

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy) – Claudia Faletolu
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Claudia Faletolu:

Karakia Timatanga | Opening Incantation

Tukua te wairua kia rere ki ngā taumata
Hai ārahi i ā tātou mahi
Me tā tātou whai i ngā tikanga a rātou mā
Kia mau kia ita
Kia kore ai e ngaro
Kia pupuri
Kia whakamaua Kia tina! TINA! Hui e! TĀIKI E!

English translation:

Allow one's spirit to exercise its potential
To guide us in our work as well as in our pursuit of our ancestral traditions
Take hold and preserve it
Ensure it is never lost
Hold fast
Secure it
Draw together!
Affirm!

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Claudia, although I think I've just been welcomed.

Claudia Faletolu:

Thank you. Yeah, it was a beautiful opportunity to open the session today with a traditional Māori karakia or incantation.

Michelle Ockers:

Would you like to tell us a little bit more about what karakia (incantation) are, why they're important, and that specific karakia (incantation)?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah, so for me and my culture, being Māori, karakia (incantation) are really important for us because they are direct links to our ancestors and they are their words that guide us every day. So we karakia (incantation) every day for anything at any time.

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely. I've gotten quite used to hearing karakia (incantation) in my work with Waka Kotahi but I know it's an unusual opening for our guests. So I wanted to honor that very important part of the culture, which is the basis of today's conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

So in our last episode, 103, we spoke with Zoe Freeman, the Strategic Advisor in the Centre for Learning and Development at Waka Kotahi about how their learning strategy was developed. And people are welcome just to stick with Claudia and I in this conversation before you go back and listen to the conversation with Zoe, if you haven't yet listened to it. But they do go really nicely together. So I would recommend people listen to both. And of course, you've been working alongside Zoe and the team at Waka Kotahi. But before we get into that, Claudia, I think you have a really interesting background and I think it would be a nice scene setting for you to introduce us to yourself.

Claudia Faletolu:

Oh,

Tēnā koutou katoa

Tēna koe Michelle

E te whenua, te turanga o Jagera-tēnā koe, o Turrbal-tēnā koe. E ngā tāngata whenua i tēnei wāhi o Manjin-karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai.

Ko wai au?

Nō Ohaeawai ōku tīpuna

Ko Te Ahuahu tōku maunga

Ko Waitangi tōku awa

Ko Ngātokimatawhaorua tōku waka

Ko Parawhenua tōku marae

Ko Ngāti Korohue rātou ko Te Uri Taniwha, ko Ngāti Hineira, ko Ngāti Hine ōku hapu

Ko Ngā Puhī tōku ahau

Ko Claudia Faletolu tōku ingoa

E tika ana te kōrero i ō tātou tīpuna, e kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiatea.

Nō reira tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

English translation:

Greetings everyone

Greetings to you Michelle

To the land, the standing place of Jagera-greetings to you, of Turrbal-greetings to you. Call to us, call to us, call to us.

Who am I?

My ancestors are from Ohaeawai

Te Ahuahu is my mountain

Waitangi is my river

Ngātokimatawhaorua is my canoe

Parawhenua is my tribal home

Ngāti Korohue, Te Uri Taniwha, Ngāti Hineira, and Ngāti Hine are my sub-tribes

I am Ngā Puhī (my tribe)

My name is Claudia Faletolu

The words are true of our ancestors, I will never be lost for I am a seed of Rangiatea (ancestral homeland)

Therefore greetings to you all

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

Tēnā koe (greetings) Michelle, thank you, ngā mihinui ki a koe (thank you very much). Thanks so much for having me today. And before I get into more stuff, I just wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the Jagera people and the Turrbal people who are the traditional custodians of Manjin, Brisbane, the land on which we are on at the moment, which is really cool. I also pay honor and respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging, because they're the holders and the gatekeepers of their memories, their traditions, their cultures, and hopes for their people. So huge mihi (greetings and acknowledgement) to them.

Claudia Faletolu:

So my name is Claudia, I'm Ngā Puhī, from the Ngā Puhī tribe in the North Island of New Zealand, Aotearoa. So I was born in a beautiful little place called Kaikohe in the far North district, right at the top of the North Island, what we call the Bay of Islands. And I grew up mainly in Wellington, in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, the capital city of Aotearoa.

So I did all my schooling down there and I ended up heading into teachers college, because that was my jam, teaching. And through my life, I've sort of always had a touchstone of education in my life. And I was lucky enough, I've married my soulmate, my best mate, his name's Moli. We've been together for over 25 years and we've two pretty awesome kids. We've got a daughter, Aroha, she's 27 and then our son Elijah, who's 20. So hubby and I have recently moved from New Zealand, Aotearoa and we live permanently here in Brisbane now.

Michelle Ockers:

Which of course is where I live as well, which is lovely to have you in my neighbourhood, Claudia.

Claudia Faletolu:

I know, it's awesome. And we're really enjoying just a different, more relaxed lifestyle, a better sort of work life balance. So that's sort of where I'm from and what I'm about. I'm very focused on whānau (family), very focused on family and everything I do is for the greater good of my family and my peoples.

Michelle Ockers:

And alongside that and the rich cultural understanding of course of lived experience that you bring to the body of work we're going to talk about today, you also have strong experience and skills in OD, Organisational Development and Learning and Development as well. So this is really a nice blend of experience that you've brought to the Waka Kotahi Centre for Learning and Development, Claudia.

