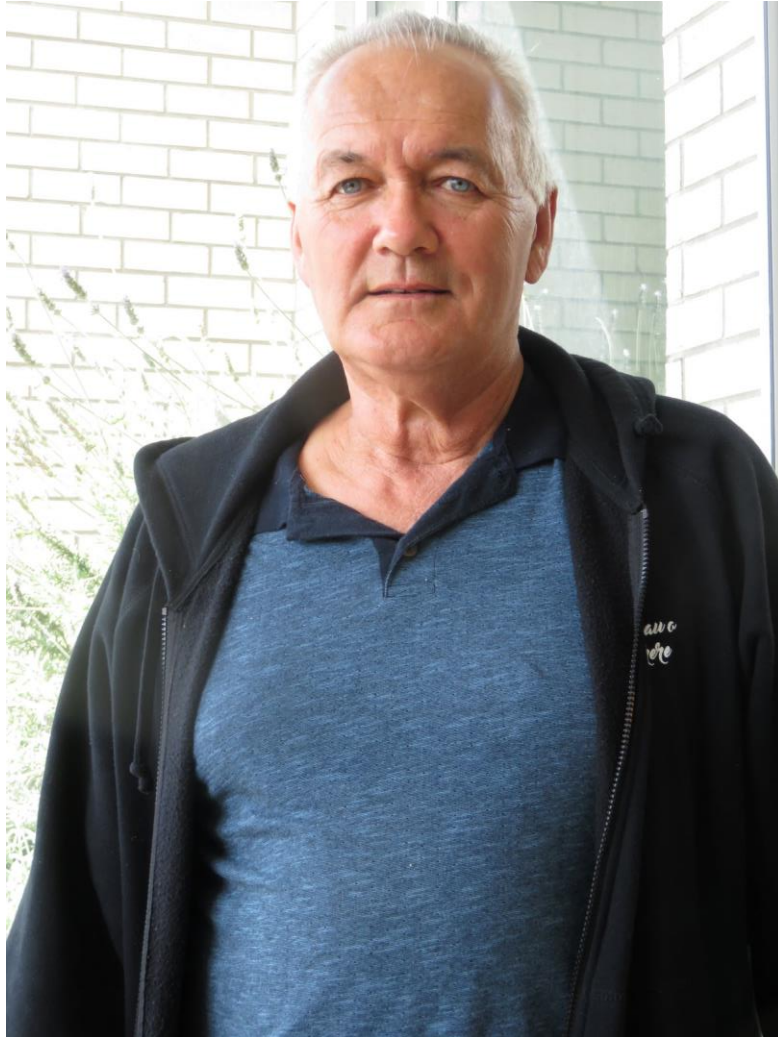


Phil Heeney



“If the Shoe Fits, Wear It”

Phil Heeney is Ngāti Porou. He was born in Te Tairāwhiti. He grew up in the Ruatorea area and later went to trade school in Te Wai Pounamu, where he became a boiler maker. When Phil returned to live in Te Tairāwhiti during a time of overt social turmoil, he became determined to establish better educational opportunities for the tamariki of the rohe based on their culture, language and on ideas he attributes to educators such as Paolo Freire. As a result, in the early 1990s Phil led the establishment of Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Waiū o Ngāti Porou. This school is an outstanding success and Phil as Tumuaiki supports and mentor other kura kaupapa in Te Tairāwhiti and nationally.

Phil said the influence of Freire first affected him when Makareta Tawaroa (a Sister of St Joseph from Whanganui) came to Ruatorea and ran a Structural Analysis seminar. She brought very new concepts, and values systems, a new pedagogy, but this really struck a chord for Phil. Phil had worked with trade unions and explored Marxism; he had worked with gang issues looking for positive alternatives, and was exposed to the Rastafarian movement in his own family. He found something useful in different ideologies but it had always been a case of the shoe not fitting properly. This new analysis was like a shoe that fitted with his experience and he could wear it.

After Makareta's visit the people who had participated in workshops with her focused on a strategy of building groups of local people with a Freirian perspective relevant to the situation of tangata whenua in Te Tairāwhiti.

They were inspired to travel to Whanganui and work more on the ideas with Sister Makareta. Phil, in particular, pursued this style of learning and worked with Father John Curnow (one of the leading Freire exponents in the 1970s and 80s) for a period of two years. The education process involved participating in workshops and detailed reflection together at the end of each day.

Phil began to teach the ideas back home and after two and a half years he finally read the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He believes that if he had read it beforehand, he wouldn't have understood it, or had anything to hang it on. Although even so (like many of us), he needed to read it several times.

Phil began to tweak the process he had been given to make it useful for the tangata whenua at home.

Catholic priest John Curnow had given him the "white NZ analysis": of the economic and political structures, and where the power lies. John clarified the obligations of groups with power with regard to the powerless.

