From Resistance to Responsibility: Te Tiriti o Waitangi Professional Development in Higher Education

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CHRISTINA SEVERINSEN
School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand

ANGELIQUE REWETI
School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand

As higher education institutions worldwide confront colonial legacies and seek to redefine their relationships with Indigenous peoples, Aotearoa New Zealand's experience provides a compelling case study. Central to this is *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, the Māori language text of the 1840 agreement between rangatira Māori (chiefs) and the British Crown. This reflection examines professional development in higher education as a catalyst for Te Tiriti-led transformation. Drawing on kaupapa Māori and Freirean pedagogies, we explore how resistance, relationality, and context-specific strategies contribute to meaningful engagement. These pedagogical approaches position education as a site for liberation, relational accountability, and collective change (Tawhai, 2020; Pihama, 2010; 2023; Smith, 2021). While our reflections are grounded in experiences at Massey University, the insights offered have broader implications for Indigenous rights, decolonising education, and institutional reform.

REVISITING TREATY LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is a living agreement that continues to shape national identity and Māori-Crown relations. However, in many contexts, references to "the treaty" often blur important distinctions between the Māori and English texts. Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the version debated and signed by most rangatira Māori, did not involve the cession of sovereignty, as confirmed by the Waitangi Tribunal (2014) in its landmark report *He Whakaputanga me te Tiriti – The Declaration and the Treaty*. It affirms tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty), mana (authority), and equal status for Māori. Although the English-language text, the Treaty of Waitangi, is often cited in policy and curricula, critical scholarship has clarified that Te Tiriti o Waitangi holds legal and moral primacy. This distinction has significant implications for educators. The enduring misrepresentation of Māori intent and understanding at the time of signing has long obscured the foundational promise of mutual respect and shared authority (Mutu, 2023). Acknowledging this is essential to creating learning environments grounded in historical accuracy and relational justice. Despite scholarly consensus on the authority of Te Tiriti o

Waitangi, educational institutions have historically relied on simplified frameworks, most notably the 3Ps (partnership, protection, participation). While accessible, these principles risk diluting the depth of Māori rights and aspirations. Such simplifications reflect broader critiques in postcolonial and critical education literature that warn against reducing complex Indigenous frameworks to easily digestible institutional slogans (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Increasingly, scholars and institutions now call for an approach that centres both the provisions and principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, recognising its political, cultural, and legal significance (Burns et al., 2024; Massey University, 2024).

At Massey University, the institutional shift to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi explicitly reflects a growing recognition of the need for historical clarity and cultural integrity. The Education and Training Act 2020 (Section 281 (1)(b)) mandates that tertiary institutions must "acknowledge the principles of Te Tiriti." Massey University's strategy documents go further, affirming kāwanatanga (governance), tino rangatiratanga (sovereignty), ngā tikanga katoa rite tahi (equal rights and status of Māori customs and systems) and te ritenga Māori (Māori values and customary practices) as essential components of university practice. This renewed emphasis on Te Tiriti o Waitangi provisions expands the scope of professional development. It demands engagement with historical context, critical legal findings, and evolving Indigenous scholarship. As educators, this means moving beyond principle-based interpretations that offer abstraction without accountability. Instead, it calls for embedding Māori knowledge systems, recognition of Māori political authority, and an ongoing interrogation of how institutional practices either support or undermine these commitments.

This work is not simply about literacy. To understand Te Tiriti o Waitangi critically means engaging with Aotearoa New Zealand's settler-colonial past and present and locating ourselves within its ongoing legacy. For non-Maori educators, this often requires a fundamental reorientation: away from neutrality or benevolent ignorance, and toward active relational responsibility. Freire (1970) calls this praxis – reflection and action upon the work in order to transform it. Following Freire's call to conscientisation, this process requires developing a deeper awareness of how knowledge, power and privilege are structured and maintained, particularly in settler-colonial settings. Tawhai (2020) explains Te Tiriti o Waitangi praxis as the continuous cycle of critical reflection and refined action that emanates from educators' experiences and commitment to positive change. Recent scholarship within higher education research has similarly called for Indigenous-centred professional development (Buissink et al., 2017), courageous truth-telling within institutional settings (Ruwhiu et al., 2021), and the co-creation of relational academic environments grounded in care and reflection (Trundle et al., 2025; Boer & Fry, 2025).

