SOTL IN THE SOUTH

A journal dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning in the 'global South'

Volume 4, Issue 2 September 2020

Pages: 228 - 234

Reflective piece

# From isolation to cross-cultural collaboration: My international PhD journey as tauiwi

**Amrit Melissa Dencer-Brown**

Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement/School of Applied Sciences
Edinburgh Napier University
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

I.Dencer-Brown@napier.ac.uk

## Abstract

This reflective piece is about my journey as an international PhD candidate from the UK to Aotearoa (New Zealand). I speak about my search to try and find a sense of belonging as an outsider and some of the challenges in doing community-focused research as an early career researcher from elsewhere. This piece includes key challenges of building networks, collaboration and overcoming the death of my father, half-way through my PhD. I speak about a toolkit of strength and resilience I had to create and now use in the support of my students and peers as a lecturer in education during the pandemic. This piece is about finding kindness and compassion in myself and receiving it from others to help with isolation in difficult times.

> *One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be broken*. Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910).

When I heard that I achieved a Commonwealth Scholarship to conduct my PhD research in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa (Auckland, New Zealand), I was both surprised and excited to be embarking on a journey of a lifetime. This three year scholarship would take me to the other side of the world, away from family and friends, and I would have to build a new support system and community from scratch. I had visited the 'Land of the Long White Cloud' a decade previously, where I had spent three months working in environmental conservation and trekking in the South Island. I fell in love with the country back then and was looking forward to experience a full immersion into Kiwi life.

My heritage is both British and Indian. I grew up on an island, where ethnic minorities were just that; a minority. We (my siblings and I) were different from day dot. Therefore, I always felt like a bit of an outsider, neither fully British nor Indian, who was my community? Where did I fit in? What was my identity? Within a few days of landing in Auckland, I found this city to be incredibly multi-cultural. My PhD office had students of 20 different nationalities, the array of cuisines was astounding and I quickly found a set of friends from all walks of life. I felt at home. Having this community of early career researchers, the majority of us away from our home countries, provided a network of support and camaraderie at a time that could have been quite an isolating.

Embarking on my research was a harder nut to crack. I had designed my research to work with local communities with links to New Zealand's second biggest harbour – the Manukau Harbour – meaning a "place for the wading birds" (McLintock, 1966:2). I was investigating the social-ecological trade-offs between removing and preserving mangroves. Conducting the scientific research was straight forward; once I got my permission from the council and bought my equipment, I knew that I could traipse around those muddy mangroves to my heart's content.

Communicating with people about a contentious issue took considerably more effort, planning and networking. You may ask, 'what are mangroves and why are they contentious?' Mangroves are trees and shrubs which grow in tropical, sub-tropical and some temperate regions of the world (Tomlinson, 1994). They are coastal ecosystems, between land and sea, with many different 'services' which they provide to both humans and nature (Salem & Mercer, 2012). For a variety of reasons, New Zealand's mangroves are expanding into the harbours and other bodies of water. Although they have existed in New Zealand for thousands of years, they are seen as 'invasive' and 'non-native' by some (Dencer-Brown, Alfaro & Milne, 2019). I myself could liken my situation to the mangrove: not originally being from New Zealand, I was met with a bit of suspicion at my presence. I found this to be true when approaching different iwi/hāpu (Māori tribes and sub-tribes), who have such an incredible connection to natural world and all of its mauri (life-force/essence). Why would they open up to me? What right did I have to even ask them about their relationship to their coastal environment? Where would I start?

I needed to start building relationships with people I had never met. I started by finding the names of people I could talk to who had commented on mangrove removals in the area. Many of these people are kaitiaki (guardians of the environment), who are involved with protection of the natural environment and help to make decisions to benefit both their people and the world around them. An



  ISSN 2523-1154

integral part of this kinship with nature is reflected in the practice of this guardianship of the environment, known as kaitiakitanga (UNEP, 2017). The Tolstoy quote which prefaces this reflection refers to this relationship between humans and nature, acknowledging an intrinsic link to happiness. I see this as happiness in both people and in nature itself. This is more than just a link, it is an integration of energies and profound respect for Mother Earth. This has always been a passion of mine and I was fascinated to try to gain some understanding of how people saw themselves as part of the coastal landscape in New Zealand. In addition, how did people interact with each other around these issues? Figure 1 shows the potential connections between groups of people interviewed in my research within the mangrove ecosystem.

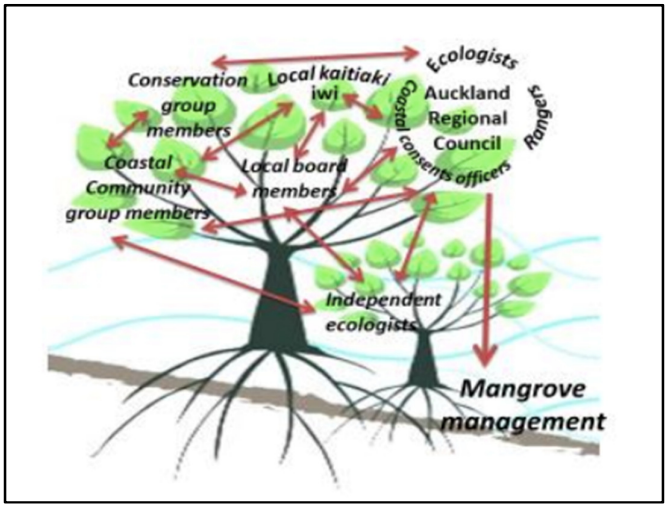


Figure 1. Stakeholders and potential connection to each other in the realm of mangrove management (Source: Dencer-Brown, 2019).

