

# Weaving selves: students' insights into identity, learning and storytelling in digital spaces

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore how digital learning design can create relational spaces for Moana students to share knowledge and express identity through (counter) storytelling. The authors report on how a Moana-centred website was used to support students' digital composition of multimodal stories.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using a design-based research approach, qualitative data were gathered across three phases. Students' insights informed the design and functionality of the website. Their engagement with the site and reflections inform our understanding of their developing educational identities.

**Findings** – Findings highlighted how culturally responsive digital environments with embedded relational principles support identity exploration and meaningful engagement for Moana students.

**Practical implications** – This research contributes to the understanding of how digital learning spaces can be designed to support the educational identity development of students.

**Originality/value** – It demonstrates the application of culturally relevant digital spaces to foster meaningful educational experiences and offer practical insights for educators and designers aiming to create inclusive learning opportunities.

**Keywords** Digital storytelling, Counter storytelling, Educational identities, Digital artefacts, Multimodal, Design-based research

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The present study was premised on the notion that digital learning design can create relational space/s for students to explore digital content and then share their knowledge and interpretations through (counter) storytelling. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), Moana (Pacific heritage) students comprise the majority of learners in some urban schools. The study sought to understand the potential for digital storytelling and counter-storytelling to speak back to deficit narratives and support the development of Moana educational identities (MEI).

Selena has ancestral connections to Samoa, Ngāti Raukawa (Aotearoa, NZ) and settlers who migrated to NZ. She is an indigenous teacher and researcher in Auckland NZ. Rebecca



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is non-indigenous and has ancestral connections to the Pākehā (colonial) peoples in Aotearoa NZ. Rebecca is a researcher of multiliteracies, digital education and writing whose scholarship is focussed on equity of outcomes for students not yet well served by the system. The wider study is Selena's doctoral research and Rebecca provided expertise, mentoring and supervision throughout.

In this article we report insights offered to us by students as they engaged with a Moana-centred website and digital composition activities. The study was conducted in three iterative phases. In the first phase a website was developed for this study where multimodal Moana stories were curated in a way that was intended to connect with Moana students' cultural identities. In phase two, students used these cultural connections to support the authorship of digital artefacts (e.g. digital counter-stories) for the exploration of their developing *educational* identities. In the third phase, students offered us their reflections on both their website use and their educational identities as Moana students (Moana Education Identities; MEI) (see [Figure 4](#)). Within each phase, students provided insights through individual survey responses, focus groups and their digital artefacts. We report on students' reflections on their experiences during this process, as we understood them, and therefore what we learned from them about designing learning opportunities for Moana students.

In the study MEI are where the intersectionality operates as the "opposite" of stereotype threat. Students can succeed at school because of their strong links to culture. Thus, culture and educational identity are inseparable the study.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

- RQ1. What is the potential for digital storytelling and digital counter-storytelling to support the development of Moana educational identities?
- RQ2. Within the context of engaging with a website designed to promote cultural connections, how did the participating Moana students define their educational identities?

### **Educational identities, digital spaces and Moana students**

Moana peoples have been expert navigators around Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) for centuries. Most recent post-colonial migration waves of Moana peoples to Aotearoa, NZ from many Pacific nations peaked from the early 1960s. Politically charged terms such as Pacific peoples, Pasifika, Pacific Islanders and Moana reflect government constructed, pan-ethnic categories that emerged through colonial systems that sought to manage migration, resources and enact racialised policy practices in Aotearoa NZ. These terms often result in the homogenising of diverse cultural identities across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa ([Samu, 2006](#); [Anae, 2001](#); [Salesa, 2017](#)). In recent times, some of these terms have been reclaimed and recontextualised by Moana communities and scholars as markers of solidarity, Indigenous oceanic identity and political resistance to colonial epistemologies ([Hau'ofa, 1994](#); [Teaiwa, 2014](#); [Lopesi, 2021](#)). We embrace all these characterisations and interpret these terms interchangeably. When describing the students and website in this study, we have chosen to use the word Moana. The 26 students (9–13-year-olds) who contributed to this study were first, second or third generation Moana peoples. As the digital world expands possibilities for communication and (dis)connection, the younger diasporic generations continue to negotiate their identities – cultural and others. Interacting with and within digital spaces adds another, constantly shifting, element to the ways that Moana people relate to each other and others, within a cultural worldview that highlights relationality and unseen, but felt, connections.