RESISTANCE AS A SITE OF LEARNING

Resistance is often perceived as a barrier in professional development. However, it can be an entry point into deeper dialogue (Tawhai, 2020). Colleagues may resist for various reasons, such as lack of exposure, discomfort, or fear of saying the wrong thing. Rather than retreating from these moments, we see them as opportunities to explore underlying questions and encourage reflexive learning.

Freire's (1970) concepts of conscientisation remind us that transformation often begins with discomfort. The process of unlearning dominant narratives and engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems and colonisation can be unsettling, but it is also generative. Similarly, Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory describes how shifts in worldview often stem from disorienting dilemmas.

It is important to distinguish between different forms of resistance. First, we acknowledge that resistance operates in multiple directions within this work. The resistance we encounter from staff fundamentally differs from resistance as understood in Indigenous activism (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The former often protects colonial structures, and the latter challenges them. Among staff, resistance often stems from various sources: unfamiliarity where staff have not previously encountered Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a critical and living document; emotional discomfort, feeling overwhelmed or uncertain; fear of 'getting it wrong'; or a sincere belief that older models still suffice. These colleagues may have been early champions of treaty work under previous frameworks and may feel destabilised by shifting expectations. Resistance, in these cases, can be a signal of investment and care, not disengagement. Paradoxically, our pedagogical approach treats these forms of resistance as pathways toward transformation – supporting colleagues to move from defending colonial structures to questioning them.

In kaupapa Māori contexts, relational principles such as manaakitanga (care), whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building), and ako (reciprocal learning) create the foundation for such dialogue. Rather than framing resistance as a failure, we hold space for it, allowing people to grapple with complexity while feeling supported. Buissink et al. (2017) note that centring care in professional development fosters relational accountability and shared purpose. Ahmed (2012) describes how institutional diversity work often provokes defensive reactions. These defences maintain dominant norms under the guise of neutrality. Naming these patterns is important, but so is creating conditions where vulnerability, reflection, and change are possible. Over time, we have seen that when resistance is met with care rather than condemnation, it can transform (Tawhai, 2020). It may reveal underlying fears, gaps in knowledge, or a longing for connection that institutional cultures have failed to nurture. This shift from resistance as an obstacle to resistance as an entry point requires patience, humility, and trust in the learning process. It also requires institutional leaders to support staff through discomfort, rather than bypassing or delegitimising it.

RELATIONAL APPROACHES AND TUAKANA ROLES

Effective Te Tiriti o Waitangi education is relational. It cannot rely solely on content delivery or compliance-based training. One powerful relational approach is the tuakana-teina dynamic, where more experienced colleagues (tuakana) support others (teina) in their learning. In te ao Māori, tuakana-teina relationships are more than a mentorship model. They reflect a reciprocal dynamic of responsibility, relational care, and mutual respect. Learning is understood as ako – a process of shared exchange where both the teacher and learner are simultaneously positioned as learners and contributors (Pere, 1982; Rewi, 2014). Tuakana-teina relationships are not one-directional. Even experienced educators are constantly learning, revisiting past assumptions,

encountering new scholarship, and responding to shifting institutional and political contexts. This humility is crucial. Too often, professional development relies on fixed hierarchies of expertise, which can alienate participants and limit the scope for co-learning.

