

More than words

Culturally and environmentally responsive literacies in The Arts

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KEY POINTS

- The visual arts unit discussed in this article offered students a distinctive way to develop and express their relationship to the natural world using culturally embedded multimodal literacy practices.
- The theory of multimodal literacy fits with the way in which meaning making in arts and cultural practices involves more than written or spoken language.
- *The New Zealand Curriculum* presents possibilities and constraints for the literacies of The Arts to be taught in ways that are culturally and environmentally responsive.
- The unit helped students understand that cultural and environmental identities are interrelated.
- Traditional symbols were treated not just as static sources of knowledge or values about an unchanging environment, but students transformed them to articulate contemporary Pasifika environmental identities.

Tuhia ki Te Ao—Write to the Natural World is a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative-funded research project that considers what it might mean to read and write about/to/for the natural world within the secondary school context. This article explores ways in which students communicate a relationship and kinship with the natural world through The Arts. We examine a visual arts unit delivered in the first year of the project, highlighting the culturally responsive approach taken by the teacher, who encouraged his predominantly Pasifika students to explore and express their relationship to the natural world using personally and culturally significant imagery.

The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI)-funded research project Tuhia ki Te Ao—Write to the Natural World begins with the premise that literacy plays a central role in informing, exploring, and articulating student’s understanding of (and attitudes towards) the natural world. The process of developing a definition of literacy acceptable to all members of the research team illuminated the contested nature of the term. From the perspective of the arts, the traditional definition of literacy as reading and writing is problematic. Advocates for arts education are engaged in struggles for diverse knowledge practices to be recognised and valued. Arts educationalists have argued for decades that the arts involve “multiple symbolic forms” (Barton 2014, p. 4) and multiple ways of knowing (Eisner, 2008). Our title, “More than Words”, alludes to the idea that meaning making in arts and cultural practices involves more than written or spoken language. Within Tuhia ki Te Ao this position is supported by the theory of multimodal literacies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000).

The concept of literacy played a central role in the development of the arts curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. We begin this article by briefly reflecting on the extent to which the curriculum offers possibilities for the literacies of the arts to be taught in ways that are culturally and environmentally responsive. In the rest of the article, we discuss the visual arts unit from the first year of the project. The unit, Me Here Now, was developed by Paddy O’Rourke, a visual arts and design teacher at James Cook High School in Manurewa, Auckland. We bring different research specialisations to analyse the unit and the concept of literacy. Michelle specialises in Pasifika education and performance, and Molly in applied theatre and community arts. Michelle argues that schools have a responsibility to recognise and value the diverse,

culturally embedded forms of literacy that their students bring into classrooms. Molly, meanwhile, is interested in the forms of arts practice that teachers can introduce to foster a sense of connection with, and commitment to, the more-than-human world. We combine our perspectives to argue that Me Here Now offered the class of predominantly Pasifika students a distinctive way to develop and express their relationship to the natural world using culturally embedded multimodal literacy practices. In their final artworks, many students combined shapes from the traditional landscapes of their families with patterns and symbols from across Aotearoa and the Pacific region. Drawing on the postcolonial theory of Epeli Hau’ofa (1994), we argue that students were expressing distinctively Pasifika environmental identities.

Literacy and the New Zealand Arts Curriculum: Cultural and environmental responsiveness

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the concept of literacy was mobilised in the struggle for recognition of the distinctive nature of the arts in the curriculum reform process of the 1990s. *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum*, the national curriculum statement for The Arts (Ministry of Education, 2000), frames the arts as literacies, drawing on The New London Group’s (1996) theory of multiliteracies (Thwaites, 1999). The New London Group (1996) argued that for students to participate in an increasingly diverse society, and for a world in which multimedia technologies play a growing role, a reconceptualisation of literacy was needed which valued multiple languages and modes of communication. Presenting the arts as literacies was, at least in part, a deliberate attempt to gain currency with a government focused on the basics of literacy and numeracy, and the importance of technology

to New Zealand’s economic future (Thwaites, 1999). But, adopting multiliteracies as a paradigm for The Arts learning area was also an attempt to prevent these disciplines from becoming optional extras. It supported a case for the disciplines of the arts to be recognised as distinctive “knowledge forms” (Thwaites, 1999, p. 12). The national curriculum statement (Ministry of Education, 2000) presents each discipline as a “specialised language”, emphasising the need for deep, contextualised learning (Thwaites, 1999, p. 10–11). The model of progression is iterative, consistent with the idea that:

To be a fluent perceiver and creator involves knowing what influences you, knowing how you master technique, knowing the medium and mode with which you work intimately, and understanding the social and cultural practice in which art is made and observed. (Barton, 2014, p. 11)

The intention for the national curriculum statement to be a bicultural document and to promote culturally responsive teaching is recognised (Mane-Wheoki, 2003). With its emphasis on linguistic and cultural plurality, multiliteracies were viewed as a potentially postcolonial approach, challenging the dominance of English language and culture in previous curricula (Thwaites, 1999). The curriculum statement stipulates that art forms and genres from different cultures and subcultures should be recognised as “texts or commentaries that reflect history, tradition, and innovation”, that a deeply contextualised understanding of *toi Māori* is essential, and that a range of cultures contribute to New Zealand’s culture and identity (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 9). Mane-Wheoki (2003), however, critiques *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* for being a “very Pākehā, Eurocentric document” (p. 88); implicitly positioning European arts as the cultural norm, limiting the possibility for its pluralist vision to be realised. The need for teaching and learning in The Arts to be culturally responsive is emphasised strongly in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) (*NZC*), which defines The Arts as “powerful forms of expression that recognise, value, and contribute to the unique bicultural and multicultural character of Aotearoa New Zealand” (*NZC*, p. 20). Siteine (2010) argues of the *NZC* that “both the vision for young people and the principles, which embody what is important and desirable in the curriculum, detail the hope that students can clarify their own identities in relation to their particular heritages and that they are positive in their own identity” (p. 3). However, the decentralisation of curriculum decision making means that the extent to which teaching in The Arts is responsive to the cultural identities of students depends on the values that underpin curriculum development at each individual school, along with individual teacher knowledge and expertise.

What about response to the environment? *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* proposes that: “Arts education enables students to generate ideas about themselves, their experiences *and their environment* and to express and communicate them in a variety of artistic forms” [emphasis added] (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 10). The learning examples given for each discipline include ways of exploring the relationship between art-making and the natural world by creating works about environmental issues; reflecting on the use of materials (including the body), and learning techniques for representing natural and everyday environments. However, *NZC* makes no direct reference to the environment in the section on The Arts. Instead, ecological sustainability is identified as one of the values schools are expected to integrate into their curriculum (*NZC*, p. 10). Studies indicate, however, that efforts to integrate sustainability across the curriculum have had limited impact at secondary level, where learning required for assessment tends to be prioritised (Eames, Cowie, & Bolstad, 2008). In the light of the strong school focus on biculturalism, diversity, and culturally responsive pedagogy at James Cook, it makes sense that Paddy O’Rourke approached the task of integrating the ecological into his teaching by relating it to cultural identity.

Me Here Now: Exploring the interrelationship of culture and environment

Paddy O’Rourke studied printmaking before training as an art teacher. He has worked at James Cook since graduating with a teaching degree 6 years ago. He is Pākehā, with Irish and Scottish heritage, and grew up in Mount Eden where he now lives with his young family. In an initial interview, Paddy explained how, in addition to his printmaking training, the students’ cultural backgrounds are the main reference point for his teaching. This was evident in his approach to planning and delivering his unit for Tuhia ki Te Ao. The initial student brief was to: make an artwork based on the environment you live in, and your culture. The unit was designed for a class of 25 Year 9 students. Our observations and interviews focused on six of these students. The majority of students at James Cook are of Māori and Pasifika heritage and live in the neighbourhoods immediately surrounding the school. Our six focus students all identified with Māori or Pacific cultures, or both. Most of their parents had migrated to Auckland from other parts of Aotearoa or the Pacific region.

