

Commentary

When two become three: Individual consultations and the triadic research review process

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(Received 18 September, 2024. Published online 3 March, 2025.)

It is a speedy but colossal journey when ākongā (students) embark on their postgraduate study, especially when they have to plan and produce a dissertation or a thesis. This commentary explores how our organisation, an Institute of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP), has transformed practices to better support ākongā in this process. We describe the triadic consultations with learner, supervisor and Research Committee representative we are finding to be an inclusive and relational approach in providing personalised feedback and advice from cultural experts as ākongā shape their ethics proposals. These kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (face-to-face) meetings and constructive critical reviews are collaborative and student-centred. These versions of individual consultations are proving effective and successful in creating a positive learning journey across a number of master's qualifications.

Key Words: Postgraduate, triadic, reviews, ethics, micro teaching, individual consultation.

1. Introduction

When higher education ākongā (students) complete their first qualification, they may feel like they've "cracked it"! They know how to attend class, submit assessments and sit exams. But for those who decide to continue on to postgraduate study, the new demands of self-directed research can be quite unsettling. Transitions from undergraduate to postgraduate study are often tinged with anxiety, self-doubt and disorientation, and therefore "are not inevitably straightforward" (McPherson et al., 2017, p. 42). One oft-repeated metaphor that we share with our ākongā is that a master's is like a 100-meter sprint taking place over a year – it's our job to make sure they don't lose sight of the finish line.

The very nature of a dissertation or thesis means that ākongā are usually supported through individual consultations with their supervisor, and while experiences may vary, most enjoy the process of personalised feedback and feedforward dialogue. Nevertheless, ākongā need to master new practices, in particular "stepping up" in self-management, working autonomously, and criticality, especially as they prepare to develop and frame an original research inquiry. The dissonance ākongā experience when they encounter different expectations of learning engagement at the master's level is further exacerbated when the institute at which they are studying is one which specialises in vocational and applied, industry-oriented learning rather than traditionally academic higher education (Smith, 2006). The Institute of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the setting for this paper, is changing as

more and more providers extend their programme offerings to include masters' degrees and doctorates. What has not always kept pace, Smith (2006) argues, is the level of experience with research supervision of staff in academic departments. The challenges of what McPherson et al. (2017) call "postgraduateness" apply, then, to both staff and ākonga as they move from a structured, supported and clearly defined undergraduate environment to the ambiguously positioned research milieu. Relationship building through individual consultations is suggested as a key tool which supports learning and capability for both parties (Gao & Reid, 2015).

In our organisation, a regional vocational education provider, we have found an additional way to utilise individual consultations as an inclusive and more relational way of supporting our masters ākonga through the research proposal submission, review and approval process. This Commentary describes our new triadic review model, where ākonga, kaimahi (teacher) and a member of the Research and Human Ethics Committee (RHEC) meet *kanohi-ki-te-kanohi* (face-to-face) for consideration and guidance. Triadic encounters traverse a spectrum of fields from management to early childhood education, and contain elements of micro-teaching, a variety of cultural and pedagogical lenses, including *tikanga* and *kaupapa Māori*, and diverse methodologies. We believe that there are multiple elements here that will resonate with ALL and teaching colleagues and may offer a way forward in our evolving tertiary educational landscape.

2. Problematising the previous research approval process

In our organisation, master's ākonga have one semester to complete a dissertation. Prior to this semester, they have completed a foundational literature review and draft research proposal, but must still gain ethical approval, carry out data collection and write a 20,000-word dissertation in a very tight timeframe. The traditional approach to approving master's applications was the same as for staff: two independent reviews to which the applicant was required to respond with documented revisions, and then a full consideration by the RHEC at the monthly meeting. Standard discussion would cover scientific rigour, soundness of methodology, overall ethics, and a mandatory section on *kaupapa Māori* research addressing potential areas of cultural sensitivity – a fundamental criteria in New Zealand as a bi-cultural nation with a commitment to honouring Māori-Crown partnerships. Approval might be granted absolutely; granted subject to a number of conditions or improvements made and checked by the supervisor or a delegated member of the committee; or required to be re-submitted the following month. Only once the submission was approved could the applicant begin any data collection. This rather involved process has sometimes been referred to as "ethics creep" and particularly negatively impacts international ākonga with their timebound visas (Monaghan et al., 2013) who comprise a large proportion of our master's enrolments. In addition to time constraints, the growing numbers of master's ākonga were creating exhaustive RHEC agendas and Committee members were expressing concern that approval of master's research submissions was becoming rushed and taking precedence over other RHEC business and responsibilities.

