Chapter 4

Creating Virtual Marae: An Examination of How Digital Technologies Have Been Adopted by Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Māori people have a history of adaptation of new technologies. In recent decades Māori innovators have taken and adapted digital technologies for a range of purposes that can be broadly defined as educational. In this chapter, the authors examine three cases where groups have utilised, and ‘colonised’, a range of particular technologies in order to build capacity for their tribal groups and wider community. In this way they use technologies as tools to overcome some of the financial, social and political deprivation caused by historic and continuing colonisation. The authors initially locate their exploration in a discussion of the historical context of colonisation, Māori movement towards self-determination, and in a discussion of Māori values and approaches to knowledge. They then present the three cases, beginning with one from a formal tertiary education programme (a Māori one), then examining a tribal initiative for language revitalisation and finally looking at a national use of digital media through Māori television.1

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INTRODUCTION

A marae is a communal meeting ground of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. Long before the advent of westerners and western technology to New Zealand the marae with its whare whakairo, the carved meeting house, has served as an open access library of histories, genealogical connections, philosophical and social values, and a site for discussion about current events. Carvings, weavings and other decorative elements within the meeting house recorded the multiplicity of records, stories and debates that were important for the well-being and development of the people. In addition, in a society built on the value of the spoken word, the flow of oratory and debate developed a common space where knowledge (practical, philosophical and of the simple gossip variety) could be shared. In some ways the processes of storing and accessing knowledge were more like the contemporary technological web (weaving together discussion, documentary artefacts, video and music) the traditional libraries of western knowledge systems.

When the missionaries arrived, Māori embraced the new technology of print (as they had other new technologies such as steel tools for carving and the plough for farming). Their acquisition of literacy was extraordinarily rapid. In many regions during the first sixty years of contact the percentage of literate Māori outnumbered that of literate settlers (Reid, 1935). The processes of colonisation produced big changes in the conditions of the indigenous people of these mountainous volcanic islands that some have called ‘devastating landslides’, in particular the taking of Māori land and the consequent economic and political marginalisation of Māori people, seriously interrupting Māori adaptations of the newly encountered technologies, including writing and print. However, although the effects of colonisation remain, in recent decades Māori have been effective in asserting their right to self-determination in a range of spheres, including language revitalisation and education. As Māori have moved out of the margins (Spivak, 1996), where they had been relegated, to reclaim the centre, they have reached out to utilise modern technologies, including digital, to attain their goals of well-being (hauora) and self-determination (tino rangatiratanga).

In this chapter we are particularly interested in the ways Māori have taken and adapted digital technologies for a range of broadly defined educational purposes. We explore three cases, each of which illustrates Māori utilisation of different aspects of digital technologies to enhance education. To extend the topographical metaphor in the concept of ‘digital divide’ we offer the proposition that in terms of indigenous development within Aotearoa New Zealand, digital technology creates less of a divide than an opportunity to repair some of the devastating landslides created by colonisation.

In this context we call the words of the late Monte Ohia, a Māori leader in both mainstream political and traditional arenas:

*If we turn our back on e-learning, we turn our back on the future. With the advent, or rather avalanche, of technology now and, increasingly, in the future, Māori need to be in the position of exploring and using it with confidence, as well as predicting what may be just around the corner. It will not be helpful to be either reactionaries to the new trends or, worse still, spectators. ... Māori have enough entrepreneurial spirit and opportunism to be at the cutting edge of technological innovation and creativity, and lead in its engagement with Māori learners and resource people. This knowledge and skill will not jump out of the sky at us. In the best traditions of [the creation story of] Tawhaki, we have to retrieve it in cooperation with those who already have it.* (Ohia, 2004).