

Culturally safe spaces

for Pacific education journeys from the periphery to the centre

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Introduction

When it was suggested I look back on my education journey I knew my migration story was likely mirrored in each of you. So, bearing in mind APSTE's long history as a formally recognised national group for Pacific educators, I decided to focus on the beauty of small culturally safe small spaces and how these set the foundation for Pacific education journeys from the periphery to the centre.

All of us are in education and share the same goals of increasing the educational achievement of all students and more specifically, Pacific students. Enhancing educational achievement is a team effort - 'It takes a whole university staff' to achieve educational successes- Pacific and non-Pacific staff, teaching and professionals and staff across all faculties. Our tertiary institutions have yet to achieve this unity of systems processes and understandings.

All of us share the challenges of being a minority group in a tertiary institution – social, economic, political and, academic. For the very few Pacific staff in tertiary institutions the journey is often a lonely one. However, Pacific knowledges are having a ripple effect on education, teaching and research today and this is largely through the impacts of the small safe **culturally secure spaces set up** - such as ASPTe - where Pacific feelings of identity, belonging, togetherness and singleness of purpose are forged and as described by one Samoan student 'where I can be me' (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014) Warm and fuzzy Pacific spaces are the important starting point. However, today I will focus on the importance of **intentionality** i.e. the deliberate planning, establishing and tracking of the small culturally affirming spaces we set up, so as to make sure we are setting the solid foundation which will inspire Pacific students into even greater educational endeavours. These comments from a UNESCO report (2002) have become my Pacific education mantra:

(that) from the depth of understanding and value of traditional forms students will gain a strong sense of cultural identity and an understanding of who they are ,, this will provide a foundation for the development of further skills and knowledge bases, contexts and understandings for life in the twenty-first century (UNESCO 2002,3)

However, I add one point to the UNESCO statement - the **validity of the 'traditional forms' as knowledge in themselves** (see Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009) Drawing on these beliefs, I propose the va'a tele (double hulled canoe) to be the curriculum guide for Pacific education. The twin hulls of the va'atele represent the bringing together and interplay of traditional and modern knowledge to create the new knowledges that students and communities need if we are to shape with confidence the futures we want for our children and our children's children (see Siilata 2014)

My educational goals are to produce graduates who can sit just as confidently at global decision-making tables as at village fono.

Achieving this blending of knowledges requires a **transformation of the prevailing systems**. In response to the issue of Western academic hegemony, Said has argued the need to create genuinely universal forms of scholarship through ‘the reintegration of all those people and cultures once confined and reduced to peripheral status with the rest of the human race’ (Said 1991 cited in Wesley-Smith 1995:117) This task of bringing the peripheral (Pacific knowledge and people) into the centre so as to form universal forms of scholarship is depicted in Fig 1.

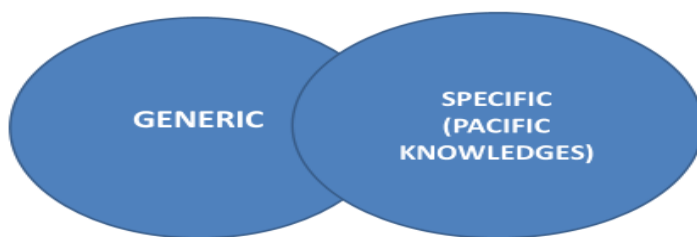


Fig 1: The interplay of generic and Pacific knowledges

This paper

My educational journey is presented in three parts noting changes in educational thinking generally together with views about the place and valuing of Pacific knowledge. In each, I present some of the small Pacific spaces I have been engaged in and highlight the deliberate and intentional planning tracking and evaluation which has taken place in these strategies aimed at moving the Pacific from the periphery towards the central. Part one is my childhood years in which there was almost a separation between home and school learning – home was our culturally secure space. Second, my teaching years, where a growing recognition of *difference* in school curriculums brought confusions as to how schools should, could or would deal with difference. On the positive side, however, these were the years which brought a global (re)awakening to the centrality of the affective in learning, theories such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs self-concept and school achievement, expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies. Part three is a brief review of the years 2006 to the present including the National Pacific Post Graduate Talanoa (2007-) which, in my biased view, is the ultimate culturally safe space for Pacific tertiary students today.

1 School years

When I think of my primary schooling in New Zealand ‘we were all the same’ are the words which come to mind. The school focus was on reading writing and arithmetic and we did all the same curriculum, exams and received the same report sheets (ours were immediately sent back to family in Samoa) In those years, the 9 am chant of ‘ $2 \times 1 = 2$, $2 \times 2 =$ ’ would echo across every playground of

the nation - an absolute example of rote learning ('till understanding was gained' the teachers would say.) At college we all learnt by heart and appreciated the beauty of the language of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets and the universal themes of love, hate, treachery, evil and lust. Lines such as the quality of mercy ... fair daffodils ... water water everywhere... still remain in my mind and, my thinking.