3. The triadic alternative

In contrast, the triadic process offers faster turnaround, interactive feedback, and a more collaborative environment. Now, once ākonga and supervisor are ready to submit the proposal, the RHEC office assigns a member to review and provide feedback. A few days later, a three-way (triadic) meeting is organised between the ākonga, supervisor, and RHEC reviewer. The provided feedback is discussed, questions answered and solutions explored. Meetings are generally online, using video-conferencing software, and the tone is formal, but friendly. We are finding that this approach can provide greater transparency (Brown et al., 2020) and works to mitigate "them and us" dynamics (Brindley et al., 2020), which often evolve during ethics processes. It is also enabling for English-as-a-Second-Language applicants, who can often describe their projects verbally where they may have struggled with their first attempts to complete the proposal template effectively.

Following the meeting, the supervisor works with the student to make any required changes, which are highlighted for easy identification in the amended document, checked by the supervisor, and then resubmitted for approval by the RHEC representative. We are finding triadic reviews have increased our efficiency, deepened engagement with fewer individual proposals to read, dramatically improved turnaround time, and created a valuable learning experience for all participants (Page & Nyeboer, 2017).

4. Micro-teaching and individual consultations complement the triadic process

Within the process of writing and refining the research proposal, and presenting this proposal online in a triadic meeting, ākongā are supported with continuous personalised feedback, which is a key component of micro-teaching. Micro-teaching generally refers to techniques that support ākongā to develop and refine skills in a controlled environment with feedback from teachers and colleagues (Cavanaugh, 2022). One of the key aspects of micro-teaching that support ākongā throughout this process is receiving personalised feedback from multiple sources. Indeed, Hattie and Timperley (2007) found that interactive personalised feedback is one of the most powerful influences on supporting ākongā to succeed.

In preparation for the triadic meeting, feedback from the supervisor, peers, Māori cultural advisors and members of the RHEC ensures ākongā are supported to have a methodologically, ethically and culturally rigorous dissertation project. Kanohi-ki-te-kanohi meetings with supervisors give personalised feedback, and time in the Research Methodologies class supports peer and group reviews. In addition, since the proposal template requires ākongā to describe how the research could be culturally appropriate, cultural experts are invited to share their knowledge of conducting research that is culturally sound. Ākongā can then reach out to these experts to further their knowledge or view webinars or a collection of text resources. Feedback is therefore emphasised as an interactive, relational process where ākongā are supported to succeed with their research – from conception to enactment (Carless, 2022).

5. Outcomes of the triadic process

The implementation of a simplified and tailored ethics approval process for master's ākongā has yielded significant benefits for all stakeholders involved. This streamlined approach has not only alleviated the stress, anxiety and complexity traditionally associated with the ethics approval process but has also transformed it into a valuable learning experience.

For ākongā, the ability to receive direct one-on-one guidance from the research team has proven invaluable. This face-to-face interaction allows ākongā to gain clear understanding of the requirements and to seek clarification when needed. Previous experiences of gaining ethics approval resulted in ākongā often feeling isolated and uncertain about the expectations placed upon them (Brinsley et al., 2020), which led to increased anxiety (Tomsett et al., 2023). However, having ākongā and supervisor/kaimahi present throughout the process has significantly mitigated these concerns, fostering a more supportive environment.

From the perspective of kaimahi, the streamlined process has brought about greater clarity regarding the necessary steps for research proposal approval. The collaborative effort between ākongā and kaimahi ensures that both parties are fully aware of the requirements, facilitating a more efficient and cohesive process. This approach facilitates more timely data collection, thereby minimizing the risk of delays that could adversely affect assessment deadlines (Davis et al., 2021).

Finally, for the research team the outcomes have been notably positive. By assigning one research member to support a small number of ākongā, the team gains comprehensive understanding of each research project they are supporting. This direct engagement with ākongā allows the research team to better comprehend the intent and scope of the projects, reducing the need for time

consuming exchanges with the wider ethics committee, and fostering a stronger connection with ākongā (Brown et. al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

Ākongā who are completing a postgraduate qualification have limited time available, thus the support strategies we adopt must be effective and student-centred. Further, our own professional practice requires that we continue to reflect on what is working well and what isn't, in the interests of the ongoing success of ākongā. Through such reflection, the processes of gaining ethics approval have changed for the better for ākongā in our organisation. The current triadic process has created a more collaborative, interactive and student-supportive environment to foster learning. Aspects of this process, such as the face-to-face, interactive triadic meetings, and personalised feedback, could be employed by other professional and educational institutes to alleviate student anxiety, stress and cross-cultural misunderstanding when supporting postgraduate ākongā.

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