

Te Whanake Online: An interactive resource for Māori language learning

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Abstract

The promotion of the Māori language is regarded by Māori as essential to the survival of Māori culture, arts, history and identity. The goal of the *Te Whanake Online* project is to develop a series of online interactive modules to complement an established Māori language learning set of texts and related resources, called *Te Whanake*. *Te Whanake Online* supports an immersion or game-style approach to language learning. Currently the fifteen modules for the first book in the series, *Te Whanake I Te Kākano*, have been completed. Each module begins with an animated movie introducing the new language of the module. Between nine and sixteen activities in each module provide practice in a wide range of spoken and written language skills, including listening with comprehension, speaking, reading with comprehension, writing and activities to help learn grammatical structures and vocabulary. The project means that Māori language learners will have access to an online resource which is at the forefront of current thinking and practice in language learning online and firmly grounded in a successful and well-established Māori language series of texts, study guides, audio-visual resources, a dictionary-index, and teachers' manuals. This article outlines the project background, its design, evaluation and the outcomes.

Project background

The promotion of the Māori language is regarded by Māori as essential to the survival of Māori culture, arts, history and identity. One of the problems that most indigenous people face is a shortage of texts and related resources, including materials for teaching their languages. Māori is no exception to this. In the mid 1970s when John Moorfield began university teaching, there were no suitable textbooks and materials for teaching Māori to adults. Out of necessity, he had to use textbooks written for Māori language learners in secondary schools. Once he was in the university system, he spent several years researching bilingualism and second language learning and teaching in order to teach Māori as a second language to adults more effectively. This was at a time when the Māori renaissance was gaining momentum and there was increasing awareness among Māori that, unless something was done, the language

would cease to be used as an everyday means of communication. Having been fortunate enough to learn the language and having experienced the benefits of this, he wanted to play a part in ensuring its survival.

In order to be more effective as a teacher of Māori, he decided that he needed to write his own materials. After a couple of trial attempts, he began writing the *Te Whanake* series. The first textbook, *Te Whanake i Te Kākano* and accompanying audiotape exercises appeared in 1988. Another three textbooks with accompanying resources followed. Recently the textbooks have been substantially revised and are now into their second editions. The series now consists of the four textbooks with study guides, audio-visual resources and a dictionary-index for teenage and adult learners. There are also three teachers' manuals which include advice on Māori language teaching, activities for pair and group speaking practice, and sample oral, listening, reading and writing tests. *Te Whanake* is now widely used in tertiary and secondary education institutions across Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The one thing missing from the series has been an online resource making use of modern computer technology that students can use independently. The main reason for this, of course, is the cost and the need for a range of skills that could only be covered by a team of people. Finally, last year we received funding to develop an online resource to complement the first book and accompanying resources, *Te Whanake I Te Kākano*.

***Te Whanake* Online project**

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The University of Otago is leading the project and partnering with Victoria University of Wellington, Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) and Te Wānanga o Aotearoa to provide assistance with ongoing evaluation. These partnering tertiary institutions were chosen because they represent a polytechnic, a wānanga and another Māori Studies School, Te Kawa a Māui at Victoria University of Wellington, using the *Te Whanake* series in various ways for teaching Māori language.

The project is funded through the Tertiary Education Commission e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund (eCDF).

The *Te Whanake* Online project means Māori language learners will have access to an online resource which is at the forefront of current thinking and practice in language learning online and is firmly grounded in a successful and well-established Māori language text.

Design and evaluation process

The original concept for the online modules was developed by students at Te Tumu working with educational technologists at the Higher Education Development Centre (HEDC) of the University of Otago. Initially the concept was developed on paper and tested with a small number of staff and students from Te Tumu, the School of Māori,

Pacific and Indigenous Studies at the University of Otago. Five senior students were used to create the characters, to write and record the dialogues for the fifteen animated movies, and to write the exercises so that the content and images would be likely to appeal to young Māori learners.

The concept underwent some revisions as a result of early feedback and subsequently, a team of five senior students from Te Tumu have developed the scripts and storyboards for all the animated stories, songs and activities in *Te Whanake Online*. Strong collaboration with staff from HEDC occurred throughout to ensure materials being produced could be effectively utilised in the proposed online framework.

Once the first online module was close to completion it was rigorously tested with first year students at Te Tumu, with staff from our collaborative partners and with *Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori*, the Māori Language Commission, which was set up by Government under the Māori Language Act 1987 to promote the language. Feedback from these sessions has been incorporated into what you are able to see on the website (<http://tewhanake.otago.ac.nz>).

Each module begins with an animated dialogue which introduces the language of that module. Students then work through a series of activities which help them to practise the language introduced in context in the animated movie.

As an example, the animated movie for the first module is not solely about language, but also includes cultural values and practices. So Eruera greets the elderly lady, Mīria, with the *hongi*, and the introductory conversation is about family links and relationships, rather than about the weather. Feeding guests is also an important part of welcoming visitors so the students who wrote the dialogue included that at the end of the first animated movie.

As the animated movie is played, the Māori dialogue also appears as captions. The learners also have the option of seeing the English translation of what they are hearing as captions. In this way they have immediate access to the meaning of what they are hearing. They can also opt to turn off the Māori and English captions.

Later in each module the learners are able to return to the animated movie when they have the opportunity to play the part of any of the characters from the animated story. The student types in the particular character's part. If they need help with the response there is a hint button that will inform them in English of what they should say. They are also able to listen to the character's words, should they wish to, before typing in their answer. Once they have typed in their response, they submit it and a window appears with their response and the character's written and spoken response for comparison. We are also investigating the practicalities of the option of learners being able to record their oral responses. Ideally, we would want learners to have the ability to do this.