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah, like I mentioned before, I went to teachers college, I was always really good at looking after all the cousins, growing up in really big families, we have loads and loads of cousins. So looking after them sort of led me into teachers college. So I did child education and then I pivoted to adult education. Not that they were much better to teach, but...

Michelle Ockers:

Just different kinds of challenges, right?

Claudia Faletolu:

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

Yeah. Just different kinds of conversations. So pivoted to adult education, that's kind of how I got led into Learning and Development. And then from there a natural progression into organizational development and all the while I've always had my culture, being Māori and doing Māori mahi or Māori work alongside it all the time. And for most of that, that has been sort of unofficial, not a part of my technical role, but I've always been called on for it. So it's been a fine balance of trying to find, when I can't sort of do that mahi (work), when I'm really there for L&D and OD, which has been a challenge.

Michelle Ockers:

And it's not an uncommon challenge is my understanding. I was in Auckland last week for the L&D Innovation and Tech Fest conference. And some of the conversations I had with Māori people who are working in Learning and Development roles or other roles in organizations, is that even when it's not an official part of their role, because there is such a strong interest, which is wonderful, in the Māori culture and how do we weave it into our work in New Zealand, that people like yourself are often pulled towards, drawn towards, feel a sense of responsibility to move towards that kind of mahi, where people are genuinely interested in weaving Māori culture into their work. Which is a beautiful thing, but also a challenging thing to navigate personally, if it's not part of your work, right?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah. And I think that's the big challenge that we have or that a lot of Māori have working in this space, is for a lot of years of our careers, we've had to balance the need of when we should be getting in there to help guide others when they're wanting to engage with Māori culture. And there is that massive sense of responsibility and guardianship and protecting it, making sure that it's well looked after, otherwise people run off and do all sorts of stuff and it can end up really...

Michelle Ockers:

Even with the best of intent, right?

Claudia Faletolu:

Best of intentions. But yeah, they can find themselves in some really difficult unsafe situations. So it is really hard to say no, when you can see something happening and you really want to get in there and save it if you can. But then there's the other side where we have a massive responsibility to do the job that we've been hired to do. And so that's sort of a fine balance to find.

Michelle Ockers:

And we're going to be talking about how you've worked with the team at Waka Kotahi, the Centre for Learning and Development, to build their own sense of confidence and ability to take, not completely independent action, but to move forward without just coming back to you all the time for the answers, but more confidently coming back with proposals for, here's how I think we can weave the culture into our mahi (work). So we'll return to that because it's important. And I think for me, I've done a couple of stories around indigenous culture recently on Learning Uncut and it can be daunting for people and working with yourselves, I want to respect the culture, but sometimes I'm not sure either.

So I kind of have felt that sense of, I want to honour this and I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing. And we of course have had a recent Lunch and Learn session with the team where we've explored some of the challenges and how can we support each other to address those. And I think having someone in a role like your own has been invaluable to building confidence and a little more autonomy with engaging with the culture. So we will

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

come back and dive into that more. So firstly, let's recap who Waka Kotahi is and your role at Waka Kotahi.

Claudia Faletolu:

So Waka Kotahi, the New Zealand Transport Agency's main focus is on providing that one integrated land transport system and it helps everybody get around everyday life and support businesses in different ways. So they look after the national transport system with a whole bunch of partners and making sure that we stay focused on improving things, making sure that we are innovating so that the system's efficient and sustainable. And the types of things that Waka Kotahi look after are everything from the roads and tolls to commercial driving, Road to Zero projects, licensing, traffic, travel, national land transport programs, climate change, and for me and my mahi partnering with Māori. Māori have great connection and deep connection to the land, to the whenua. And so everything at Waka Kotahi is on the whenua of our ancestors. So there's a lot of mahi (work) being done in that space to partner with Māori better and to have deep relationships with them moving forward.

And my role covers sort of a breadth of different areas. And the main focus, my mahi is around Māori cultural advice. So that's anything from a Māori strategy to Māori capability, to tikanga (customs) processes and protocols, mātauranga Māori - Māori knowledge, and then L&D, Learning and Development with a Māori lens across that. That's mainly the Māori capability mahi (work) that we've been doing and all the associated sort of supporting learning programs in there.

And then with Organisational Development, it's about weaving Māori strategy and cultural narratives into standard OD or people strategies that every business would have, from workforce strategies to culture strategies, diversity and inclusion, organizational capability, leadership, learning, all that kind of stuff. So I work within the Centre of L&D alongside Zoe and the leadership team. And I also have a dotted line into Te Mātangi, who is our Māori partnerships team.

So I work across two teams effectively, and I balance the relationship across those two teams. There's up to thirteen in that team. And then we've got seven in our leadership team within the Centre of L&D. My approach to mahi incorporates both a standard business approach at the same time as a Māori cultural approach. So there's cultural aspects and processes and protocols that I need to follow when I'm doing this type of mahi. And what that means is I have to walk in both worlds at the same time all the time, and that's not just at work. That's in my personal life. I am of Māori descent, and I'm also of European Scottish descent. So I carry those ancestors at the same time. Growing up in Aotearoa though means that I have a deep affiliation to my Māori side, more so than my European or Scottish side.