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To frame this study, we used the Moana conception of *vā*, through Selena’s Samoan lens, to act – as a relational frame woven throughout this study and serving as a paradigm of critique for all our decisions. *Vā* is an indigenous term deeply rooted and therefore nuanced in Pacific languages, cultures and spiritual underpinnings (Wendt, 1996; Mo’a, 2015; Lopesi, 2021). From a Samoan perspective, the *vā* consists of the *vā feāloa’i* (social relationality) and *vā tapuia* (spiritual relationality) (Tui Atua, 2009; Mo’a, 2015; Simanu, 2002; Tuagalu, 2008). *Vā* can be glossed as “space between people or things” (Ka’ili, 2017, p. 89) and considered to be enacted relationally through acts of maintaining these spaces. *Vā* principles were identified – respect, reciprocity, responsibility and reverence – and we used these principles within the iterative research design, to engage responsively with participants and to question and critique our own analyses. The *vā* principles acted as ‘checkpoints’ to return to, throughout the study.

The *vā* has been conceptualised in the digital space. Koya Vaka’uta (2017) first explored the idea of digital interactions as happening between existing, seen/unseen, known/unknown traditions, expectations and ways of communicating. She named the Pacific specific *digital vā* as a relational space or place that holds tensions and potentials for technology-led futures. Other Pacific scholars have built on this notion (Lopesi, 2021; Fa’aea *et al.*, 2021), recognising that digital spaces can alter face-to-face practices and ways of being with the potential to enhance and/or break communication pathways. Digital spaces are not neutral and not representative. They encompass the politics associated with cultural and social power, popular phenomena, differential access and technological opportunities. Nevertheless, they are here and young people are immersed in them.

Digital technologies are a part of daily life for many Pacific families in Aotearoa. Each technological evolution brings adaptations to communication and literacy opportunities (Head *et al.*, 2023). The influence of colonial powers has created challenges still being dealt with today in Aotearoa and across the Pacific (Collins, 2021). Indigenous ways of being and thinking are underrepresented in texts (including online and multimodal texts) used in classrooms (Terras *et al.*, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Through digital innovation educators have increasing opportunities for a more equitable approach to accessing resources and content.

One such opportunity is access to and authorship of digital content. Ways that Moana youth navigate and engage with online content to create and re-create their knowledge and identities is largely unknown. In this study, digital spaces were designed purposefully to showcase multimodal Pacific content. In doing so, we explored how digital (counter) stories, created by Moana students, supported their exploration of their identities, including their educational identities.

Both digital storytelling and multimodal authorship use the affordances of technologies and digital spaces to mediate indigenous knowledges (Wicker and Ruan, 2023). Moana centric content can play an important role in fostering Moana identities through the integration of indigenous epistemologies within contemporary literacy practices (Mills *et al.*, 2016). By exploring and responding to the website content and provocations, Pacific students encountered open-ended, multimodal tasks that encouraged them to express their cultural identities, make connections to their lives and create authentic digital artefacts (Rigney, 2020). These student-created artefacts contributed to the on-going negotiation of MEI: how students see themselves – as individual learners – and as part of a collective (Meiklejohn-Whiu, 2024).

### Storied connections create counter-stories

This study draws on intersecting views of composing, storytelling and teaching as relational (Hoskins and Jones, 2017) and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981), participation (Rogoff *et al.*, 2018)

that both reflects and shapes identities over time. The website provided virtual spaces where, through stories, ancestral voices were available for exploration, for Moana students to shape their own narratives, informed by these inherited narratives (Goodson and Gill, 2014). Through this process of weaving voices and possibilities, young people draw from both their inherent and their inherited literacies (Hetaraka *et al.*, 2023).

Aligned with Moana ways of seeing the world, connections within digital spaces have been theorised as dynamic and relational (Mo'a, 2015; Koya Vaka'uta, 2017), focusing attention on the shifting sets of relations as people bump into each other online (Terras *et al.*, 2015). Storytelling has long been known to be identity work, steeped in connections and relationality. Through the sharing and creating of stories, new and old relationships are ignited. Culturally and relationally, storytelling and listening can be the catalyst for new understandings:

Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships [...] They are active agents within a relational world [...] (Kovach, 2000 p. 94).

Storytelling and stories have an impact on creator and the receiver, and the future audiences are part of the unknown. Counter-storytelling is defined by critical race theory scholars as storytelling that challenges (or casts doubt) on accepted perspectives and ideas, especially those seen as natural by dominant groups (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). In this article we explore students' contributions, views of themselves, of learning, of story and of storytellers and their reflections on using the website for connecting to these aspects of themselves through the artefacts they created. We use students' responses, as we understood them, to understand the educational potential of a website designed to open a digital counter-storytelling space.