During the first week of the unit, Paddy showed the students artworks that presented culturally located perspectives on the New Zealand landscape. From the subsequent whole-class discussion he judged that the class

was most interested in Buck Nin. In the final lesson of that week, he modelled an approach to analysing Nin’s use of visual elements in his 1993 painting, *Bridging the Gap*. Students then responded to a series of prompt questions to develop their individual interpretations of that painting, which were shared with the class. The first research observation took place at the start of the second week of the unit. In this lesson, students were set the task of identifying elements of their whakapapa and pepeha, including where their parents/grandparents came from, the cultures that were important to them, and their significant mountain and body of water. The second part of the task was to search for images online to represent their culture, where they were from, and the place where they lived now. As students searched for and selected images, it became apparent that few saw themselves as being *from* Manurewa. When questioned by Paddy about the images they had selected, it was evident that most students had never been to Wiri Mountain or Weymouth Beach, and many felt no sense of connection to those places. The places where they spent time were the mall, the swimming pool, the school, the supermarket. Most students moved quickly on to finding and selecting cultural motifs and patterns. The images they selected included motifs from traditional clothing, artworks, and flags, but also contemporary tattoo and design works. Records of the subsequent lesson show that Paddy responded to this by shifting the brief slightly. The reworded brief asked students to research and find images to represent the elements of their whakapapa that were important to them and their whānau. They needed to combine shapes representing a significant mountain, river, sea, island, or whare; motifs or patterns representing their connection to those elements; and images or text expressing how they felt about the place or places they were from. They could choose to incorporate traditional motifs, patterns, or arts practices such as *tapa* design or *tatau*, and/or contemporary imagery.

It is possible to consider cultural responsiveness in the classroom with the following continuum in mind:

- Level 1: Surface level—greetings, pronunciation
- Level 2: Environmental—the walls reflect diversity
- Level 3: Curriculum—a diverse range of texts and authors are represented
- Level 4: Pedagogical—teaching style is varied to reflect diversity and to cater to specific cultural needs
- Level 5: Assessment—students are assessed in culturally diverse and appropriate contexts. (Johansson, 2011)

In this framework, Paddy’s response to his students’ apparent desire to meld the traditional and contemporary imagery reflects high levels of cultural responsiveness. He used a diverse range of visual texts and teaching materials (from Māori and Pasifika indigenous images through to pop culture), responding to their learning preferences and allowing them to produce finished artworks that built on their cultural capital. From their artistic choices, Paddy could see that the students were confident with the idea of art expressing cultural identity. In this unit, he built on this by introducing the idea that cultural and environmental identities are interrelated.

Tuhia ki Te Ao has adapted Bill Green’s model of 3D literacy, which includes operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of literacy. The project’s adaptation of the model is based on the argument that literacy practices play a part in social, cultural, and *ecological* understandings, attitudes and actions (Figure 1). The model is depicted as three interconnected spirals, representing the ways in which the dimensions can flow together, rather than developing in linear progression. This model helps to illuminate the ways in which Paddy brought an ecological focus to the unit through specific multimodal literacy practices, which is the focus of the rest of this section.

The next lesson observation took place in the middle of the unit. The lesson focused on Nin’s painting, *Banner Moon Land Protest Series* (1975–76). Students began by

