



Response to
“Body as A Picture Book:
A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos”
by Paul Graham

by Jacob Tumanako

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Paul Graham's paper "Body as A Picture Book: A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos" leans into the art of creating space for conversation, utilising tattoos as an opening to narrative yarns with young people. I feel a connection to this paper as I'm interested in expanding the realm of narrative practice and finding new ways to push boundaries beyond current practice. I also work with young people, and understand the need to walk alongside, looking for doorways. The keys to these doorways are held by the young people we work with and are only available when we make space for what's important to them. I am also a Māori man with tattoos, or tā moko as I call them. Each and every line within my tā moko has meaning, and it is this meaning that makes my identity visible.

Tattoos are like a time capsule, sharing a story located within a specific time in history. The meaning we place on this form of documentation can shift depending on where it's placed, and according to the condition. Paul shares a story about a young person who used a fading temporary tattoo as a marker, a metaphor symbolising the idea that anger can fade. Once the tattoo is gone, so too is anger. This also conjures the idea that there is a set of skills and knowledge associated with a fading tattoo, opening a doorway into a story of hopes and dreams.

As a result of reading Paul's paper, the way I see documentation has shifted. I never thought of the idea that tattoos are a form of documentation; how documentation can be shifting; how our relationship with documentation can influence the stories we tell ourselves; how a fading tattoo shifts the way we interact with the stories in relation to it. Documentation can be dynamic, an evolving story, and our relationship with that story can also shift.

Another aspect of the paper that stirred something in me is the idea that tattoos can be acts of resistance. When considering Western societal norms, getting a tattoo can be seen as an act that counters the views of those who buy into negative discourses about tattooing. This is something that holds a place within my life, as someone subject to assumptions and bias because of the positioning of those wearing tattoos as antisocial. Paul's writing prompts me to see the power in a tattoo, the courage behind it: the tattoo as an act of resistance.

This paper is a great example of finding ways to open doors for narrative discussions, being decentred and being open to walking alongside a young person as they make meaning of their world. What stood out for me was the way in which dominant societal stories influence our own stories. However, when we think of dominant ideologies, which ones are we talking about? Within many cultures there are differing perspectives, histories and stories that influence the relationships people have with tattoos. For me, tattoos are a reflection of my purakau, a story that exists before and after my time. Being of Māori descent, tā moko has deep spiritual and cultural meaning; however, when I am away from my lands, they have different meanings. They help me to remain connected to my people, my land, my ancestors, both in the past and in the future. Tattoos are doorways within the scope of time, providing an opportunity to expand the boundary of identities.

Paul has devised a way to engage young people that speaks their language. This is important. We all have bias, we all have assumptions, but through the use of tools such as this, we allow space for a young person to share their story, retell it and make meaning of their world. In the end this is our role, right? To find ways to open doorways so that we can sit alongside the people we are privileged to work with as they make meaning and reshape dominant storylines.

Nga mihi

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