So when I come to work, there's a lot that's sort of on my shoulders from both sides, but that doesn't mean I'm in any way any type of super expert at all in my culture, which is one of the first things I tell people. I'm still on my own journey, reconnecting to my Māori side. I'm still strengthening my connection every day. I am not a fluent speaker of my own language. I was brought up mainly in English. So I'm on a journey to relearn, unlearn and relearn my own language. I do not have everything, or I do not know everything about all cultural protocols in my culture. And I don't have a really deep expert level of traditional knowledge either. But what I do really well is build and grow and learn every day and then bring that to work and help others along the way and make connections.

I'm a super connector and my superpower is being Māori in this space. And because of my own history and journey, I'm learning every single day about my culture, about who I am and how to be strong in it in a space that's really, really challenging. And not just Waka Kotahi but in the public sector, which can be really, really challenging at times.

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

Michelle Ockers:

That's so interesting that you're still on your own journey with your culture at the same time of supporting others on their journey, Claudia. So when we think about how we learn, how we grow and these days, the idea that you don't, and I'm going to borrow this from the wonderful Satya Nadella, the Microsoft CEO, we don't have to be know-it-all's. Being learn-it-all's is far more effective on our journey through life to keep us open to learning.

If you find you are being asked questions, when there's a body of work, you need to engage with where you feel perhaps you don't have quite the right level of expertise, being a super connector I imagine reaching out to your network is one way that you help bring the right expertise into the body of work. I'm interested, just from your own personal learning practices, what that looks like. Maybe if you can tell us about a time recently, when you were asked a question or asked to engage with a body of work and you needed to find others to support you with that, what does that look like for you? How do you do that?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah. I teach people the same way that I learn. So I get often asked, can I have a whakatauki or proverb to support this work that I'm doing? So for me personally, what I do is I have so many touch points of resources. So I have a lot of books. I read a lot of books and for Michelle, she can see my background and I've got a bookcase full of books.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Claudia Faletolu:

So I do read a lot and I do a lot of research online in terms of the right proverb. What's the context, what's the story? What are you trying to say with it? I have a whole raft of questions I need to ask. I then go and do my own research and I pull together the best collection I think that would match. I then reach out to my network of experts who are far more deep in expertise and mātauranga Māori (traditional Māori knowledge) than me. And I go and talk to them and I make sure that during that conversation with the person who's requested it, it's about intention. If I don't feel like they've got the right intention, I won't do it. And it's as simple as that. If I feel any kind of tokenism at all, I will just say so, confront it and move on.

But if they come with the right intentions, that's always going to pave a really positive path to find the right proverb for them. So I'll go and reach out to my network of experts. And there's quite a raft of them I'm lucky enough to have access to. I've got Waka Kotahi Te Mātangi, our Māori partnerships team. I then have a Māori public sector network as well that I reach out to. And then of course I have my own personal family my whānau. So I kind of use a mix and match of all of those different people to go and bounce my ideas and my thinking to land on the right one.

And when we're asked to do something like that, what we come back with is not options for them to choose, because we're a great believer as a culture and things happening for a reason. And answers will be given once you've done the right mahi behind it, and they'll be unearthed and you'll be able to discover what it's supposed to be. So it's not like we go and do some research and here's three and you can choose from them. We go away, we do the hard yards and we come back with a proverb that will match the intention and the context and the work that it has been requested for. And then it turns into what we call a gift. So we gift it to them because our culture carries a lot of what we call mana (prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma - mana is a supernatural force in a person, place or object), which is hard word to describe.

Mana is something that you don't take for yourself. It's given to you, you hold it. And it's like a level of respect and prestige that people give to you because of the interactions they have

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

with you. So with our very strong leaders in our world and my Māori world, we've got leaders with very deep mana, with very strong mana and everything has a type of mana associated with it. So if we gift you a proverb, it carries with it a little bit of a mana. So we gift it to you and expect you to look after it and expect you to uphold the mana of this piece of work that we're giving you. And you have to tell the story of how it was put together and the process that was used to call it into the work that you've requested it for.

So when people "simply" and I'm using quotation marks, ask for a proverb or ask for a Māori name for a team or a document, it's not so simple. And it takes a very long time. We can't do it in a week. There's a lot of conversations. And sometimes when it's a really important piece, we have to go to our elders and get approval from them. So that can take a long time. And we have a really common approach and we call it a thousand cup of teas, and that's how we build our relationships, is by having a thousand cup of teas with a lot of people. So I probably do about 500 cup of teas, just for one piece of work, one little request, but for the bigger pieces, definitely going into the thousands of cup of teas to talk to people.

Michelle Ockers:

I love the depth of thinking and the care, you talked about being a guardian of the culture earlier. And I think that's a beautiful illustration of what that means in reality, and the depth of care and thought that goes into your work. The other thing that strikes me is, this is a fantastic example of how we work and learn in a networked world, which is interesting because sometimes we think, well, the whole working and learning in a network is a very modern contemporary approach to doing things.

But it's also, as you've outlined, it's a longstanding way of working and learning. And when I say working, getting things done in groups, which you've just illustrated so beautifully. So let's talk for a moment. I think actually this is really important. I thought it might be self-evident and I think it is, but I don't want to make that assumption that it is self-evident, around why Māori culture is so important to Waka Kotahi and more specifically to the work of the Centre for Learning and Development.

Claudia Faletolu:

I think to understand why it's so important to Waka Kotahi specifically, we kind of have to lift up a little bit, and especially for your listeners who may not know Aotearoa or New Zealand very well, for us as a nation and as a peoples, for Māori, it's important to recognize that we've got a couple of things in place in our country that are different from others and most. We've got the Treaty of Waitangi, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is one of our founding documents as a people. We've got three, but that is one that is worked into our constitution, and it's in our Public Service Act. So that's really important to acknowledge.