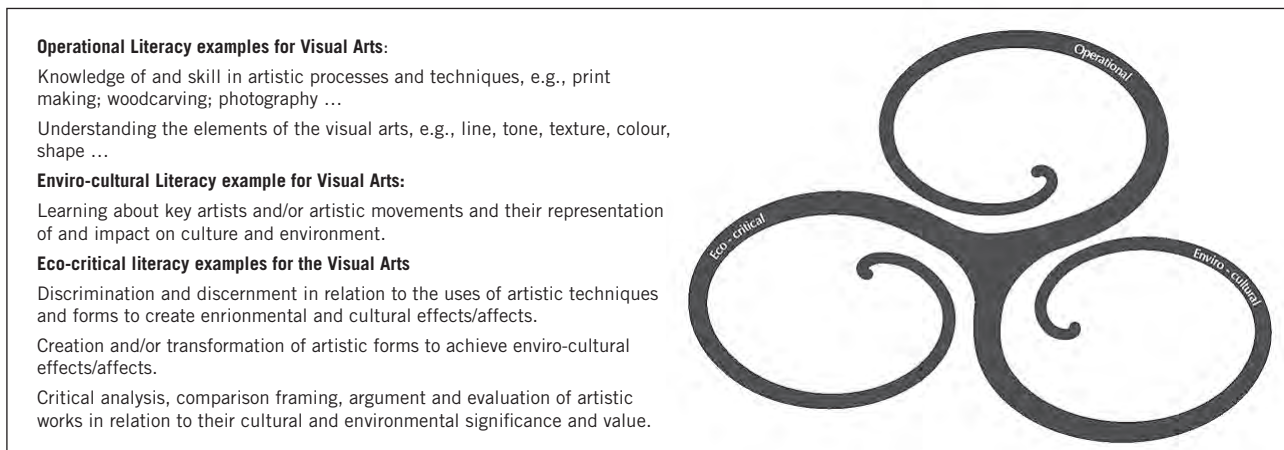


FIGURE 1. ADAPTED 3D LITERACY MODEL FOR VISUAL ARTS

individually identifying and describing Nin’s use of visual elements in this painting. In visual arts, understanding materials, elements, conventions, processes, and principles can be seen as operational literacy. Drawing their attention to a large projection of the artwork, Paddy asked the class to identify the visual elements Nin uses to represent features of the natural environment:

Paddy projects *Banner Moon* on the board and gets them to look closely at use of shape, pattern, texture and line and think about what features of the landscape or environment they represent. He points to a circle as an example... the moon, he prompts. He asks about what the straight line in the middle might be—“the line between two cultures” says Niko. Paddy directs them back to the ecological: “If it is a landscape, what might it be?” ... the horizon... Rangi and Papa... [extract from research observation notes]

Paddy then highlighted Nin’s use of visual elements to convey a culturally embedded perspective on, and relationship to, the land. He drew their attention to the way in which the painting is composed to create a perspective on a landscape. He showed the students a picture of a taurapa (carved canoe stern), to help them identify the shape in the foreground of the painting, through which the stylised landscape is viewed. He asked what this might represent and, to prompt them, asked about what the title of the painting means. This led to a discussion of the context of the painting and the land protests of the 1970s in which Nin was involved. Paddy explained how Nin uses the shape of the taurapa in the foreground to comment on the issue of Māori land ownership. Interpreting how artists use particular elements to convey a perspective on, or relationship with, the natural world is one example of enviro-cultural literacy in art.

Enviro-cultural literacy involves recognising, selecting and applying available cultural forms and practices for cultural and environmental effect. On reflection, the ecological focus of this dimension of literacy could have been extended by building on the whole-class activity described above. For example, providing photos of actual

plants, animals, elements and landscape features used symbolically in Nin’s painting and then challenging students to locate as many as possible. Students could then choose one and research its ecological and cultural significance. With an awareness of the context of the painting, students could build their own theory about what the form represents within the composition of the painting. This task might encourage students to make informed choices about the symbolic use of natural forms in their own artworks. For example, a Tongan turtle design was integrated into one student’s final work (see Figure 2). Enviro-cultural literacy might be developed by relating this symbol to knowledge about sea turtles and their significance to the ecologies and cultures of many Polynesian peoples. Robert Melchior Figueroa (2011) uses the term *environmental identity* to encapsulate the way “cultural identities, ways of life, and self-perceptions ... are connected to a given groups’ physical environment” (para. 2). His concept of environmental heritage refers to: “the meanings and symbols of the past that frame values, practices, and places peoples wish to preserve as members of a community” (Figueroa, 2011, para. 2). Artworks and creative practices can be forms of environmental heritage, expressing and sustaining environmental identities. There was potential in the unit to further expand students’ awareness that traditional patterns and motifs express the ecological knowledge, relationships, and values.