In digital spaces, stories and artefacts have the potential to transform and be transformed as they interact with new audiences. This can be conceived as enacting the digital *vā* (Koya Vaka'uta, 2017) by maintaining the relational space between the human and non-human, with potential to influence and transform relationships and interactions. Potential transformation is influenced by changing relationships within yourself and with others, through interactions (Mila-Schaaf and Hudson, 2009). Each person interacting with digital stories and artefacts brings with them different sets of relations. These relations extend beyond the seen into the unseen, over time and space. In this study, the website offered access to digital spaces with possibilities for relationships with "physical" (Salmond, 2012) cultural artefacts (i.e. such as barkcloth/tapa/siapo texts). The website stories and content offered the possibility of other connections (unseen), to students' own stories through both living relatives (i.e. discussions with family) and non-living relatives (i.e. no longer living family or stories passed down through those people). The connections that students made became the new stories and artefacts authored by students. Stories passed on from Elders and ancestors, and through artefacts and objects act as reminders for Moana peoples of how we are and can "be" in this world. As Marin *et al.* (2020) explained, "stories told by young people are steeped in the conservation of cultural tradition and include the revoicing of the discourses of their cultural forbearers (ancestors, elders, and contemporaries)" (p. 2201). Moana-centric content provides opportunity for re-storying of values, ideas and narratives held by students, their memories or the memories of their families.

### **Designing a website for and with Moana learners**

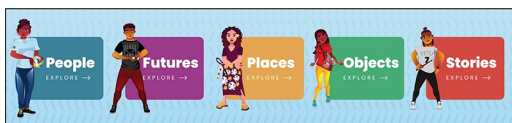
In this study, the website was curated to counter the existing digital experience: to critique, challenge norms and explore power relationships and practices in everyday life (Luke, 2012)

and to reflect what students told us about themselves, about learning and about stories. Content for the site was selected from G-rated public digital artefacts available, in various formats: artist installations, spoken word, poetry, Pacific dance, music and objects. The texts selected were therefore a collection of entertaining, enjoyable, educational and engaging stories or artefacts.

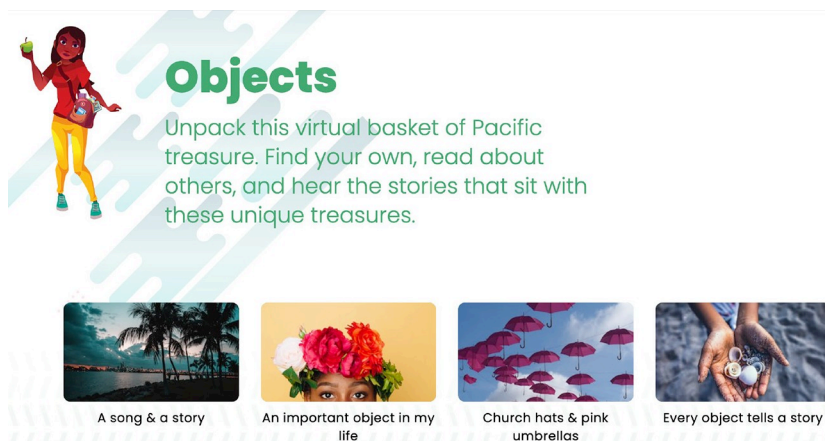
The content featured diverse Pacific professionals across arts, trades, medicine, law and sport, with attention to gender, experience levels and contemporary relevance. The site's categories of people, places, stories, objects and futures, were designed to foster connections, encouraging students to imagine futures grounded in their heritage. Most digital content was created by Pacific authors and sourced from publicly accessible platforms like YouTube (with credit given). [Figure 1](#) is a screenshot of the website categories. [Figure 2](#) is a screenshot of what a student would see when opening the objects category.

The website design centred the relationship between students, content and their lived experiences, prioritising visibility and relatability. Content featured personal and collective narratives – these stories allowed students to see themselves and others reflected. The website also offered the students critical engagement opportunities through prompts and activities that encouraged exploration of Moana identities. The approach, informed by student contributions, invited learners to reflect on texts in relation to their own worlds and the re-shaping of possible futures. Two examples from the website prompts are shown in [Figure 3](#).

Moana literacies were embedded within the website through multimodal representations aligned with the NZ Arts curriculum (visual arts, dance, drama and music). These modalities enabled Pacific storytelling through song and movement, reflecting diverse forms of cultural expression and sensemaking.