The activities of each module are designed to build students' confidence as they move from easier to more demanding activities. These activities help the learners acquire the new language introduced in the animated dialogue of the particular module's movie. They provide practice in a wide range of spoken and written language skills, including listening with comprehension, speaking, reading with comprehension,

writing and activities to help learn grammatical structures and vocabulary. There are 187 activities in total, each module having between nine and sixteen exercises to explain and practise these language skills. The activities of each module vary. Often they begin by explaining a grammar or usage point and an exercise gives the learners practice in this.

Learners using *Te Whanake* Online will also have access to an online dictionary at the click of a button. Using a University of Otago Research Grant has enabled us to place the *Te Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index* online. The online version enables new entries to be added by the author at any time. This is a dictionary for learners of Māori, written on new principles. It is a selection of modern and everyday language essential for learners. As well as the words one would expect in a traditional dictionary, it has encyclopaedic entries designed to provide key information about plants, animals, stars, planets, heavenly bodies, important Māori people, key ancestors of traditional narratives, tribal groups, ancestral canoes, song types, Māori names for institutions, country names, place names and other proper names. There are also explanations of key concepts central to Māori culture. Comprehensive explanations for grammatical items are included, with examples of usage, as are idioms and colloquialisms with their meanings and examples. These have all been included because they are important in communicating in a Māori context, and contribute to understanding and speaking the language in a natural way.

While this dictionary is designed to stand alone, it not only includes all the words used in the *Te Whanake* series of narrative texts and resources, but is indexed to the *Te Whanake* series, thus giving quick access to topics, maps, illustrations, idioms, colloquialisms, proverbs, tribal sayings, grammar and usage explanations with examples.

Project outcomes to date and at the conclusion of the project

What outcomes were we seeking from this project and how close are we to achieving them?

We wanted to provide research opportunities for post-graduate Māori language students. This has been achieved. A team of five post-graduate students have been working on this project since August 2005.

Removal of barriers to the development of Māori language competence. Teacher and student feedback so far indicates that this project will provide an engaging, contemporary and accessible Māori language resource online.

We wanted to design it with current language learning theory and practice in mind. The project will contribute to the development of linguistic and communicative competence for beginning through to advanced learners of Māori language.

Provide high quality online Māori language modules designed to facilitate reuse, portability and pedagogical flexibility. The technical architecture of the project is pivotal to this and has been designed by Educational Media staff at the University of Otago's Higher Education Development Centre. Central to the architecture is an open source Content Management System called Magnolia. The Educational Media team have adapted Magnolia to allow for both the easy insertion of the animations, and the

online editing of questions, exercises and explanatory materials. Once complete, each module is published to the *Te Whanake* Online website but can also be exported as a standalone package of Web files or as a Shareable Content Object (SCORM 1.2) package for use in an institutional Learning Management System (Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle are examples of Learning Management Systems). The export facility opens the possibility for modules to be distributed to students for use off-line in situations where fast Web access is not available. *Te Whanake* Online modules will be available for download from the website.

Contribute to the dissemination of accessible Māori language resources across the tertiary sector. The results of this project will be available to all NZ tertiary institutions at no cost to them.

In September last year the funding from TEC enabled us to set up the two teams to begin developing the fifteen modules. To date the dialogues for the animated movies for all fifteen modules have been written and recorded while the exercises and the audio recordings have been completed for all fifteen modules. Eleven songs, practising language from the modules, have been written and recorded.

To give readers some sense of the detailed work involved in producing *Te Whanake* Online, here is an outline of the production process for just the animated characters. There are six characters who appear throughout the modules and these were developed by students at Te Tumu. They began by writing up character descriptions, and then photographed people who they felt represented the characters they had described. A Wanganui artist, Ian Cookson, drew cartoon characters from the photographs and then our team of 3D animators, led by Michael Chen, created the 3D character models from Ian Cookson's sketches. Using the scripts and storyboards developed by the Te Tumu team, we created the animations using the character models and custom designed props and exported them to Macromedia Flash format to enable Web-based delivery and to facilitate interaction with the animations by students. The fourteen animations and materials for the remaining modules are well into production under the stewardship of the Production Manager, Tim Elder, and with the support of our team of web programmers, led by Richard Zeng. Useful trialling of parts of the first module by some first year students and staff from the three other institutions and *Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori* (the Māori Language Commission) was completed in 2006 and feedback from these sessions has enabled us to make improvements to the module design and animation process on the fly.

And the result of all this effort? Most rewarding for us has been seeing the delight on the faces of all those who have trialled the first module as they recognise authentic Māori characters and voices in a professionally produced and contemporary online program. This is the effect we were hoping for when we embarked on *Te Whanake* Online and an outstanding team effort is allowing us to achieve this.

Conclusion

While the content of the fifteen modules of *Te Whanake* Online complement the chapters of the textbook *Te Whanake 1 Te Kākano*, as much as possible, we have endeavoured to make *Te Whanake* Online a stand-alone resource for learners. Ideally, students will be attending classes with a skilled Māori language teacher and will be using the textbook, study guide, the exercises on the accompanying CDs and *Te Aka*

Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index. However, learners anywhere in the world with access to the internet will be able to use *Te Whanake* Online whenever they wish at no cost.

We would wish to keep our teams together to move on to developing an online resource for *Te Whanake 2 Te Pihinga* and the other two books and resources in the *Te Whanake* series. To date we have not obtained funding to do this. We are convinced that the *Te Whanake* Online project will be an extremely valuable for motivated learners of Māori.

Please visit *Te Whanake* Online website and for more about the *Te Whanake* series at these bilingual websites:

<http://tewhanake.otago.ac.nz>

<http://www.tewhanake.maori.nz/>