I nurture singing storytellers.”

Te Oti calls this process studio-ing, a concept he developed and one which underpins his teaching innovations. Studio learning in the university context is unusual as students study with the same performance teacher for the entire length of their degree. It is a highly individualistic context which focuses on training technical skills in three modes: studio, ensemble, and lecture. Te Oti teaches across all three modes, and over time has innovated these models with strategies derived from his research project, *Success for All* (2007). Funded by the Teaching Learning Research Initiative, this study reported Māori and Pacific Island student experiences in studio. Te Oti consciously creates a community of learners; students who socialise, sing and study together. He is part of this community and witnesses their stories in studio, at dinner, over coffee, in rehearsal, on social media and in performance. In turn they witness his. His students prosper because they feel supported and their families’ interests and communities’ values are respected. This approach challenges hierarchies that can occur in a critique-oriented learning environment. It builds trust, which is vital for a longitudinal teaching-learning relationship and diminishes the isolation some university students feel in studio learning environments.

Te Oti’s studio exists beyond a specific physical space. It operates in a conceptual space. Inspired by Christopher Small’s (1998) relational concept ‘musicking’, he turns the studio from an object into a verb. Studio-ing is to actively take part in any capacity of the teaching-learning moment across all domains and in any setting. The concept of studio-ing describes a space where learning goes beyond content and skills. It is a social space with the potential to empower learners, develop relationships, heal trauma and build resilience. It is heavily impacted by the diversity of his students, who are from different cultures, some living with mental health issues, some realising their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Three other teaching initiatives for which Te Oti has been recognised are; *Cross-disciplinary: Tuia, tui, tuia* (MUS 758/DAN 302), where voice and dance students share cross-discipline information on technique and creative processes through interactive tasks (University of Auckland Teaching Excellence Award in Innovation 2010), *Enabling Future Teachers: Culture Matters* (MUS 761), which enhances students’ practical training with research relevant to the context, and *Kapa Haka: Sustaining musical ecologies*, workshops that re-contextualize vocal health practices for trainers working in kapa haka, a genre that moves between traditional Māori and Western singing styles.

Te Oti is described by his colleagues as innovative and transformational. Acknowledged as a creative thinker in his field, he is often invited to contribute knowledge through performance, publishing, and research across multiple domains in his field and is invited to take leadership roles within his institution and internationally. He has strong networks with music educators from the field of Community Music (CMA) a research commission subsidiary of the International Society for Music Education (ISME). In 2016, he became the first New Zealander and Indigenous commissioner to CMA and in 2018 he became the chair of that Commission. In 2019 ISME created a Special Interest Group, Decolonising and Indigenising Music Education (DIME). Te Oti is the first Indigenous committee member and responsible for creating an International Indigenous Advisory Group (IIAG) to work in partnership with the committee.

“In his dual roles as singer and educator, I see Te Oti as an embodiment of the Māori and Pacific Voice, in both senses of the word: speaking and singing the living culture; and speaking and teaching from out of that culture on behalf of its people.” (Associate Professor Nuala Gregory, Deputy Dean of Creative Arts and Industries)

Endorsements

Dr Te Oti Rakena

Excellence in Supporting Pacific Learners Endorsement

Te Oti says Pacific peoples and their stories play a special role in Aotearoa New Zealand. As tangata whenua, he positions his teaching initiatives, research and service roles within the shared history and culture as “an anchoring point”. However, many students enter the School of Music with strong performance skills but variable degrees of musical literacy and training, as strong audiation skills have historically been reserved for families accessing private music studios and high decile schools. To address this inequity for Pacific singers, Te Oti developed *The Prior Learning Project: Enabling Pacific students*. This project explored Pacific student experiences with course content, gathering narratives from them using Talanoa. This led to workshops funded by the University’s Centre of Learning and Research in Higher Education which utilised the Pacific students’ narratives to develop strategies for improving their achievement.

Such strategies included adding hand signals to the Tongan solfege system, creating analysis tasks using Pacific hymnals rather than Bach chorales and offering individual keyboard lessons (the most requested skill), accessing music literacy through kinaesthetic training. Students completing this initiative had a 100% pass rate for stage two and three theory papers. Many of the students completing this project have moved into postgraduate programmes and some are studying internationally. This project has contributed to the music content in the Tertiary Foundation Certificate Music pathway and the support mechanisms offered by the Tuākana academic network.

“The project has been described as ‘a proactive and innovative solution’ to issues arising from inequitable access to adequate prior music learning opportunities.”