**Figure 1.** Screenshot of website categories  
Source: Artist: Joe Faga; Graphic designer: Fraser Tebbutt



**Figure 2.** Screenshot of the objects category and some possible choices

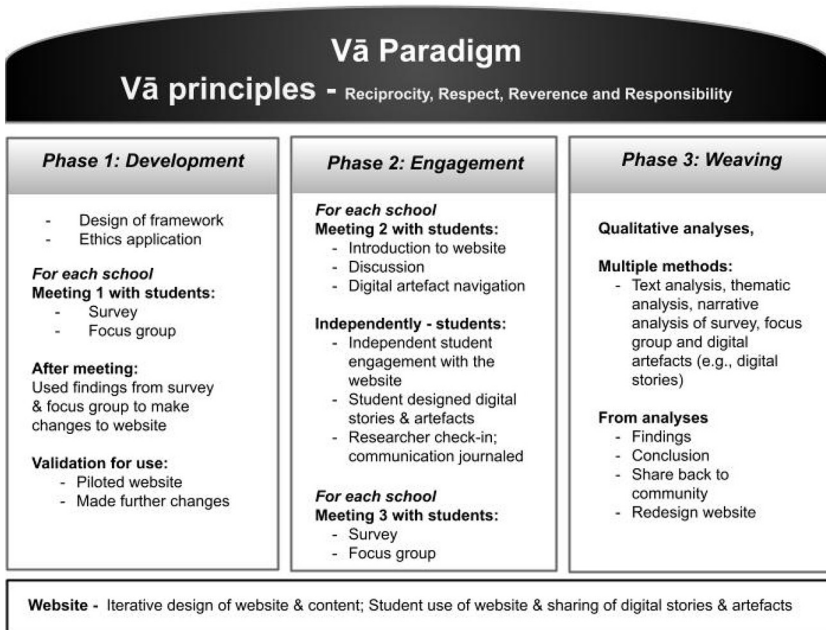


**Figure 3.** Two screenshots of Response prompts  
**Note(s):** DLO = digital learning object

The design aimed to support students' Moana identity exploration by connecting them with Pacific artists and their work. Story creation using Moana artefacts was conceptualised as counter-storying, echoing. The website's design thus engaged with dual aims of fostering creativity and criticality (Robertson and Wagner, 2012), linking Pacific visual arts, artefacts and narratives. Student reflections highlighted the importance of both individual achievement and collaboration. The site facilitated this through offline (i.e. conversations with family, peers) and online interactions (i.e. multimodal texts), while also enabling individual engagement (i.e. creating their own stories).

## Methods

A multiple-methods approach to a design based research (DBR) process was used to develop the site, engage with the site and then reflect on the site (see Figure 4). DBR has methodological flexibility as a characteristic and thus provided an opportunity to listen to



**Figure 4.** Design based research study overview

student views about learning and to ask how they had chosen to interact with the website content. [Figure 4](#) shows an overview of DBR phases used in this study.

The nature of evolving technologies and online movements are complementary to both the DBR approach and to the vā paradigm and principles in this study. Using a website allowed content from multiple sites (e.g. CoconetTV) and other digital content (e.g. NZ school journal stories) to be integrated for the students. Methodological flexibility, an iterative approach through DBR and indigenous frameworks supported the potential for this study to contribute to students being successful in creating digital stories from their engagement with the website.

To hold transformative power, critical reflection is key. Using a DBR approach, qualitative data were collected across three phases – (i) development phase – grounding and conjecturing; (ii) engagement phase – iterating; and (iii) weaving phase – reflecting ([Hoadley and Campos, 2022](#)). Analyses of student voice (Survey 1, FG 1) contributed to an initial iteration of the website which was piloted then introduced to the two groups of students who then engaged independently with the site for three months. At the end of the three-month trial period, the reflective voice of students was collected.

### Participants

Student contributors to the study were recruited from two schools in Auckland, NZ. Both authors had worked as researchers with the schools and some of the teachers. The two schools have efficient 1:1 digital infrastructure and as part of their digital programme students were already “CyberSmart”, familiar with the Google classroom suite of tools and had access or owned their digital devices. Twenty-six students, all of Moana heritage, across two school sites and four year levels (Years 5–8) agreed, with their families’ approval, to take part in the study. [Table 1](#) shows the number of student participants across the four year levels.

Across the survey and focus group measures, participation numbers varied. Participation numbers for each measure are shown in [Table 2](#).