Many of the students in Paddy’s class came from families that have migrated from other parts of Aotearoa or the Pacific. Over the course of the unit, some students developed a more informed awareness of the physical environments from which their families had migrated. Completing their pepeha meant students found out the names of mountains, bodies of water and other elements of the land that are significant to their whānau (see for example Figure 3 where the student has incorporated these elements into the composition). Paddy asked them to find images of those actual places so that they could

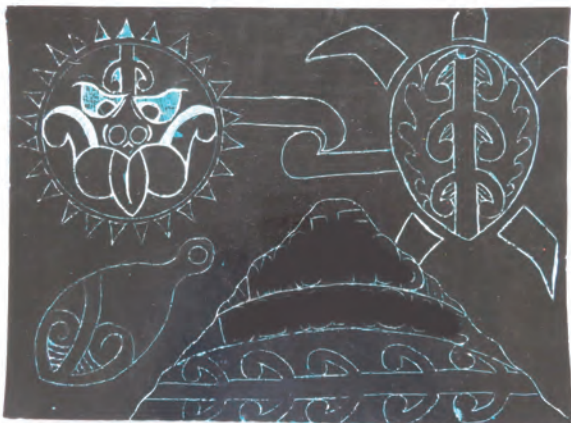


FIGURE 2. STUDENT FINAL ARTWORK



FIGURE 3. STUDENT WORK IN PROGRESS

incorporate the specific shapes from those environments into their artworks (see detailed outline of the student's maunga in Figure 4). For many of the students, cultural background is central to their sense of identity. This task moved the students towards an understanding of physical environments and cultural identities as inherently interconnected.

The eco-critical dimension of literacy involves understanding how forms and representations might be critiqued, contested, and transformed for different cultural and environmental purposes, interests, and contexts. Transformation in the theory of multiliteracies happens in the process of creating, recreating or recontextualising, reshaping and reconstructing meanings (The New London Group, 1999, p. 74). Buck Nin, for example, transforms traditional Māori symbolism, combined with stylised sky and earth forms, for the contemporary context, commenting on land issues that came to a head in the 1970s. Traditional symbols are not just static sources of knowledge or values about an unchanging environment, they can be transformed or recontextualised to articulate contemporary environmental identities.

Constructing Pasifika environmental identities

Within the Tuhia ki Te Ao project we take up the notion of relationship with the more than human world that Pasifika people have traditionally been aware of and are now rearticulating in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. Since Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) forged an understanding of "Our Sea of Islands", there has been a growing consciousness and subsequent articulation of the identities of Pasifika people in connection with, and concern for, the world around them. It is worth remembering that the term *Pasifika* is an artificial concept and comes loaded with political and cultural baggage specific to Aotearoa.

"Pasifika" is defined as a collective term used to refer to people of Pacific heritage or ancestry who have migrated to or been born in Aotearoa New Zealand. Pasifika include recent migrants or first, second and subsequent generations of New Zealand born Pasifika men, women and children of single or mixed heritage (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Hau'ofa argues that "although our historical and cultural traditions are important elements of a regional identity, they are not in themselves sufficient to sustain that identity, for they exclude those whose ancestral heritage is elsewhere, and those who are growing up in non-traditional environments" (Hau'ofa, 1998, p. 405). Because of the Pacific diaspora, many cities in the Pacific Islands are now home to people of different cultures and ethnicities, however Aotearoa, and particularly Tāmaki Makaurau—Auckland, is notable for its diversity and density of multiethnic communities.