It took months of initiating and attending hui (meetings) with kaitiaki, being part of open discussions, and being incredibly respectful – and as aware as I could be of their culture and traditions – to build relationships of trust and honesty. I was repeatedly told by one of my supervisors that I was tauiwi (an other, an outsider, from a different tribe) and that this was how I would be perceived. This brought out a lot of concern and anxiety for me, an early career researcher, away from home, trying to conduct non-bias mixed methods research, for the benefit of both humans and nature. Thus, I forged my own relationships with people on the basis of honesty and being genuine. I attended local community meetings and introduced myself in person, with kindness and respect. I think this was what allowed me to have fruitful, deep conversations with people and gather knowledge and information which was absolutely invaluable to my research. I didn't go in with my academic hat on, I was truly humbled to be allowed into marae (meeting houses) and have thus the chance to share information in an open way, with no agenda, with no presumptions and with the utmost transparency. The topic of my research was polarising, it did and still does divide communities. Some people would not change their minds about mangroves and how to manage them, regardless of published peer-reviewed research. It wasn't my objective to conduct transformative action research with this work. It was to understand a complex issue to the best of my abilities in a few years and offer some solutions and recommendations. Almost more, or of equal importance to me, was being part of a network of people, from practitioners, to policy-makers, to kaitiaki. Some I never heard from again, some I remain in regular contact with, some I would even consider friends.

On this journey, I learned many things. I learned that people won't always see eye to eye, there is an inherent tension when people don't perceive the world around them – and their relationship to it – in similar ways. I observed this when speaking with participants about mangroves, as well as within myself in my role as a student, trying to navigate new environments at both university and in the community. However, if we actively listen to each other, then we open up space for discussion, collaboration and changing the state of play. This opens up possibilities for creating a more sustainable future for both humans and nature.

Outside of doing the PhD, I also learned a lot about myself, and what was truly important to me. Many students will feel this imposter syndrome when carrying out their research (Sakulku, 2011). The general feeling of isolation and lack of connectivity with people in your own school or faculty can be overwhelming, even when studying in your home country. Being an international student creates another potential level of isolation. Even as someone who has travelled a lot and lived in a few different countries before coming to New Zealand, times were still tough. I lost my father, in the UK, half way through my PhD. Carrying on with my research after returning from home post-funeral was one of the hardest things I've done in my life. This sad event created another level of isolation. I had completed my interviews before my father's passing and had been rocketing along in my research at quite a pace previously; however, this just wasn't possible in the months following such loss. I knew I had to continue, I knew how proud my dad would be of me to complete this body of work, but I started to lack the drive and motivation for pushing on so intensely as before. The first thing I learnt to do was to be kinder to myself. I had to give myself time to grieve and time to heal from this loss of someone who had always been in my life, who I admired and looked up to, and whose love of nature and people was a big influence on myself and my work. So I took one day off per week. This was my day to reflect and cry and heal, slowly from dad not being there anymore. I would take walks, go and get the ferry to Devonport and walk along the beach, talk to dad about what I was doing and how much I missed him and slowly I began to feel less sad (see Figure 2).

*A year ago today,*
*Daddy you passed away,*
*I miss you all the time,*
*But mostly I'm doing just fine,*
*Today I took the ferry*
*Over to Devonport,*
*Where I released your ashes,*
*In April on your birthday.*
*I hope you are at peace,*
*I hope your soul is restful,*
*Our memories of you keep you alive,*
*Every day you are there in our hearts.*
*Your legacy lives on,*
*And we will continue to reminisce and love you each moment.*
*JDB; always remembered, never forgotten* ❤️

Figure 2. View of Rangitoto volcano from Devonport beach, Auckland, New Zealand and accompanying poem (Source: Author).

Secondly I sought help. I had never considered counselling before and felt quite strongly that I had the tools to deal with most big things in life. I had meditated and practiced Mindfulness for a few years before this, but I really felt I needed to talk to someone about what I was going through. I always like a plan and to understand more about myself and my responses to situations. I was entitled to three free sessions at my university and took them. This was quite an eye-opener for me, not least to understand my role in my family. It helped me draw boundaries I should have created a long time before and to step back from tension and drama without getting affected so severely. I was able to support myself and my family long-distance with this new toolkit of strength and resilience, which was invaluable to me. During such a time of immense pain and sadness, it was clear that my support system in New Zealand was even more important and valuable. Friends who I expected to be there for me were not, and those I didn't think would be supportive or present, were. In addition, it strengthened the bond I had with my partner, who proposed six months after dad passed away. He had previously lost his mother just a few months before and we were able to grieve and heal together.