#### Online surveys

A qualitative online survey was used in the first two phases. The main purpose of the survey was to find out about student perspectives on their MEI. The framework for the questions arose from the literature about Pacific values and education, and storytelling combined with

**Table 1.** Student participants

Students	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Total
No. of students	3	7	5	11	26

**Table 2.** Student contributors for all measures

Schools	Survey – development phase	Focus group – development* phase	Survey – engagement phase	Focus group – engagement** phase
School 1	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 10	<i>n</i> = 6	<i>n</i> = 3
School 2	<i>n</i> = 16	<i>n</i> = 16	<i>n</i> = 8	<i>n</i> = 9
Total	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 26	<i>n</i> = 14	<i>n</i> = 12

**Note(s):** \*Face to face; \*\*online

the authors' experience in educational settings with Moana students. [Figure 5](#) shows the survey and focus group question themes used in phase 1 and 2.

#### *Focus group interviews*

Focus groups were completed in two phases and enacted through the Pacific conversational method of “talanoa” (e.g. [Ka’ili, 2017](#)). They were held in each of the two schools during school hours or online. Selena worked with an open-ended question format including asking students how they might choose to introduce themselves, how they would describe themselves as learner and what their Pacific superpower might be as a learner. Focus groups were relational, nurturing the vā and allowing for space as students thought through their responses both in person and online. Some Pacific scholars refer to this relational approach to conversation as “e-talanoa” which centres the “ethical responsibility prioritising principles of generosity and care” ([Fa’avae et al., 2022](#), p. 394) that are privileged within talanoa ([Ka’ili, 2017](#)). Generosity and care extend to time together and include wait time, which in Pacific spaces, often means being comfortable with silences ([Boon-Nanai et al., 2022](#)). Relational principles derived from Moana epistemologies (vā, talanoa) allowed for students to explore their beliefs, values and perspectives. Group interaction among students was encouraged, enabling a more relaxed discussion.

#### *Data analysis and interpretation*

Before the website was used by the students, layers of analyses considered all the “invisible” interactions between the content producers. One layer was Selena, as the website designer/curator, and then content (i.e. stories, provocation/prompts). These layers, effectively the vā

<b>Phase 1: Development</b>	<b>Phase 2: Engagement</b>
<b>Survey question themes &amp; examples</b>	<b>Survey question themes &amp; examples</b>
<b>Stories</b> - 'What kind of stories do you enjoy?'	<b>Stories</b> - 'What stories are important to your family?'
<b>Describing identity</b> - 'If someone asks you where you are from, how do you reply?'	<b>Describing identity</b> - 'What does being from the Pacific mean to you?'
<b>Being a learner</b> - 'How do you describe yourself as a learner?'	<b>Being a learner</b> - 'What do you think a learner is?'
<b>At school</b> - 'What makes learning fun for you?'	<b>At school</b> - 'What makes learning fun for you?'
<b>Focus group question themes &amp; examples</b>	<b>Focus group question themes &amp; examples</b>
<b>Online activities</b> - 'What do you do online?'	<b>Website</b> - 'What did you find interesting on the website?'
<b>Describing identity</b> - 'How do you introduce yourself?'	<b>Identities</b> - 'What do you say to introduce yourself?'
<b>Being a learner</b> - 'How do you describe someone who is a learner?'	<b>Being a learner</b> - 'How would you describe yourself as a learner?'

**Figure 5.** Question themes in the survey and focus groups

relationships, underscored the complexity of the analysis. In particular, with digital stories and artefacts created by students, analysis needed to consider both visible social dimensions and metaphysical aspects embedded in stories and dialogue. As Braun and Clarke (2022) note, analysis is inherently situated and shaped by broader power structures which historically marginalised indigenous knowledge systems through colonisation – therefore analysis is never neutral or objective. The *vā* is recognised as an indigenous, Moana, way of foregrounding the complexities and subjectivities within the study. A combination of the *vā* – as a paradigm and as principles for framing the analysis – and reflexive thematic analysis (TA) were used to analyse the survey and focus group data. Braun and Clarke’s (2022) six-phase reflexive TA was used to interpret the data, offering a flexible process suited to navigating multiple knowledge systems and worldviews. Its emphasis on nuance, complexity and contradiction aligned with the study’s aim to explore layered meanings within the data. Initial familiarisation was conducted in Excel, followed by coding in NVivo. Final theme definition and write-up were informed by ongoing reflexive engagement, including researcher journal entries, memos and analytical notes.