However, resistance to Te Tiriti o Waitangi education may also come from tuakana themselves – colleagues who believe they already possess a comprehensive grasp of the treaty. This resistance may stem from reliance on earlier frameworks, such as the 3Ps, which were once dominant in institutional discourse but are now recognised as overly reductive (Waitangi Tribunal, 2023; Burns et al., 2024). These colleagues may not have had the opportunity to engage with contemporary scholarship that challenges and expands on these foundational but limited perspectives. Some hold to legacy models and may view newer approaches as unnecessary or destabilising. These positions are not necessarily dismissive. They may reflect genuine effort and past engagement, now challenged by contemporary critique. Re-engaging tuakana in professional development can therefore be delicate but rewarding. Rather than excluding these voices, we encourage respectful dialogue that acknowledges the evolution of treaty literacy over time. By inviting tuakana to reflect on their own journeys, we affirm their value while also stimulating growth. This approach aligns with Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, which frame learning as situated, social, and ongoing. This dynamic also resonates with what Ruwhiu et al. (2021) describe: Indigenous people courageously challenging power structures from within institutions by speaking uncomfortable or necessary truths. Their contributions enrich the dialogue and create continuity across generations of staff development. Importantly, the presence of tuakana can also foster whanaungatanga – relational connection and a sense of belonging. Tuakana can create culturally grounded spaces that support others to step into uncomfortable conversations with greater confidence (Tawhai, 2020). This modelling of openness, rather than certainty, is compelling in professional learning environments that aim to transform not only knowledge, but practice and worldview.

CONTEXTUAL AND SITUATED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the context of higher education, it is crucial to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach to Te Tiriti o Waitangi professional development may not be effective. Each university, college, school, and discipline has unique characteristics and challenges that require context-specific strategies for embedding Te Tiriti. Understanding these nuances is critical for meaningful and sustainable change, as contextual understanding involves recognising the specific needs, opportunities, and constraints within each setting (Tawhai, 2020). While resistant colleagues may understand the relevance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi within broader national discourse, they may struggle to see how it connects to their specific disciplinary work or teaching practices. This is particularly important in the journey toward becoming a Te Tiriti-led university - a vision that calls for genuine institutional transformation across all areas of activity.

Achieving this transformation requires shared commitment that cannot be the sole responsibility of Māori staff or confined to the work of equity-focused roles. Instead, meaningful change depends on the active involvement of all

members of the university community. Massey University's commitment to upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi across its four strategic pillars – Pou Tangata (People), Pou Rangahau (Research), Pou Ako (Teaching and Learning), and Pou Hono (Connection) – offers a comprehensive framework to guide and support this collective responsibility (Massey University, 2021; 2024). Through meaningful dialogue with colleagues across disciplines, we can help identify the most relevant and impactful ways to incorporate Te Tiriti o Waitangi into their work. This may include exploring how Te Tiriti relates to research ethics, curriculum design, student support, or community engagement, among other areas. Demonstrating how Te Tiriti o Waitangi connects to specific professional roles helps staff move from abstract principles to contextually grounded practice.

This contextual approach aligns with situated learning theory, which emphasises that learning is most effective when embedded in authentic, real-world contexts and socially mediated through participation in practice communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). More recent scholarship has extended this idea to professional development in higher education, noting that transformative change occurs when staff engage with new knowledge in ways that are directly relevant to their disciplinary identities and institutional realities (Boylan et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2014). Importantly, in kaupapa Māori contexts, relevance is tied not only to discipline but to whakapapa - connections to land, people, and knowledge systems. Te Tiriti o Waitangi education that engages with local histories and iwi (tribal) partnerships ensures learning is not only situated but also relational and ethical (Smith et al., 2012). We recognise the inherent tensions in working toward transformation within colonial institutional structures. This work involves strategically engaging with institutional structures while maintaining commitments to relational, Indigenous-centred approaches: utilising university structures while simultaneously working to transform them.

In this sense, kaupapa Māori and situated learning perspectives converge: both highlight that knowledge is not neutral, but located within cultural, historical, and relational contexts. Massey University's commitment to enhancing Māori learner access, participation, and success, at all levels of provision and as defined by Māori, reinforces this contextual approach. This includes attention to outcomes for whānau (families), hapū (sub-tribes), iwi (tribes), and Māori communities, and how institutional actions impact these groups (Massey University, 2024).