When I was five we went back to Samoa because our grandmother Naitua was not well and so my schooling began at Tanugamanono school. During these months we lived at the back of the village - which was the same back of the village for our numerous trips home in subsequent years, in the years 1980-2006 when we returned to Samoa with our children to live and to our lives in New Zealand. This 'back of the village' was my education - family meetings, games, protocols, sister/ brother relationships, what is of value. Not surprisingly, *our back of the village* behaviours and protocols evolved into the ways we lived our lives in New Zealand – the family gatherings, networks and faalavelave. The back of the village is our standing place our faasinomaga

In these years our home (*more Samoan than the homelands*) was our safe place. We learnt the place of family, faith, relationships, language and 'being Samoan' Our parents worked hard and we worked hard at school. We were a 'straight home after school family' (keep out of trouble) There were few Samoan families in Wellington at the time: we knew everybody, our families met together as a community in our little house on the hill. I felt totally safe because my four brothers and the many cousins who came to live with us could run faster and fight harder than any others in the neighbourhood.

Learnings

Home ways and school ways are different. There is one goal in education and one pathway to achieving this. Home is our culturally safe space.

2 Difference: teacher, lecturer (1966--1980)

I entered Teachers College/ University study – the only Pacific female from a NZ school to do so alongside a small group of scholarship students – during the boom years of the late 60s and 70s when New Zealand's Pacific population had increased significantly. The safe places for me during my tertiary study were: inspiring lecturers, the Honourable Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan who was a student at the time and took me under her wing so graciously, the Maori club at Teachers College and, my family, sports and the church.

I taught with my husband Jim in Maori schools and in Porirua schools for almost ten years. During those years we were part of what I call a NZ educational awakening to the possibility of difference – in students, curriculum and educational outcomes. We witnessed the introduction of a host of policies and practices aimed at ensuring Pacific students learnt the basics so they could enter the mainstream classes. These catch-up activities were along the lines of the US Headstart programme of the time. They were very much a 'bring them up to scratch so they can succeed in THE pathway'

mentality – there was little appreciation or understanding of the knowledge Pacific children were bringing to school.

Two incidents brought home to me the fullest implications of being different:

One of our daughters was part of a new entrant experiment in Porirua aimed at classifying disadvantaged children so they would receive additional support. Undoubtedly this was a well meaning intervention comprising testing for e.g. listening, talking, motor type skills. I wasn't particularly worried because our daughter had been reading at home alongside her older sister and was well into the higher levels of the Little Books being used in infant departments at the time. However, she was classified as disadvantaged. I was told that she just sat and looked at the teacher?

Well, as reported, many Pacific students 'just sit and look at their teachers'. While my response was 'what are you doing as teachers to engage our students/ or any students?' I also felt the full heaviness of the disadvantaged label. I knew I could challenge and/ or work to change this label. But what of the other Pacific (and non-Pacific) students who had been so labelled and who continue to be labelled in this way today?

Around that time also I took my new entrant class on the trip to the Titahi Bay rock pools where one young pupil, just arrived from Samoa, stripped down to his undies and ran straight in! He hadn't seen the sea for a long time and that's what you do.

This incident reinforced again to me the necessary relationship between home and school values, expectations and behaviours. Furthermore, the critical need for policy makers, educators and teachers being aware of and able to read cultural differences, as in this poem:

Listen Teacher Emma Kruse Vaai:

Listen teacher
Listen to me
Don't look away
See my eyes they hold messages
That can make you understand me
Hold my hand and your heart can warm towards me
Let me dance and sing you
My own songs which you don't know
And you might smile
As you've never smiled before
Let me tell you a story
Of my ancient past

And then, maybe, you can see

Another person in me.

The influence of the affective on learning came to be my flagship during my years as a lecturer in education at Wellington Teachers' College (1977-1980) and remains so today. Early theorists didn't explore the place of cultural security within the affective domain. But, by saying the words they opened the door to further discussions. The following two activities point to an increased recognition of culture within the official or formal NZ policy making corridors of the time. These examples also highlight really compellingly the power of small Pacific spaces:

One

I was able to argue for the introduction of a Polynesian Studies Unit into the WTC curriculum. In the second year I included a practical assignment whereby students could opt to introduce and run a Polynesian Club at a primary school. Evans Bay Intermediate accepted what turned out to be an exceptionally enjoyable and valuable learning pilot which culminated with the Polynesian Club presenting at the end of year celebrations. Poly was a welcomed culturally safe space for EBI students and teaching staff and for our WTC students and Poly are now a New Zealand tradition. In 2008 I took this a step further by researching for a relationship between being a member of a Polynesian Club and educational achievement (e.g. intentionality). Findings were that the Polynesian Club was a a) reaffirming and culturally secure site and b) teacher support associated with Poly (such as homework centres, additional tutoring and networking) had smoothed and guided their pathways into other school academic curriculum. One said 'it's the only reason I come to school and then I go to class'. When NCEA marks were disaggregated at the end of this 18 month study by Pacific students who were poly club members and those who were not, Poly club members had significantly fewer absences than non members and passed more NCEA higher level subjects and with higher marks. While many factors contribute to educational achievement, these findings demonstrate the intentional and careful planning and tracking carried out by these Poly teachers (including the engagement of parents and community support) with the aims of a) reinforcing cultural understanding but also b) supporting members connect to other learning sites and communities (see Fairbairn Dunlop 2014)

Two

In 1980 I was awarded a scholarship by the Director of Education for my masters study *Samoan parents perceptions of education* (VUW 1980). This study explored for a relationship between parents' perceptions and expectations of the school and school learning. The sample was 20 Wellington parents / families who, at the conclusion of the English/ Samoan interviews said 'faafetai mo le fesili' thank you for giving us the chance to share our thoughts. Repackaged findings of the views of this small group of parents were circulated to all New Zealand schools. Main findings were that these parents saw a separation between the school role and home behaviours and teaching and, they expected schools to focus on English and, Reading Writing and Arithmetic (employment). Comments included:

Leave your English at school ... Only Samoan (language) when you come in the door

I ask my daughter what she did at school today. She said 'we did the pois'. I said to her 'what you gonna do when you go for a job.. are you going to swing the pois?

I especially note these parents' views on language maintenance because Salainaoloa Wilson's 2010 study (VUW) revealed that since that time there had been a shift in Samoan parents' attitudes with respect to language maintenance. In brief, the parents in Wilson's study had come to rely and expect the school to teach and maintain the Samoan language and, I suspect the cultural security that implies.

Learnings

There are many educational goals and more than one pathway to learning
Learning builds on the values and beliefs, knowledge and skills children bring to school
The affective (self-concept, identity, self-esteem) are powerful factors in learning.

When we lived in Samoa (1980-2006) I experienced the practical interplay of traditional and modern learning. After a brief spell at the Secondary Teachers' College (STC) I worked for 15 years in Agricultural Education, Extension and Rural Development at the University of the South Pacific (USP) School of Agriculture, Alafua. Here I found a really great mixing a la va'atele of traditional and modern knowledge in the farming systems approaches used. For example, when introducing new planting materials and technologies most consultants acknowledged and took account of farm family knowledge - built over generations e.g. the taro blight research. Prominence was also given to farmer attitudes in the adoption/ take up of new hybrids e.g. did farmers think pigeon pea would be a valuable addition to the traditional farming systems? 'No' said one farmer 'you can't take pigeon pea to a faalavelave'.

Hand in hand with this 'opening of the door' to other knowledges in agriculture, was a growing challenging of universally held goals and policies (such as CEDAW) against traditional ways e.g. women's roles in the chiefly systems, physical punishment and the place of youth. In fact, there was significantly more community debate on these and other development issues than happens in New Zealand. Which was interesting.

During these USP years I was privileged also to be part of the group of very articulate, provocative and influential USP academics who rallied against domination, especially cultural domination. Questions of identity raised were and remain central to discussions today (see the writings of Hau'ofa, Meleisea, Thaman, Taufe'ulungaki and poets Albert Wendt, Sano Malifa, Noumea Simi, Momoe von Reiche and, Tate Simi below)

IDENTITY

Tate Simi

Educate yourself

So you may understand

The ways of other people

But not too much

That you may lose

Your understanding

Of your own

Try things palagi

Not so you may become palagi

But so you may see the value

Of things Samoan

Learn to speak Samoan

Not so you may sound Samoan

But so you may

feel the essence

of being Samoan

Above all

Be aware and proud

Of who you are. So you may spare yourself the agony of those who are asking

“Who am I ? “

3 2006 – Pacific Post Graduate Talanoa

There is ongoing spirited debate amongst Pacific scholars on questions such as what is knowledge through to how Pacific knowledge construction processes influence the way we teach and research. There is urgency in critiquing the platforms underpinning the proliferation of Pacific research methodologies which have emerged in recent time against standards of robustness.

Learnings

Tertiary institutions have firm rules & regulations regarding what is robust research/ teaching. Whichever research or teaching model you choose (Pacific or other) those standards must be met.