Treaty of Waitangi was an agreement between Britain, represented by a fellow called William Hobson and New Zealand. And that was represented by many of our Māori leaders, our Rangatira. So it was signed in a place called Waitangi, hence it's called the Treaty of Waitangi. And that was signed on the 6th of Feb 1840. So there are many sheets, there's about nine sheets to that treaty. And it was written in English, translated into Te Reo Māori, our language, and then it was sent around the country to sign. And I am very aware that I'm abbreviating this very critical part of our history into a few minutes. But if you want to find out more, please check it out online.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, why don't we Claudia? Because it is an important context for the story. If we can find a good quality resource that we can put a link to in the show notes.

Claudia Faletolu:

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And if people would like to understand more of the background of the treaty, that they are able to go and take a look at that.

Claudia Faletolu:

Definitely, we'll put something together and put that in.

And with the Treaty, it's important to note that because there were two versions, there was an English version and a Te Reo Māori version, the translation wasn't exact. So there were actually two different meanings and two different documents. So when Māori signed, we signed the Māori one. So thinking the translation was this, but in English it was slightly different. So that was really challenging for our people, and we've lived with that journey ever since, dissecting and understanding the differences and then what it means to us as a people being Māori and to our nation of Aotearoa New Zealand. I think I mentioned just before, it's critical to note that the public sector in New Zealand has evolved and we've updated our Public Sector Act, and that was in 2020. And Te Kawa Mataaho, or the Public Service Commission added a Section, a Section 14, and that explicitly recognizes the role of the Public Service to support the Crown in its relationship with Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi.

So that is now the first time we've ever had that. And that's a huge move for our nation. So that means that we've got to be really purposeful and meaningful around continuing to build and improve our relationships with Māori, by creating really collaborative approaches and recognizing the Tikanga, the cultural protocols and processes that we have, into the way that mahi and work is done within the Crown and across the public sector. It's also about growing and understanding Te Ao Māori, the Māori world. That's from concepts, our concepts, our traditional knowledge, our values, our perspectives, our language, our customs that's been put into the Public Service Act. So we've got a clear commitment across the Crown that that is something that the Public Service will do.

So move into Waka Kotahi, that means that we've always had a relationship with Māori just because of the type of mahi that we do on the land. So it's not like we've never had Māori relationships before. We've never done that type of thing before. We've always had a level of that, but now we've got the strength behind us to push and grow and evolve a far better pace with far more expertise at hand. So it's been really good that we've been able to use that as a building foundation step for us to stand on and say, yes, we have an individual and a collective responsibility for cultural competency in our Waka Kotahi family. And that's going to deliver with and for Māori, and it's going to show our commitment in supporting Māori relationships. And even in our own population of staff, making sure that we have fair and equitable representation of Māori. Making sure we have Māori teams, Māori leadership, and Māori are represented in the decision-making processes and roles within Waka Kotahi.

And it's really good to point out that Waka Kotahi is doing this mahi (work) with and for Māori because we know it's the right thing to do. We also have the backing of it being put into our Public Service Act. And it's good to know that in some cases it could be seen as, ah, we have to do it, because we have to do it, we're forced to do it. But for Waka Kotahi I can see it's true intention by some of the great people we've got in-house that are working really hard to show up and make sure that they guide Waka Kotahi.

We've got an amazing Māori partnerships team who do that. And then we've got great allies and champions across the organization. The Centre for L&D, I would consider are a really strong ally and champion for kaupapa Māori (Māori topics/plans/matters) and Māori mahi (Māori work), which is why I have come into Waka Kotahi to work because I trust the people. I know the people and they have created a culturally safe space for me to work.

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

Michelle Ockers:

I think it's really important, one of the things that's impressed me important to point out is, you mentioned it's the right thing to do. And you've talked about legal obligations. But I think the commitment to weaving Māori culture into mahi (work) at Waka Kotahi goes beyond it being an obligation. And if people listen to Zoe's episode and the conversation she talks about, it's not just because it's the right thing to do. It's actually because it makes the work better, because there is a richness to the culture.

And I think it really stands out strongly in the Learning and Development space. There's a richness to the culture and what we can learn and how we can do our work better as a result of weaving, deeply weaving going beyond the tokenism, which you mentioned before and respectfully and deeply weaving and coming to the Māori culture as a European or as someone of non-Māori culture background with an open mind, with a sense of curiosity and a desire to look at how this can enrich our worldview and the quality of our work. And I see that in the approach that the team at the Centre for Learning and Development takes.

I think we should move into talking about, well, what does that really look like in terms of the body of work over the last couple of years? You've had two rounds of working with Waka Kotahi I believe Claudia. What timeframes have they been in?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah, I first came into Waka Kotahi in 2019 and did a year and then stepped out for a year and then came back for another year and a bit. So my first time here, I was brought in to do Māori capability and look at what we could do for Waka Kotahi staff. So I helped with a really wonderful strong team at the time, a Māori capability framework that could help everybody and the organization do self-assessment and think about, what are the competencies I'd like to build into the role, into the mahi I do. And also something that would be good for them personally, in their development and growth. So that was my main focus back then, and then to come back a second time to help them review that, and then look at more around weaving cultural narratives and to build that into some of the foundational pieces. And Tā Tātou Rautaki Akoranga - the Waka Kotahi learning strategy being one of them.