Adopting a systems-level approach to Te Tiriti o Waitangi integration in higher education involves recognising the interconnectedness of various university operations and working towards a holistic change. We can develop more effective and sustainable Te Tiriti professional development initiatives by understanding the broader institutional context and the interplay between disciplines and functions. Systems thinking (Senge, 2006) encourages us to move beyond isolated interventions and instead consider how multiple levers of change can align to shift institutional culture. This is particularly relevant for becoming a Te Tiriti-led university, where transformation must occur not only at the surface level but throughout the institution's values, relationships, and ways of operating. By providing examples of successful Te Tiriti o Waitangi integration across different fields and showcasing how these efforts contribute to a shared vision, we can build confidence and momentum among colleagues. Peer-to-peer learning, case studies, and practice-sharing opportunities help normalise and celebrate the application of Te Tiriti o Waitangi within everyday academic work.

Contextual understanding also means recognising and building on the existing strengths of our colleagues, as each brings their own expertise, cultural background, and pedagogical values that can enrich Te Tiriti professional development. By taking a strengths-based approach, we foster an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. Massey University's commitment to Māori and national development – where decisions, funding, and resource allocation reflect Māori priorities and aspirations – supports this model of educational leadership (Massey University, 2024). Ultimately, being a Te Tiriti-led university means recognising that we are all on this waka (canoe) together. Through ongoing learning, dialogue, and collective responsibility, we can embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi not as a compliance requirement, but as a guiding framework for relational, equitable, and transformative education.

CONCLUSION

Te Tiriti o Waitangi professional development is not merely an educational exercise but a site of ethical and relational transformation. To engage meaningfully with Te Tiriti is to challenge the assumptions that underpin institutional structures, disciplinary traditions, and individual practice. This requires moving beyond symbolic gestures or compliance checklists and instead cultivating a shared responsibility for Māori aspirations and rights. This work is not comfortable. It involves confronting our own locations within systems of power and privilege, engaging with histories that unsettle, and imagining futures not yet realised. For non-Māori, this often means learning to sit with uncertainty, listen with humility, and act with integrity. For Māori, it means navigating the tension between advocacy and exhaustion, between holding space and being heard. At the same time, we acknowledge that this commitment remains aspirational in many respects. Significant challenges remain in ensuring that Te Tiriti o Waitangi is authentically and consistently integrated across the university, from governance and policy to everyday teaching, research, and service. Structural inequities persist, and Māori staff and students continue to experience the impacts of these disparities. This work takes place within a complex political landscape where commitments to Te Tiriti o Waitangi are subject to ongoing contestation. While we focus here on institutional and pedagogical dimensions, we recognise these efforts sit within broader action for Indigenous sovereignty and rights. The contemporary political context makes this work both more challenging and more urgent.

Relational transformation begins with creating spaces of care and accountability. It requires institutions to support dialogue that is honest, complex, and ongoing. It involves recognising resistance not as failure but as an opportunity to go deeper, to understand what is at stake and what might be possible. As institutions worldwide reflect on their roles in advancing Indigenous rights and addressing colonial legacies, Aotearoa New Zealand offers both a case study and a provocation. Te Tiriti o Waitangi offers both a context-specific foundation and a globally relevant case study. What does it mean to honour foundational agreements? What would it take to transform higher education into a space of relational justice? A Te Tiriti-led university is not just an aspiration for Aotearoa. It is part of a broader movement toward more just, inclusive, and relational forms of higher education. We offer this article not as a definitive

roadmap, but as a contribution to that ongoing conversation. The challenge now is to move with courage – to see professional development not as a task to be completed but as a process of collective becoming – one that centres Te Tiriti o Waitangi, uplifts Māori aspirations, and reimagines what it means to learn, teach, and lead together.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

DR CHRISSY SEVERINSEN
School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand
c.a.severinsen@massey.ac.nz

Dr Chrissy Severinsen is an Associate Professor in the School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. She co-leads the postgraduate public health and undergraduate mental health and addiction programmes and is the lead Kaiārahi Tiriti in the College of Health.

DR ANGELIQUE REWETI
School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand
a.reweti@massey.ac.nz

Dr Angelique Reweti (Ngāpuhi) is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Health Sciences, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. She co-leads the Bachelor of Health Science programme, co-leads the health promotion major and teaches hauora Māori in the postgraduate public health programme.