But Phil was working with angry Māori and changed the process to explore the role of the powerless in struggling for liberation. This meant a lot of Te Tiriti work and cultural analysis. He found useful tools for this work via Makareta Tawaroa and Rob Cooper, and he added his own ideas to cover the gaps in the analysis. At this time there were many TOPS groups (training schemes for unemployed) with whom he led Te Tiriti education sessions from a structural perspective.

For about 3 years in the 1980s there was an intense, rising awareness of Te Tiriti and related issues, and then Phil saw it reach a saturation point. He saw a whole new breed of very articulate Māori people come through, and this led to a diminished demand for a greater and wider consciousness of the issues. It was as if Māori perceived these articulate and academic, presentable Māori people as their salvation. Phil became aware of needing to go back to step one all the time in the analysis work, and of the shortage of concrete models. He saw the risks of theorising in this

context, particularly the risk of co-option. At the same time, he was having a personal experience of his children being within an education system which he didn't believe in.

The Pen or the Sword?

In the face of the massive social dislocation in the 1980s he saw two ways of Māori breaking the cycle, the pen or sword:

“So I thought I'll try the pen first and if that doesn't work the sword is always there. But once you have drawn the first sword you can't control it and say that's enough. You don't own it and cannot control the sword, it keeps going.”

Therefore, for all those reasons he chose to get active in education. Trying to transform the system was too hard because there were and are people who have stakes in “what is”. Phil noted that they become aggressive when you challenge the institution they are part of.

Phil was posing questions and problems but some people didn't want to see it. So the next strategy was to disregard others and network with those who wanted a different approach. They decided to build a school as a cultural base at Ruatorea.

This was a challenge because, as Phil puts it,

“Māori culture has assimilated the trappings of the capitalist economy and it finds itself within hierarchical power structures such as the education system. I wanted to move away from the hierarchical model but it's been very hard. People kept saying, ‘Where's the leader? You're the boss, so sound like a boss, act like a boss’.”

Phil described how the power brokers in the community have to learn to understand that they are just one person among others who have equal hopes and dreams which have been submerged in enculturation and poverty. “We are trying to reclaim the strongest thing in the Māori culture. This has a utopian aspect,”

He said that to avoid horizontal violence, which is already an issue, they don't confront power brokers directly but allow them to expose themselves. He quoted the whakataukī, Te kawau anake – ko au, ko au, ko au: it's the shag alone who shouts out – me, me, me.

The Value Base

Phil has an analysis of the meaning of tikanga in relation to the colonisation of tangata whenua values which links to Paulo Freire's concept of domestication. “The basis of pure tikanga is correctness. If tikanga is used as a disempowering tool, it loses its root meaning and purpose it becomes domesticating tool. It is a matter of what is tika.”

Phil talked about how the tamariki need to know their Te Tiriti rights and how to critically question. This is as vital to their identity as excellence at kapahaka and waiata.

We asked Phil if he considered himself an educator.

“I don’t consider myself an educator. I don’t know what educationalists are talking about, but I realise it must be rubbish because I don’t get it, and we’re really doing well without it!”

Phil said that the academic world uses the knowledge to keep themselves separate from everyone else and give themselves their *raison d’être*.

Te Waiū o Ngāti Porou is based on concepts of shared responsibility, plus equal and valued contribution.

“We have the responsibility to ensure another generation does not grow up without their potential in terms of being Ngāti Porou, being Māori and being good people.”

The tamariki are urged to do what they want to do when they leave. They can participate in the wider economy if they wish, or maintain the marae culture if they wish, but the kura works to instill a value system about care and respect for people, and for the environment. Phil steers them away from the police force or working for the Government “because if the Government is the problem how does becoming part of them make you part of the solution?”

As he says, Central Government is not necessary to breed success in Ruatorea, where they had no Government funding for the kura for years.

“We decided we would set up our own structure rather than be dependent on Government. We started with old buildings and it is surprising what you can do without lots of money.”

Maintaining the Kaupapa

“When we started it was hard but we had a different type of person who came aboard, but now we get accolades and it attracts another type of person. There are people who pave the way and people who come aboard to embellish the paved way; these are the phases of development. I worry about the original values being submerged in bureaucracy. We can work with the system as far as it’s helpful to us, we don’t fight them for the sake of it, but we carry on with what we want to do and we keep the Ministry of Ed at arm’s length,”

However, one of the fruits that have come through is that the detractors have to objectify and acknowledge the kura’s very positive educational results.

Phil believes the keys to success were beginning with no resources and no support from the Ministry of Education, and no external support that they couldn’t control.

With regard to the Government and Ministry of Education, Phil and kura whānau ask, “If you are prepared to support our way good, but if not we will do it the hard way. If we are successful what has been the key? The key component is that they (the Ministry) weren’t involved.”

Some of the parents at the kura have high level roles in education, national contracts and high qualifications and are seen as experts. They are seen as experts in comparison to Phil whose qualifications are as a boilermaker from Marsden Pt.

However, Phil’s strategy is to build support for the kura methodology from a groundswell of local opinion, which he sees as essential.