### Findings

The findings presented here are students’ insights into MEI. They show how (counter)storytelling might promote MEI through invitation to connect with Moana content. We present findings relating to both the (counter) storytelling and learning aspects of MEI (i) being a learner across contexts and (ii) stories from a Moana perspective.

#### *Being a learner across contexts*

Responses to questions about “being a learner” revealed a set of attributes, grouped as either individual/distinctive or collective/relational and summarised in Table 3. While some traits span both categories, Pacific students in this study emphasised that learning is not solely individual – if you are a learner, you also consider and support others too.

This student highlighted the individual attributes alongside the collective/relational characteristics of a good learner:

**Table 3.** Individual and collective attributes of a learner identified by students

Individual/ distinctive attributes	Collective/relational characteristics
Intelligent	Inspiring
Hard worker	Demonstrates/shows
Kind	Offers kind words
Generous	Encouraging
Reliable	Loyal
Perseveres	Motivate others
Focused	Collaborator
Nice	Interested in others
Determined	Good listener
Confident	Contributes
Has good ideas	Helps others
Positive attitude	Respectful
Disciplined	Caring
Takes risks in learning	Loving
Confident with opinions	Role model

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[...] someone who tries their best in all subjects or in everything they do. They motivate not only others but themselves. They have the confidence to participate in everything, take risks and also focus on something they are working on [...] (Year 8 student, Survey 1).

When considering how they saw themselves as a learner, another Year 8 initially described themselves as, “Being a leader who collaborates in everything”. As the engagement phase (2) was coming to an end, the same student wrote:

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I describe myself as respectful because I respect everyone’s opinion. I respect what people in the past sacrificed for the people to live well in this generation.

As well as reflecting Pacific values, this statement reflects and reinforces the embedded nature of the relational, which is evident in how this student considered their relationships to people and things, past and present. It articulates a deep respect and recognition of the connection to relationships from the past, which influence students’ futures. Aiga (family; extended family) were also highlighted in responses and discussions.

Aiga are central to ways of being and doing for many Pacific people. The strength and support offered for parents and their children within aiga are visible compared to other Western, nuclear family models and connected to students’ notions of responsibility, respect and reciprocity. In their responses, students mentioned aiga as role models and providing necessary support and involvement in learning. When considering who a good learner is, students had some ideas:

I think good learners are my parents because they migrated here without my grandparents [...] they came here with their knowledge [...] and make a good living for me and my siblings. (Year 8 student, FG 2)

Parents were observed and looked up to each day. Mothers were acknowledged as role models, helpers and good learners. One student said that their mother teaches the family things that they can use in their future. Another year 8 student spoke about how they learned a valuable lesson from their mother: “you can never accomplish anything until you try.” (Survey 2) Fathers and a brother were identified as learners. Fathers because they teach, learn from their mistakes and because one father had recently graduated. A brother was mentioned because of his focus and commitment to reading.

Aiga goes beyond parents and siblings, as two students identified their cousins as people who model a love of learning and hard work – “Even on the weekend” (Year 6 student, FG2). Grandparents also featured. One student shared that their grandparents help them be a good learner by encouraging them to listen to their parents. The importance of attending school, the stories they tell their grandchildren, the life learning from being the first to arrive in Aotearoa and working hard for their families – all contributed to the evidence that grandparents are learners. Students with grandparents who were active in their lives reflected the value that these relationships bring to their identities. These relational principles included both physical (e.g. discussions with a parent) and the metaphysical, (e.g. making someone who has died, proud).

Students described learning across a range of contexts. Some mentioned school, others home and others different contexts. These contexts reflected places where students knew they learnt different skills – “life skills,” school subjects, leadership skills and access to different languages. When talking about being a learner, one student shared details about the language rotations at their church:

[...] we just have an English week for praying [...] and the next week we do a Tongan, we sing Tongan, we pray in Tongan, and we have a translator as well and we do the same thing in Samoan. (Year 8 student, FG1)

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Students selected specific skills that they considered potentially useful as learners. Attributes such as being a hard worker, “being bossy” and learning from others were mentioned. An example of this comes from a student who wrote about their arguing skills:

My parents said to me that I can make a good argument with them [...] they say, you should take that into your future [in studying law]. (Year 8 student, Survey 2)

Students’ reflections on learning extended beyond the classroom, encompassing experiences at home, in sports, online, in church and with aiga. These varied contexts revealed that students held multiple, context-specific understandings of themselves as learners.