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

Michelle Ockers:

So let's talk about the learning strategy and your role shaping the learning strategy, Claudia. At what point did you get involved in that body of work and how did you get involved?

Claudia Faletolu:

So I started back in my second time around into Waka Kotahi last year in about March. March? Yeah. So I knew that they were looking into their learning strategy and building one. And so we were able to get together quite early on in my arrival back into Waka Kotahi and start talking about that.

So it was good that I was able to get in at the beginning, which is really important for us because over sort of my career, my experience, we've always typically been brought in near the end of things. Oh, yes, let's bring in that Māori thing.

But with this piece of work, very different because it was brought in right at the beginning. And I know that with Zoe and Jessie, they were very clear about their commitment and they've been on a journey already in the last few years. So it's always been a part of their natural thinking. And we've just had really robust and deep kōrero (conversations) around what we wanted to do. And really it was just having a good partnership of Te Ao Māori, the Māori world into the learning strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

So how do you go about doing that and you've touched on kind of the deep thinking that goes into a body of work like this. You talked earlier about shaping a cultural narrative and wanting it to be more than just tokenism. It's not just whacking a label and a few nice pictures and a couple of whakatauki (proverb), I'm still working on that word...

Claudia Faletolu:

That's it, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Whakatauki (proverb) into the strategy or the storytelling around it later on. How did you approach this work, knowing it was going to touch everybody in the organization in terms of just getting it started and making sure that it was woven in properly into the shaping of the strategy?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah, and I think it was through those deep conversations and that kōrero (conversations) that we had, that we unpacked our thinking and what we were envisioning for the learning strategy, partnered up with Te Ao Māori, the Māori world. So for me, I instantly have sort of a little bit of a checklist. I need to make sure that Te Ara Kotahi, our Māori strategy is represented and woven through the strategy.

I also knew that I would instantly need to think about an appropriate cultural narrative that would help uplift the learning strategy and what it was trying to do and its intentions. It was also around incorporating other appropriate or supporting cultural models or resources that I know of and thinking about bringing their vision to life in the imagery that we use. And that's kind of what I was tasked to do. And the great thing about this mahi (work) was that, like I said before, I knew them from before. So I trusted them and they were really good in providing me a really culturally safe space to do this mahi. They knew by working with me before that this was a huge piece of work, that it would take a thousand cup of teas. So that would have to be managed with their timeline of expectation from the business.

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

And at the same time, teach them as much as I can, as I go through this process, help educate them about the different processes that I'm going through so that they can learn at the same time as doing the mahi (work) with me. And what happened was that we had all these cups of teas, conversations and then I had to go away and shut myself off for a little bit and do some deep research, deep dive research, talk to a lot of people through my network of experts and then have some really good sleeps. And what happened was that I actually got a vision and a dream, which is another part of our culture and listening to all things that come into your realm and sphere and listen to what they're trying to say.

So I had a dream. I envisioned this image of an ecosystem with very specific elements of our culture in terms of native trees and plants, native animals, a traditional, what we call home place with a marae and different wharehau and meeting houses. And I woke up and I drew it instantly. I drew it just with some felt tip pens and quickly on a piece of paper before I forgot and then took it into work and then just sat on it for some time to dissect some of the sort of next level of details. And then I took that and then checked with my network again. It's always about talking. It's always about operating as a collective. We don't operate individually as a people. So everything I do, I never do alone. And I'm never held responsible by myself. It's always done as a collective and that sort of reflective of our societal structure.

We have tribes, sub tribes and family groups. We're all interconnected, we're all interdependent. And we lean on each other all the time for work. So with that piece of work, once I'd sort of held it for a while and collected and collated some of the details, then I took it to Zoe and Jessie, and I said, this is what I've been gifted in my dreams. This is the vision that's come forth. How do you feel about it? And through all the talking and a few tears, because when you're in the moment, you get moved by different narratives in the journey. So it was really good to be able to find that narrative and that it came to me at the right time and then being able to work it into some of the details of the technical strategy that had to be built at the same time and partner it all up together.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's talk perhaps about what some of the... And maybe just pick one element to start with, and then we'll see if there's another one you want to talk to. There's obviously a lot of symbolism in the visual narrative. So would you like to pick something of significance to the strategy from the visual representation and talk to us about what that element represents, how it links to learning and even potentially, if you can extend it a step further, how you see that come to life or brought to life in the learning strategy itself?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah. So with the learning strategy, we gifted a whakatauaāki, a proverb to the strategy and it goes, 'Poipoia te kākano, kia puāwai' which is, 'Nurture the seed and it will grow'. And it was a really strong guiding principle for this mahi and its entirety. So with that came along the vision. And in there, one of the components was the tree that's in the middle of our image. And it's a very specific tree. It's a kahikatea tree and kahikatea trees in Aotearoa, New Zealand, there's male and female ones. And for our learning strategy, our kahikatea tree is a female. And it's in the middle of our image and it's surrounded by other kahikatea. And typically grow together in groves and support its family. So it's our tallest native tree in Aotearoa, and it's got a very straight trunk. It adapts to swampy sort of living and marshes.

