

Tikanga Tips: Māori Customs and Practices Relating to Learning and Teaching at Victoria University

Generally speaking, *tikanga* are Māori customary practices or behaviours. The concept is derived from the Māori word '*tika*' which means 'right' or 'correct' so, in Māori terms, to act in accordance with *tikanga* is to behave in a way that is culturally proper or appropriate.

Most people prefer not to act in ways that are offensive to others, so this list has been compiled in an effort to increase awareness of Māori culture and to help avoid confusion or uncomfortable moments when people may be unsure of what to do.

The basic principles underpinning the *tikanga* noted below are common throughout New Zealand. However, different *iwi* (tribes), *hapū* (sub tribes) and *marae* (Māori community meeting places) may have their own variations. The guidelines below relate to practices endorsed by Te Kawa a Māui, the School of Māori Studies, and modelled at the University's Te Herenga Waka Marae, and are relevant for any Victoria University campus or event.

- Heads** **Avoid** touching another person's head, unless invited.
Why? Māori people regard the head as very *tapu* (sacred).
- Pillows & Hats** **Avoid** sitting directly on pillows or cushions. They can however be used to prop up your back. **Avoid** putting hats on food tables.
Why? This is linked to the idea that heads are *tapu* so anything that relates to heads, like pillows or hats, should also be treated carefully. (see 'Food' below).
- Food** **Avoid** passing food over anybody's head.
Why? There are many Māori rituals and practices relating to food. In a teaching and learning context, it is common for Māori to share food as a means of welcoming people, celebrating success or building rapport. However, another important function of food is to remove *tapu* so it needs to be handled carefully around things that are considered to be *tapu*.
- Tables & Bags** **Avoid** sitting on tables, particularly tables with food on them or those likely to have food on them at any point. **Avoid** putting bags on tables. Instead place them on the floor or a chair.
Why? Putting your bottom or carry bag on the table is perceived to be unhygienic. Not sitting on tables is also linked to Māori beliefs about the *tapu* nature of bodily wastes and the need to keep them separate from food.
- Speaking** **Avoid** entering and crossing a room while someone in authority is addressing an audience. To avoid offence, either wait quietly by the door until there is a break in the dialogue or, when that is not appropriate, enter as discretely as possible. Try not to walk directly in front of the speaker or, if you can not avoid it, crouch down as you pass as a sign of respect.
Why? Traditionally Māori society is very hierarchical and crossing in front of a more 'senior' person is considered rude.
- Stepping over people** **Avoid** stepping over people, even in crowded teaching spaces when you are trying to find a suitable seat. Ask the person to draw their legs in first, or find another route.
Why? From a Māori cultural perspective, it is considered offensive for a woman to step over a man.

For further information about the reasons behind these and other *tikanga*, see:

Barlow, C. (1991). *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Māori Culture*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

Mead, H. M. (2003). *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values*. Wellington: Huia Ltd.

Tauroa, H. & Tauroa, P. (1986). *Te Marae: a Guide to Customs & Protocol*. Auckland: Reed Methuen.