In 2007 we set up the Pacific Post Graduate Talanoa by access grid with the aim of growing a vibrant Pacific post graduate research community. We had talked to students across the eight national universities who were almost always a minority in any faculty or class. They told us of their feelings of geographic and academic isolation and the challenges they experienced as a result of what they described as the uncertain positioning of Pacific studies in their institutions. They said they would welcome a place where they could discuss and critique the rapidly growing Pacific research literature. We decided to explore the use of Access grid technology to create a culturally safe space where students could discuss their research issues in their own way (see Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014 p 15)

Aims for this virtual but face to face communication space included the chance for students to:

- Meet, dialogue support each other
- Share research, discuss research –related issues
- Be exposed to multiple views (interdisciplinary)
- Interrogate Pacific epistemological positions, pedagogies and methodologies
- Build relationships (network) into other learning communities (disciplines and, academics, policy makers, elders)
- Explore the potential of this new technology

Hub coordinators were established at all of the universities (see fig 2). Hub coordinators are the irreplaceable institutional drivers for the talanoa: talanoa would not run without their support. They identify and round up their post graduate students, select presenters, publicise the talanoa and most importantly they participate. Most hub coordinators are academic staff. However, APSTE professional members have also taken this responsibility and I acknowledge their tautua with appreciation today - Massey (Sonny Liuvaie, Palmerston North Campus) Auckland (Tim Baice) and Canterbury (Pauline Luafatu-Simpson)

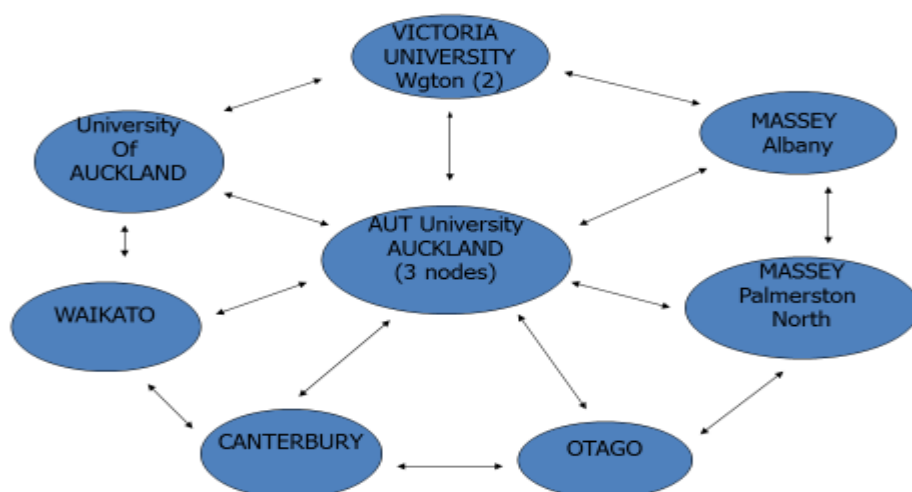


Fig 2: The talanoa national hub sites and networks.

The talanoa run twice monthly (3-5pm Mondays) with tertiary institutions sharing responsibility for presentations. Since 2012 the USP Suva and the National University of Samoa have joined and in 2015 numbers were swelled by post graduates from the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands and the University of British Columbia



Fig 3: The first Talanoa, hosted by Vaaomanu, VUW brought the periphery to the centre...

Talanoa outcomes can be measured in many ways; attendance (2014 data showed a doubling to over 600 from the 300 measured in the first year); by spread of participants including connections made across and between communities of learning (participants include Ministry staff from Education, Pacific Island Affairs, Social Development, NGOs, practitioners and family members wanting to get a better idea of what their children do) and by the number of presenters / participants now graduated. Annual reports contain numbers participating (by session, university, gender, work place) presenter abstracts and power points and session flyers. These are a historical record of the eight years of Talanoa and the decisions made and acted on by our coordinating team. The talanoa have become a tradition.

A somewhat unplanned outcome was that in working together to coordinate the Talanoa, Pacific academic staff now meet as a national community of Pacific academics. We communicate by phone, email, and subject to finances meet face to face and have organised a highly successful national Pacific post graduate conference. Unlike ASPTE, we presently function as an informal team.

These **intentionally** organised and tracked national post graduate Talanoa are a trusted and culturally safe space for Pacific researchers, a place where, as noted by one 'I can ask the questions I don't ask in class'. The ongoing yearly cycle of the Talanoa are undoubtedly a factor in their success as are the social and collegial friendships made which continue on in other sites and activities.

To conclude

ASPTe is a nationally recognised institution and meets annually as in this glorious turn out today. For many years ASPTe has helped break down staff feelings of isolation and, participants go home totally rejuvenated. Without a doubt ASPTe is a warm and fuzzy place. Is this space intentionally planned to support, springboard and track future actions whether shared or by individuals? Viewing the programmed discussion on cultural indicators for the tertiary sector, the answer is yes.

Manuia le fonotaga

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