And it's got buttresses, roots at the bottom and it provides a lot of stability and they are the oldest member of the ancient Podocarp family. And they've been around for about 160 million years. So kahikatea are sometimes called dinosaur trees because they're so old and that kind of represented, the straight trunk and the strength in that and the stability of the roots representing the strategy in terms of the learning strategy is a straight trunked piece of

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

strategy with very deep interconnected roots that provides stability for the organization. And it's long lasting, it's sustainable. It will be around for 160 million years. So that's why that tree was really important. And for Māori and our history with the kahikatea tree, we have many uses for it. So the kahikatea tree grows fleshy berries or koroī, which were really important food resource for us. And they were served at special feasts in great amounts.

And birds also flock to the kahikatea when the berries are rip and they distribute the seeds far and wide. So that's why koroī, those berries only grow in female trees. So that's why our tree is a female. It grows berries so that birds can flock, the seeds are sown and they're spread out. And that's what we wanted with the learning strategy as well. Is that the different animals and the different people around the organization would flock to the learning strategy, feed off it, and then spread those wonderful berries of knowledge out to the rest of their teams and their families.

So that was one sort of part of the image, which was really critical and very, very important for us. And another one that I can think of is in the image, we've also got what we would call a traditional, a waka or a canoe or boat. And that boat is actually a direct reflection of the Waka Kotahi image of waka, which is a representation of our values, our business values. So we've got four business values and that waka represents the direct connection of this learning strategy connecting to a much bigger strategy of values and our much wider organizational direction and strategic direction going forward.

So there's a lot of cultural narratives in that image. And I had to write like a massive document, because there was so many, but at least it's written down and people can dip into it and have a read and get some insight. And then it sort of can help people's or guide people's thinking with the strategy and how they might connect with it.

Michelle Ockers:

With permission, I'd love to be able to share both the image itself in the show notes and that narrative because Claudia, I've been working with this strategy for some time and I actually have never sat down and heard the narrative explained like that. And it's so powerful and even thinking about nurture the seed and it will grow, from the perspective of the body of work that those of us working in Learning and Development do and how we think about that work. The ability for things to grow with the right input and growth continues to happen even when we are not there to tell the seed how to grow and how fast to grow and when to sprout leaves and where to face the sun. That it's around preparing the soil, laying the foundation, nurturing. And that I think plays really beautifully into the idea of learning culture, which I know is one of the branches in the learning strategy and is appearing more and more in contemporary learning strategies where organizations are shaping them.

So, really powerful. And I think important for people who are working with your strategy to understand the symbolism, understand the narrative and to think and reflect deeply on, well, what does that mean for our work. And with you having talked a little about the image in a way that I've actually not heard before, I can see the influence of how that's woven through the strategy.

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah, 'cause there's a technical strategy. Yes, we have five branches of that strategy that address these sort of areas. But it's how we can partner that up with a cultural narrative that uplifts the storytelling of it. And that's what makes it so different, better and stronger. And we have a common saying, and it's something that for Māori, we've been saying for many, many years, what's good for Māori is actually good for everybody. And I think it's sort of reflective of maybe some of the comments that Zoe made in terms of, it's not just the right thing to do, it's going to make things better if we do it this way. How we do things in the Māori culture is actually really beneficial for everybody.

So when we were thinking about the image and some of the storytelling and the cultural narratives in there, there's everything from the marae (tribal home), the place of bringing people together, we've got traditional māra or gardens, how we garden and our culture is a very deep telling story. We've got the different types of weather. We've got a sun, we've got clouds, rain, stars. So that's sort of reflective of what we call Maramataka, which is our Māori moon lunar calendar. And that informs how we garden, when we plant, when we fish, when we do meetings, when we should sort out problems.

We've got things like diversity of people in our image, reflective of people coming together as a collective. It was a really well-developed image in terms of we used an up-and-coming young Māori artist to do the image as well. So we thought about everything in terms of how this all came together, the vision, the meanings, the different narratives, who drew the picture, why they drew the picture. So it was a really long but rewarding process for all of us involved.

Michelle Ockers:

How do you think the strategy might have been different without, and I'm going to say your involvement, but obviously it's the involvement of a whole group of people, to help shape the weaving of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) into the strategy? How do you think it might have been different without that?

Claudia Faletolu:

If it did not have that partnership with Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) concepts, it would be like every other strategy that we've seen in our careers. And I've seen plenty, lots of PowerPoint slide packs, with some really good intention in some of them. But incredibly flat and maybe not so warm and inviting and talk to people's what we call ngakau or their hearts, connect to their hearts, not just their minds, but to feel like there's some real true care put into it. So people feel right, well, this is a learning strategy that's actually built for, and with me in a way that I can connect to it, in a way that I've never connected to maybe another learning strategy before.

So I feel like having that partnership of the business with Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) in this learning strategy has uplifted it into a place it's not been before. And maybe one of the very few across the public sector that's been written like this.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, yes. The visual narrative and the deep symbolism behind it is something that I think, because in the European culture, we think so much with our heads, we think so much through logic rather than through, I guess the emotional connection. We talk a lot about storytelling, but in terms of allowing story to shape our work, rather than thinking about at the end, how can I use a story to tell people about the work, it's just a different way of approaching strategy development. And I know from some of the work that I do with other organizations with strategy, seeing how this has shaped your strategy is shifting my approach a little bit to asking different kinds of questions of people early on, around the

Learning Uncut Episode 104

Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)

– Claudia Faletolu

narrative and starting to look at the narrative very early as the strategy is being shaped rather than leaving it till later. And well now, let's get the Comms team to tell a story, right?