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### Stories

Stories are an integral part of Indigenous cultures (Smith *et al.*, 2016; Cajete, 2017). Students were asked about stories they enjoy, how they hear and find stories and how important stories are to them and their aiga. Responses to these questions provided an indication about access students had to their own stories. Across the responses, students mentioned a range of stories – action, mystery, fiction, true stories and Pacific, cultural and Bible stories. They spoke of stories with connections, ones with happy endings and feeling good at the end of the story. One Year 8 student stated:

I think everyone has a different story, but they all connect in some sort of way [...] but I think we mostly like the stories about Polynesians and how they grew up in NZ because [...] [they are] our stories. (Survey 2)

#### *Multiple sources for resourcing stories*

For the intermediate school aged students (Years 7 and 8, 11–13 year olds) grandparents featured as key storytellers. This resonates with Smith *et al.* (2016) when they stated that “the storyteller may be as important as the story” (p. 138). Although parents were mentioned, they were not featured as the “go-to” storytellers for these students. The Year 8 students’ responses, in particular, acknowledged the people who tell them or share stories with them. Grandparents featured as the people who would either share stories voluntarily or who could be approached for stories:

My Nana used to say what they did when she was a little girl and what she did growing up and when they moved from Samoa to New Zealand. (Year 8 student, FG1).

Stories from a grandparent often included what it was like to grow up in the Pacific islands or stories about their experiences with their siblings. Marin *et al.* (2020) described such stories as epistemological practices that can contribute to reciprocal learning and possibilities. One student spoke of listening to stories when someone passes away in their family. In more school-based perspectives, Year 5 and Year 6 students referred to the library and two online book app/programs that allow them to select their book/s. One student spoke briefly of “researching their own family stories.” (FG 2) Overall, to resource their stories, most students mentioned accessing older aiga who took time to share with them.

#### *Stories provide connections*

Moana learners were conscious of how their histories influenced their present-day situations. Many of the students were curious to find out more about their ancestors’ stories and culture(s). A Year 8 student reflected that they would like:

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To learn about culture because we are growing up in New Zealand and we don't really know about our culture (Survey 1).

Students sought connections through stories. They wanted to know how they were connected to the stories of their ancestors, what those people were like and how they are similar or different. A student mentioned the genealogy of their surname and the stories that might emerge from understanding more about it. There was an awareness that by being here in Aotearoa, connections to their Pacific heritage are waning:

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I don't know anything/much about my ancestors. (Year 6–8 students, FG 1)

In recognising these tenuous strands of connection to their ancestral stories, students understood the value of learning from stories about their culture(s):

I am interested in finding [out] more about [my ancestors] because I feel that they are the reason that we are the way we are, and that without them things would be different. (Year 8 student, Survey 1).

This comment reflects respect as a core principle of the *vā*, highlighting the student's awareness of those parents, grandparents and *aiga* – who have shaped their life. Such reflections reveal a reverence for ancestral contributions and the relational foundations of their identities.

#### *Stories can teach*

Wanting to know, to understand and to learn, are all ideas that came from students who identified stories as a way of teaching them something. This Year 8 student provides an indicative comment:

A good story for me is basically something that you learn from. It can never be a happy ending, it can never be a sad end but always one thing you can learn from. (Survey 1)

Several students echoed similar sentiments, describing how learning occurred through mistakes, disciplinary moments and intergenerational storytelling, particularly from or alongside grandparents. These narratives conveyed values such as respect and self-discipline. One student, for example, gained insight into their family's immigrant struggles through such stories, deepening their appreciation for the sacrifices that shaped their present.

The notion of 'stories that teach' is intertwined with the *vā* principles of responsibility and reciprocity. As students grow, through these stories, they are being spoken to about their responsibilities. Students are being told through these stories of how reciprocal relationships work and how they impact the *aiga* as a whole.

#### *Stories not yet shared*

In some circumstances, students discussed or wrote about stories that were withheld or remained untold. Students were aware of the reasons why stories may not be shared with them and showed acceptance and empathy for the storyteller. When asked about their thoughts on not being told some stories, students had some thoughts. This student stated:

[...] because some [stories] they think we are not ready for yet and because they [the stories] hurt them as well – talking about it. (Year 8 student, FG2)

Students recognised that not all stories are ones that are easy to tell. Some need to be "persuaded" out of the grandparent; some indicated that their youthful enthusiasm meant they are not ready for the story. Another Year 8 student, on reflecting about their lack of access to stories, said:

I think our family is still in the process of making our own stories. (Survey 2)

## Discussion

The findings offer some insights into embedding Pacific values, identities and principles into websites and learning designs in ways that engage students with who they are. In this study, these designs sought to open spaces for students to speak back to dominant narratives. When designing learning around storytelling with Moana students, key features were reflected for their developing MEI:

- Learning is collective and individual, across times and places. A learner is a teacher.