He believes that the person at the back of shed having a toke has a valid contribution to make as well as any ‘expert’.

“People who don’t speak out all have their dreams and aspirations. One or two articulate individuals cannot speak for them. The articulate and wealthy have other options. Many people here have no options. History shows that people with options will exercise them when they choose to, they can leave or not, but we work with the others, 90% of people on the coast who are not going anywhere else.”

Phil decided to focus on the young. He said they work with young people because the older people have too many stakes in being who they are and the mana issues are powerful in Māori culture. If it was perceived that he was an educator to older people, some could see it as infringement on their mana whereas, with the tamariki, you can shape their values. No education system is neutral, it is all about the values.

Applying Values at the Kura

Other people see Te Waiū children as different but the staff doesn’t see this; they are too close. Yet he believes there are differences.

He thought one example of difference might be the way a 7-year-old and Form 6 student play handball together really seriously. There is no problem with age mixing except for the artificial divisions, delineations and values that have been created and instilled into kids’ heads about age from other schools.

“We’re one whanau. The boy/girl thing is like a brother/sister relationship, no one makes eyes amongst themselves, that is for kids from other schools. 12- and 17-year-olds are in learning groups and work on projects together with no self-consciousness, assisting each other for mutual development”

Children who come from other schools bring some issues typical of the school system. Some can join in easily but others have the baggage of institutions where they were previously taught. Phil sees this as an ongoing issue as there is a growing demand to join the school at the higher levels and older children are more fixed.

In terms of global youth media, the school tries to give a critique in terms of who's losing and who's benefiting, and what are the underpinning values.

“Hollywood culture is very powerful, all we can give is an alternative critique and value system. The global media culture has a monopoly on cool. We ask ‘where does our identity come from? What is the definition of right and wrong and good and bad in all of these issues that are at stake?’”

The kura is only now going right through to seventh form with kids who will have grown up with a different paradigm and are conscious of the power of media.

“We are all being re shaped by our daily experience. We are all products of our environment.”

Te Reo is the only language at Te Waiū and they create their own teachers. The educational process is to challenge people's thinking and broaden their existing perspectives, not give solutions. This works with parents and hapū decisions if they are there with good will.

“The hard issues are the things that people don't say, not what they do say. We have to realise that marae decision making is colonised. It's about ‘agree or disagree’, and you don't become richer, you don't learn.”

The Long Haul

Phil sees the conscientisation process as ongoing. He has seen some people go to a workshop on Freirian ideas and be blown away; they want to sell all their goods and pledge to do all these great things. Within a year they have been sucked back into mainstream culture, because of the sheer pressure and lack of ongoing support for values that felt so powerful at the time of the workshop.

“You have to make a lot of conscious decisions; it is an everyday thing to constantly check yourself and ask, am I still on the pathway? What is it that shows me what I am or I am not? It is isolating for politicised people, because there is a strong academic dimension to Freirian thought as well as the heartfelt and spiritual dimension. The arguments for and against these ideas are very clever. We need to sit and challenge and be challenged but it is rare to sit down and go to that level and support each other.”

He said he could talk to some groups about some issues but not always at the depth they had years ago when they started the analysis work with Makareta.

“Most of us are more measured in how we use our energy than we were in the 80s. We go back to Base One all the time to but what has actually changed?”

Phil still sees co-option of Māori culture as a threat at the highest level of knowledge, e.g., the way that whakataukī are used by Government Departments which demeans the whole culture.

The greatest obstacle Phil has run into is institutionalised religion because it doesn't have to be rational.

“Whatever profound argument you try to explore or good points you put up, they can just say to your question ‘It’s the devil.’ It is a totally irrational approach and if you challenge they all want to pray for you.”

He noticed that when he took people through the cultural/political/economic analysis, they were ready to get out and fight but when they got to religious analysis things came unstuck.

Phil quotes Fernando, a Filipino Freirean activist: “There are things you can do – and things you will do.” Radical action is possible but the “will you?” comes down to what you have been conditioned not to do. He sees similarities within Māori culture

“A lot comes down to religious ideas we have taken in. If you take the analysis back to roots of the great religions you can see that once religion is co-opted by governing structures it’s becomes domesticating. There is a powerful relationship between states and religion, they coexist. The same is true for trade unions that are also part of the state system. The yang of the yin.”

For Phil, an approach that names gender or class as the problem in isolation will not be useful, it’s about all the issues. He reminds us about the value system of the “primitives”, the sophistication of aboriginal world views.

He still finds the Freirian concepts he started with to be vital.

“You have to change what you can, we are looking at a wānanga as a natural evolution from the kura but I don’t have a 5-year or a 5-day plan. I do know the values and principles and that good doesn’t come out of rubbish. The value struggles have happened here and some cannot see a correlation between outcomes and processes.

People are still captured by the imposition of top-down process, and the belief that some are born to think as visionaries and others born to toil!

It is still about empowerment and when people are disempowered it is hard. They believe they can’t contribute, they expect the teacher to fix it. But the community is changing.”