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

The Comms team may not be the right team to ask to tell that story, if you haven't done that depth of thinking earlier on. So for those who are shaping learning strategy, thinking about your narrative really early on, I think it's certainly something I'm learning from this body of work that I'm doing and seeing the approach that you've taken at Waka Kotahi versus the approach that I've seen taken elsewhere. So thank you for all that I'm learning through this exposure as well.

Claudia Faletolu:

My pleasure.

Michelle Ockers:

So one thing, and it could be a separate conversation all on its own, around the body of work that you've done with the, let's just talk about the leadership team potentially in the Centre for Learning and Development. We don't have time for a deep dive left in this conversation, but we can always leave the opportunity to come back and deep dive a little later. In terms of the support you have given them on their cultural journey and having improving their confidence and their competence with Māori culture and bringing that into their work, what are the key shifts you've seen over the past two years with your work with the Centre for Learning and Development leadership team, and how have you approached that work?

Claudia Faletolu:

I think with the leadership team in the Centre of L&D, in the last two years, there's been quite a lot of shift. And some of it has been more across the business in terms of structure of the people group, other senior leaders, changing hands and stuff like that. So there's been that kind of influence, which has led to more empowerment for our leadership team. And some of the things that I've seen happen with the leadership team, and it's all come from a place of really good, deep connections and relationships with me prior. So being able to come in 2019 and build those relationships and take our time to have a thousand cup of teas so that we get to a point where actually now we can really ramp it up and do some focused, intentional mahi around weaving Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) into the mahi (work), but also look at their personal development as a team.

So it's been taking them on a journey to grow strong connections to our Māori strategy, really unpacking that and talking, having regular conversations around, what does the strategy mean for the organization? And then what does it actually mean to us as a center and our function? So it was about helping them, guide them along those conversations and feed some berries and seeds to kick off some of their thinking processes. And I think also for them, it's about helping them on their personal journeys. And they're all in different places, just like all of us, they're in different levels, in different spaces. So it's about, for me building one-on-one connections with them, understanding where they're at with their journey with Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) and what they need right now. So currently, I run weekly te reo Māori (Māori language) sessions with them as a team, where we get to practice every week, which is critical for their pronunciation.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

So that's the Māori language and utilizing Māori language in their work.

Claudia Faletolu:

Yep. And making sure that they can weave that through every day in every way. So that's our commitment, is that we will use the Māori language every day, whether that's spoken and emails and documents and letters, anything, we must do that. We must start normalizing it. So it's then just a part of how we do things. And that's worked really well with the wider Centre. Now that's just a normal expectation, that they will see the Māori words in different documents. And we've agreed on a list of Māori words that we will be able to weave in amongst our English sort of sentences, to bilingual titles all the time, to documents that need way more Māori language in it than some of the other standard documents.

So we've got a range of things that happen in that space, but being able to take the leadership team on a weekly journey with their own language capability has been really important. It's been really important for me to share as much as I can, every time about the process that I use when I'm asked to do work. They will come and have conversations with me about different pieces of work and some ideas. And I'm like, that's cool, for me, this is what it would look like. Can you go and do some of that now and then come back to me? And I think you mentioned before, I've seen that difference between 2019, they just came, people would come and say, can I just have a proverb? Now they say, I've been thinking about a proverb. I've done some research. I feel like, and this is just a light, dip my toe kind of level, but here are some ideas. What do you think?

So it turns more into a partnership of conversation rather than I'm asking you, Claudia, to go off and do this stuff. So it's definitely, I've seen that evolution happen. And it's been really encouraging for me to see them use those skills every day and to put at the forefront of their thinking, what considerations do I need to make to the Māori culture, to the Treaty of Waitangi and our Māori strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

And it strikes me, you've talked about two particular, I'm going to call them, I don't know if it's the right word, but levers almost. The language, and then proverbs, which are a window into Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), they're a window into the Māori worldview. And they invite people to think more deeply about how they are approaching their work and explore what they can bring from that worldview to enrich their perspective and their work. So it goes beyond, it's not symbolism, it's an invitation to engage through those two mechanisms.

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah. And it's been, for us as Māori, our language is everything. Our language, because we are a culture that was not of the written word, everything was done with our voices and with our carvings and our meeting houses. And so that's how we spoke. That's how we told stories. That's how we taught others, our genealogy, our family trees, everything was done by storytelling. We are one of the many great storytelling cultures of the world. So having that skill set is a superpower.

So having and using our language every day, uplifts our culture, and definitely creates a window for people to look through and start engaging and start learning. The Whakatauki and proverbs is another one. I think it's a very common one that we are engaged for across businesses. So it's sort of a natural alignment, but it includes sort of that next part of our language. It's not just the spoken word, but it's the proverbs and proverbs for us are like lessons, words from our ancestors that teach us something every day. So those are really critical for us to lean on as well.

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

And I think what was most important for me personally, was just being in a team that I knew I was going to be supported, that I have great empowerment by my manager, Jessie, and by the rest of our leadership team. Just incredibly important for me, there's a high level of cultural safety that's required to do this type of mahi, and I've not always been in a culturally safe space to do this mahi. So I know what it feels like when it's not safe, versus this team, which has been an incredibly safe space for me.

Michelle Ockers:

So that's obviously been vital to do this body of work well. What have been the key challenges that you've faced, even in a culturally safe space, the key challenges?

Claudia Faletolu:

The key challenges for me are always around a level of racism that I encounter most days. And that can be different in different ways, because there's institutionalized racism within the public sector. So sort of recognizing and then building my skill set to address it in a way that is appropriate for me, because there's a level of cultural safety I need to think about. I think some of the other challenges is just time. We, as a culture for Māori people, we see and engage with time in a very different way than businesses and organizations and departments and Crown agencies. Everything's very tight and everything's very short-sighted.