I'm not sure that I would change anything about my PhD journey as it all happened the way it was meant to. I completed within my three years, achieved my publication goals and created and maintained life-long friendships along the way. For me, there was dissonance between my expectations of what a sense of community within my institution and supervisory support should be and what it was in actuality. I was always treated as more of a peer back in the UK (I had previously begun a PhD there before). I shared an office with lecturers in my role as a graduate teaching assistant and felt a very strong sense of community and collegiality at that university. In contrast, I did not feel the same sense of togetherness and belonging in my overseas institution. It felt fragmented and pocketed, with more tensions between people and a lot less kindness. It was fascinating to me that, as a mature student, with over a decade of teaching experience, I was never considered as a peer to the lecturers. There was an inherent hierarchy, where I felt a lot of pressure to prove myself as both a good researcher, teacher and overall person. It was the network of post-doctoral researchers, PhD and masters students who became my family, we supported each other through our journeys and were advocates for each other's work. We co-authored together and ran an early career researcher workshops about collaboration and networking (Pannell, Dencer-Brown, Greening, Hume, Jarvis, Mathieu *et al*, 2019). I took this with me into my current role as a lecturer in education. I support students in their learning and see them as peers also. I understand their struggles of isolation and want to do what I can to give them the tools to deal with this.

This is even more pertinent in the current situation with COVID-19. Good mental health and well-being has to take precedence over assessment and examinations. I think that without the first-hand experience of what I went through, I would not have such empathy as I do now. Living in this pandemic has given me more time to appreciate the natural world around me and I believe that people the world over are reengaging and connecting with nature in ways of old. This is spoken about beautifully by Richard Louv in an interview on the radio station The World (Curwood, 2020). Indigenous communities have never lost this relationship, but the majority of the modern world has (UNEP, 2017). Although things have changed immeasurably, I wonder whether they will ever revert back to the way they were before; or, is this a systems change whereby we will do things differently from now on? From a learning and teaching perspective, we have been fully thrust into the 4$^{th}$ industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016). Will we see a shift from face-to-face teaching to a more blended approach after this is over?



 

For me, this current situation has provided an opportunity to create a new network of support across the university, where virtual meetings with colleagues previously unknown have become a regular occurrence. It has provided a new space to share practice and has opened up more opportunities for collaboration. It has improved my digital literacy and communication skills with peers and students alike and enhanced creative approaches to learning and engagement which may not have had the chance to be developed before. Although we are all currently isolated, working from home and interacting virtually, I hope that when this is over and as we return to some semblance of normality, that we will remember the importance of community, support and more than anything, kindness and compassion for others. Not least, I hope that we look back upon this time to appreciate how we had the chance to reconnect with nature and how this helped with our own well-being. I hope that in this time, we renew our respect for the natural world and understand on a deep intrinsic level that indeed a condition of happiness is to maintain, nurture and appreciate our natural world and to ensure this link is not broken again.

Figure 3. Mangrove seedling, Mangawhai, New Zealand (Source: Author).

**Funding sources:**

No funding sources for this piece.

**Acknowledgments:**

No acknowledgements for this piece.

## References

Curwood, S. 2020. Connecting with nature in the time of COVID-19. *The World, Living on Earth*, 8 April. Available: https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-04-08/connecting-nature-time-covid-19. Accessed 14 May 2020.

Dencer-Brown, A.M. 2019. Investigating the Social-ecological Trade-offs Between Removing and Preserving Mangroves in New Zealand. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.

Dencer-Brown, A.M, Alfaro, A.C & Milne, S. 2019. Muddied Waters: Perceptions and Attitudes towards Mangroves and Their Removal in New Zealand. *Sustainability*. 11, 2361. DOI:10.3390/su11092631.

McLintock, A.H. 1966. Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. Available: https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/manukau-harbour/page-2. Accessed 12 April 2020.

Pannell, J. L., Dencer-Brown, A.M., Greening, S.S., Hume, E. A., Jarvis, R.M., Mathieu, C., Mugford, J. & Runghen, R. 2019. An early career perspective on encouraging collaborative and interdisciplinary research in ecology. *Ecosphere.* 10, e02899. DOI:10.1002/ecs2.2899.

Sakulku, J. 2011. The Impostor Phenomenon. *The Journal of Behavioural Science*. 6(1): 75-97. DOI:10.14456/ijbs.2011.6.

Salem, M. E & Mercer, D. E. 2012. The economic value of mangroves: a meta-analysis. *Sustainability.* 4: 359–383. DOI:10.3390/su4030359.

Schwab, K. 2016. The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond. *World Economic Forum*, 14 January. Available: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/. Accessed 13 April 2020.

Tomlinson, P.B. 1994. *The botany of mangroves.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme). 2017. Indigenous people and nature tradition conservation. Available: https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-people-and-nature-tradition-conservation. Accessed 14 May 2020.