

Reflections from the Tairāwhiti Digital Equity Project

An Update on Learning, Leadership, and Community-led Systems Change

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Introduction

This updated reflection builds on our initial learnings from the Tairāwhiti digital equity kaupapa—a community-led movement grounded in care, equity, and collective action. As the project has matured, so too have the relationships, complexities, and aspirations that surround it. What began as a bold response to digital exclusion has become a broader ecosystem effort: one that seeks not only to improve access but to challenge and reshape the systems that maintain inequity.

Rather than treating digital equity as a standalone issue, this mahi has helped surface the deeper questions about resourcing, relationships, and community-led governance. It has made visible both the promise and precarity of building from the ground up.

1. Leaning Into Complexity

One of the clearest insights since our first reflection is this: systems change isn't neat. It doesn't follow a timeline or linear logic. This project has had to embrace the messiness, holding space for uncertainty, while still seeking clarity and action.

We've learned that complexity isn't a barrier. It's a signal that we are working at the right level. Our work exists within a layered system of power, history, infrastructure, and community readiness. Trying to simplify that system risks missing the very dynamics we need to influence. Instead, we've leaned into ecosystem thinking through mapping relationships, identifying leverage points, and choosing our interventions carefully.

Progress in this space often looks like relationships deepening, language evolving, and trust expanding, well before infrastructure or policy catch up.

2. Relational Infrastructure is Everything

While strategy and systems thinking are important, what has sustained this kaupapa are the people and the relationships between them. The early wānanga was a critical turning point. It allowed us to move beyond transactional collaboration into a more intentional, values-based collective. We weren't just aligning on tasks. We were aligning on why this matters, and to whom.

That relational groundwork has paid dividends. Even as capacity fluctuates and external conditions shift, the project holds because people remain connected. Slack, while a useful tool, is not the glue. It's the relationships beneath it that give the tool power.

Investing in relationships is strategic. It's not a soft add-on but rather it's the infrastructure that enables action when the system is in flux.

3. Leadership is Relational, Not Positional

The leadership required for this kaupapa has not come from formal roles. It has emerged through the willingness of individuals to take responsibility, hold space, and keep the kaupapa warm.

Tāiki e! has served as the central coordinating pou for this kaupapa, holding the threads across multiple projects and organisations. Much of this leadership has been invisible, stimulating action, holding relational warmth, supporting accountability. It hasn't been about control, but about creating the conditions for others to lead.

We're beginning to see others step in more confidently. That shift towards shared responsibility and wider ownership will be key to the long-term sustainability of the kaupapa.

4. Joy and Responsibility: What Sustains Us

Despite the weight of the work, what sustains this kaupapa is joy. Not joy in the superficial sense, but the deep, affirming joy of seeing our own people thrive. Of serving our Coast and rural communities. Of seeing our rangatahi working alongside our kaumātua, bridging generations in the spirit of learning and transformation.

This joy coexists with a strong sense of responsibility, both to the kaupapa and to one another. That balance is important. If we only carry the burden, burnout is inevitable. But when we stay connected to the bigger vision, the work feels less like survival and more like purpose.

The joy of service, of legacy, and of connection reminds us that this is more than a project. It's a way of living into the future we want to see.

5. Movement Happens in the Margins

One of the most unexpected lessons has been just how much of the real work happens outside formal meetings. Some of our most strategic shifts have emerged from car rides, after-hours kōrero, and unplanned moments of connection.

This isn't incidental, it's part of how Māori communities work. These marginal spaces are where trust is built, where ideas are tested, and where energy is exchanged. Systems change isn't just

made in workshops or frameworks. It's made in the margins, through deep listening and relational insight.

We continue to lean into these informal moments, knowing that often the most important breakthroughs are not scheduled, they're felt.

6. Navigating Systemic Silence

The project has continued to evolve in a context where regional and national support for digital equity is inconsistent at best. Regional strategies that once held promise have lost momentum. National policy has shifted, with funding for digital capability and social support systems significantly reduced. These changes have created gaps both in resourcing and in hope.

Yet the kaupapa hasn't stalled. In the face of systemic silence, the community has stepped forward, not with complaints, but with creativity and resolve. We've built what we could, with what we had.

The insight here isn't that community can fill the gaps—it's that we shouldn't have to. The strength of grassroots leadership must be matched with system-level responsibility. Otherwise, we risk creating a two-speed system whereby communities do the heavy lifting while institutions recede.

7. The Power—and Risk—of Community Stepping Up

Time and again, this project has shown the power of collective action. When resourcing is tight, people show up. When complexity increases, communities lean into one another. This is part of the magic of Māori and community-led systems; we are built for relational responsiveness.

But there's a danger here too: that this resilience gets exploited. That funders and institutions assume "the community will take care of it," and use that as a reason to disinvest or delay.

We must resist this. While kotahitanga is our strength, it is not a substitute for structural support. Communities are not a backup plan. They are a partner. And true partnership means shared responsibility, not downloaded burden.

8. Looking Forward: Sustaining the Kaupapa

If there is one thing to carry forward, it's this: don't fear the complexity, trust the ecosystem. Start where the relationships are strong. Let momentum come from connection, not compliance. And don't be disheartened by systems that don't yet see you. Keep building the model that proves what's possible.

The hope is that over time, more leadership will emerge, more capability will be built, and more resources will follow. But even if they don't, this kaupapa is already changing lives, growing rangatira, and reshaping what digital equity can mean.

As we look to the future, our priorities are clear:

- **Embed a community-led, participatory investment model** that builds collective ownership and reduces competitive scarcity.
- **Strengthen ecosystem infrastructure** by investing in connectors, conveners, and community tech champions.
- **Grow strategic alliances** with iwi, marae, kura, tech partners, and national influencers to scale impact beyond the region.
- **Develop a long-term digital equity strategy** grounded in kaupapa Māori, with measurable wellbeing outcomes and sustained resourcing.
- **Shift the system** by challenging policy assumptions, advocating for equity-focused investment, and holding institutional actors to account.

The kaupapa is moving from proving that it matters to proving what's possible.