These notions of diasporic communities and non-traditional environments are very applicable to Paddy's students attempting to negotiate their local and ethnic identities through the visual arts. We suggest that, because of their non-traditional identities, students felt able to choose visual representations of Aotearoa-based Pasifika identities. One student chose to repeatedly replicate traditional Fijian *tapa*-patterning (see Figure 5); another mixed Samoan *tatau* designs with Tongan turtles and Māori koru patterns (see Figure 2). The ability to use or transform artistic forms to articulate a uniquely Pasifika identity, embedded in environmentally conscious imagery, is an example of the students developing eco-critical literacy.

Conclusions

Tuhia ki Te Ao sets out to address the needs of all learners as part of culturally responsive pedagogy which recognises place, environment, and sustainability as central to cultural identity and literacy development

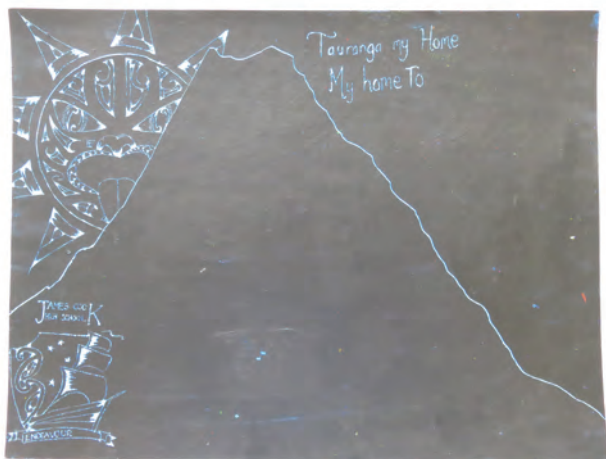


FIGURE 4. STUDENT WORK IN PROGRESS

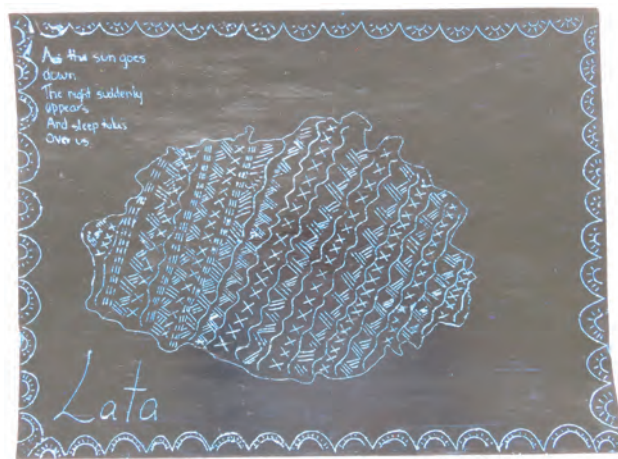


FIGURE 5. STUDENT FINAL ARTWORK

in Aotearoa New Zealand. Reflecting the aspirations of New Zealand's curriculum for The Arts, and the established values of the school, Me Here Now integrated the ecological into the visual arts by relating it to cultural identity. The visual art unit developed by Paddy O'Rourke for his students at James Cook High School treated cultural and environmental identity as interrelated. He approached the task of exploring environmental relationships and identities with a strong commitment to culturally responsive classroom practice. Paddy's unit developed students' operational and environmental visual literacy as they selected and combined shapes, patterns, and motifs to represent their relationship with culturally significant places. They also started to understand the ways in which other artists, like Buck Nin, use and transform traditional imagery to represent culturally located perspectives on land. We argue that through the multiple modalities of the arts, students can engage with aspects of their "environmental heritage" that exist in non-linguistic forms (Figuroa, 2011, p. 2). In their final artworks, most students layered and fused imagery from a range of Pasifika cultures. We suggest this could be interpreted as an exploration and articulation of contemporary environmental identities. We see potential in the idea that this kind of culturally responsive creative process might contribute to the active construction of a sense of environmental identity based on a connection and commitment to the Pacific region (Hau'ofa, 1994).

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