For Māori, we plan 50 to a 100 years in advance. So we know the length of investment we are making and things. So we think far beyond, obviously ourselves, all the time. We plant seeds for trees that will provide shade for those when we're not here. So when we are thinking about the work, I think about, what can I put in there and make sure is safeguarded for once I leave.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Claudia Faletolu:

Once I'm no longer here. So time is really precious and it's a very big challenge because doing Māori mahi, doing mahi in this space takes a long time. And that does not fit into the timelines of businesses who need a strategy within three months. And it's going to take me seven to eight months to do the work properly and appropriately, that honours the Treaty of Waitangi, honours our culture, honours my peoples.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting, the reflection there about making it sustainable. One of the conversations I often have with organizations who are thinking about shaping a learning strategy is, you have to take the time to engage deeply across your organization. Thinking business first and in this case culture as well, business and culture, and shaping that work through deep conversation. And I guess that thousand cup of teas, if it's appropriate for me to use that in my conversation...

Claudia Faletolu:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. I will be using that analogy. It takes a thousand cup of teas to shape a high quality compelling, high value learning strategy. So if you engage with whatever the important

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

elements of culture are for you, no matter where you are in the world and that's culture beyond your own organization as well and think deeply about the context in which you operate, that seven to eight months is kind of about right anyway for shaping a high-quality learning strategy. Claudia.

Claudia Faletolu:

Exactly. And it's always based I think for me, in terms of a thousand cup of teas, is always built on the foundation of, I know for me traditional values and principles. So our mātauranga (principles) and our uara (values), values like kotahitanga - unity, manaakitanga - the care that you give others. We've got thousands of them. So I operate on those values within a thousand cup of teas, which means the things that I do I know are done in the right way for the right reason at the right time.

Michelle Ockers:

And in terms of, to close out the conversation today, until our next cup of tea, tips for others. And I'm just going to ask a question in the context of within Māori culture, because one thing I'm conscious of is indigenous cultures vary widely from place to place. So it would be inappropriate to ask you about this body of work in the context of other indigenous cultures. But for those who would like to get started or do more with weaving Māori culture into the mahi, what suggestions do you offer them? What key tips for getting started?

Claudia Faletolu:

Some key tips from my experience and my journey is to get the right people in, get the right Māori people in to do that mahi, make sure that you think about those questions up front at the beginning of your work or your project. Make sure that you become a strong ally for Māori and kaupapa Māori (Māori topics/plans/matters) and the mahi and the work that you do. So it's about building awareness, awareness of your own journey of engagement with the Māori world. So helping us normalize it, having care and how you do that journey of learning and discovery, because it's far more greater than people realize when they start this journey, becoming an ally, going on their journey of learning about the Māori world. So take your time and get the right support in place for you. Make sure you have a guide, make sure you have that Māori guide, that's there to help that you can stay close to. That you can ask questions in a safe way and there's no judgment.

And that's the hardest thing, is to let go of your fear and let go of judgment. It's also about being humble and having humility in your journey and the way that you engage Māori people for work. Don't rush things, be sensitive and make sure that you build awareness around the different types of privilege people have. That's really important because that's brought into behaviours when you engage with Māori around the type of privilege that might be just built into your DNA because of your ancestry, the journey that we've had in New Zealand Aotearoa. So it's about managing that and to stand up for us and to help us.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Claudia, for an absolutely fascinating conversation today. I learned so much yet again, and I'm sure our listeners have learned a lot. We'll have a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes. If anyone would like to reach out directly to you, would you welcome anyone reaching out directly to you with questions? I was making an assumption there.

Claudia Faletolu:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut Episode 104
Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy)
– Claudia Faletolu

But I should check that in with you.

Claudia Faletolu:

Absolutely. I'm always open to having conversations, always open to a cup of tea, always open to sharing. I think sharing, being a share-it-all rather than a know-it-all. Sharing as much as I can to help others. That's just a part of a part of my superpowers and being Māori. So yeah, always welcome.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. And I do of course share every episode via LinkedIn and invite people to comment on the LinkedIn post as well, so we can continue the conversation publicly there. Thank you so much, thoroughly enjoyed this little conversation and cup of tea and I would like to invite you to close with a closing karakia.

Claudia Faletolu:

Awesome. Ngā mihinui ki a koe (thank you so much) Michelle, thank you so much for having me today in your virtual whare (house), your virtual home. It's been an absolute honor and pleasure to be able to share some of my story and my journey. And thank you for giving me the opportunity. So I'll close with a karakia for our session.

Karakia Whakamutunga | Closing karakia

Unuhia, unuhia
Unuhia ki te uru tapu nui
Kia wātea, kia māmā,
Te ngākau, te tinana
Te wairua i te ara tangata
Koia rā e Rongo
Whakairia ake ki runga
Kia tina! Tina!
Hui e! Tāiki e!

English Translation:

Draw on, draw on,
Draw on the supreme sacredness
To clear, to free the heart
The body and the spirit of mankind
Rongo, suspended high above us
Draw together! Affirm!

Learning Uncut Episode 104 Whiria te Tāngata (Weaving Maori culture into learning strategy) – Claudia Faletolu

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the founder of Learning Uncut. She is an experienced, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D *Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of Learning and Development*
- Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – *for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*



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