Caring is embedded in the reciprocal relationships that shape Moana spaces, where the notion of self is understood as relational and deeply woven with collective responsibilities (Mo'a, 2015). Findings from the study showed that students did not frame learning as an individual endeavour; rather, being a "good learner" attending to, supporting and considering others as part of their MEI. Students described themselves as carrying their full identities— across school, home, community and wider relational contexts. This reflects a holistic understanding of learning and belonging. It also highlights the positive implications of inviting students to learn through opportunities that weave across multiple selves and value the stories that they bring with them – reflecting the belief that everyone is more than one story:

- Stories are voiced with purpose.

People have been telling stories since the beginning of time. These stories carry the intentions, histories and identities of those who told them and those who retell and/or re-experience them. (digital) storytellers and their contexts are inseparable from the narratives they share. When Moana students are invited into learning spaces that honour their languages, values and relational ways of knowing, they have increased access to more equitable educational experiences. For this to happen, it requires the educator, the learning designer, to move beyond monolingual and monocultural assumptions to recognise the plurality of learning spaces. As the study findings suggest, ongoing research is needed to further understand the reshaping of these spaces:

- Existing digital spaces do not invite participation: invitation is a part of educational learning design.

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of digital storytelling as a culturally responsive pedagogical tool in Indigenous education that offered students opportunity to step outside the content consumer role. By designing Moana-centric digital spaces and multimodal resources alongside opportunities for multimodal composition, educators can foster environments where learners are empowered to express their identities, engage in meaningful dialogue and navigate diverse perspectives.

Findings from this study show that the *vā* principles of respect, reciprocity, responsibility and reverence, enables students to author and create digital stories that connected to their experiences as well as people, places and cultural artefacts. The website content became a catalyst for engagement and a lever of which Moana students could discuss or learn from. Moana-centric content acted as an invitation for students to draw on their cultural and other identities, contributing their perspectives to digital (counter) stories. Their digital artefacts and stories were individual expressions of digital stimuli, students' own stories, peer dialogue, family discussions – as narrative resources available to them. This study supports our understanding of relational interactions, grounded in the *vā*, that support the intersection of Moana educational identity exploration, storytelling and learning within digital spaces.

## Conclusions

In this study, findings show how digital learning design can affirm educational identities and open up learning opportunities. The use of design-based research as an iterative, more flexible approach to research was important. DBR allowed for the duality of both indigenous and western frames, to work in a way that was complimentary. DBR allowed for student insights to inform refinements to the website, to suit participants. DBR phases supported analyses and authentic results. The study shows how all students can have access to invitations and permissions to bring all of who they are to their learning spaces. These findings also show the 'inherited and inherent' nature (Hetaraka *et al.*, 2023) of Pacific values expressed through the student voice collected across the iterative DBR phases of the study. As demonstrated in their composed artefacts, students' responses wove the social, metaphysical and academic (Koya Vaka'uta, 2017; Mo'a, 2015; Tuagalu, 2008) as aspects of their identities. The interconnection of who they are to those around them was embedded in student expressions.

Students expressed strong relational values, emphasising connections with parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, friends and peers. When discussing learning, collective traits were as prominent as individual ones. Older students demonstrated leadership and valued respect, particularly for aiga members who held cultural knowledge and stories. Students also showed empathy towards those who had yet to share their stories, recognising the significance of timing and personal readiness. Student voice from this group revealed a desire to learn more about their ancestors, their stories and histories. From almost all students, there was a deep pride stemming from knowing about who they are and where they come from.

Supported by a Moana-centric digital space, Moana students, through their stories, revealed not only who they are but who they aspire to be. Indigenous students understand learning as both a collective and individual process, something not constrained by time and place. Digital storytelling therefore potentially enables Indigenous communities to reclaim narrative control and assert their developing identities. This can be done alongside highlighting the importance of respecting Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural protocols. The implications of this research extend beyond theoretical understanding to practical applications that support inclusive, identity-affirming digital spaces and productive learning experiences. Such applications support the weaving of identities and narratives within digital spaces and places, while maintaining a stance that allows for difference, dialogue and diversity.

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**Further reading**

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