

## Communal Learning in a Virtual Village

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### Abstract

This paper will discuss the collaborative teaching and learning methods used in our UU204 “Pacific Worlds” Course at the University of the South Pacific (USP)— a generic undergraduate course offered online at the 200 level. The course draws on a discussion forum called *talanoa*, as well as *matai* assessment. The latter draws on Pacific arts such as singing, dancing, painting and poetry, which students can utilize to depict a contemporary issue affecting their community, nation or the Pacific region. Under previous modes of learning, through face-to-face and print, the students were still separated by the vast Pacific Ocean. Now, however, this distance has been bridged by the “virtual village” of online learning.

*Keywords:* discussion, online learning, Pacific culture, *talanoa*, *matai*, assessment

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## **Introduction**

UU204 is a generic undergraduate course offered online at the 200 level of study. Its purpose is to teach students about Pacific consciousness. The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional university with its main campus located at Laucala in Suva, Fiji. It is owned collectively by the governments of its 12 member countries from the Pacific region, comprising Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Niue, Tokelau and the Cook Islands. It was established in 1968 and has a total of 14 campuses located throughout its member countries. The USP region is spread across 33 million square kilometers of ocean. This area is more than three times the size of Europe. However, the total land mass is about equal to the area of Denmark. Populations vary in size from Tokelau with 1600 people to Fiji with more than 800,000. The total population in the region is about 1.3 million.

([https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=usp\\_introduction](https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=usp_introduction))

The title of this paper acknowledges the traditional communal way of living in villages that indigenous Pacific Islanders are known for. The paper explores how modern technology has enabled the online classroom to become a Pacific student's virtual village. It also attempts to illustrate how learning can be contextualized to suit the Pacific environment, while at the same time keeping up to par with the rest of the world in terms of technology.

## **Background**

Earlier modes of learning for the Pacific student have ranged from traditional learning in a village to the formal learning in a physical classroom through face-to-face and print. Since these type of learning were conducted in physical learning spaces, the USP students located on the main campuses of Laucala (Fiji), Emalus (Vanuatu) and Alafua (Samoa) and the regional campuses scattered throughout the member countries were separated by the vast Pacific Ocean. The online learning that modern technology offers, however, has bridged this distance. “ Advanced communication technologies through USPNet are used to reach distance and flexible learning students across the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean.” ([https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=usp\\_introduction](https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=usp_introduction)) Today’s students can traverse the vast 33 million square kilometers of ocean that covers the USP region and engage in the various online modes of learning and assessment through the learning management system MOODLE, which is used by USP.

### **A Pacific Educator’s Voice**

Thaman (in Mason & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2014:53) has advocated for cultural democracy in teaching Pacific students. She has defined this as “a philosophical precept that requires teachers to take into consideration students’ cultures in their teaching: more specifically to understand students’ learning styles; how they think and, most importantly, communicate with one another.” Thaman (in Dorovolomo, Koya-Vakauta and Lingam, 2014:127) attributed the high failure rates of Pacific Islands students in schools and universities to “conflicts in role expectations and breaches of role boundaries because many teachers and university teaching personnel do not share the cultural norms, values and beliefs of many of their students.” Attaining cultural democracy in the Pacific is a major challenge,

considering the dominance in the Pacific education system of the imported ideologies and cultures of Europe (England and France in particular) and more recently, Australia, New Zealand and USA. (Thaman in Dorovolomo, Koya-Vakauta and Lingam, 2014:128)

Furthermore, Thaman (in Dorovolomo, Koya-Vakauta and Lingam, 2014:129) suggested the adoption of “policies that take into consideration Pacific cultures, especially those of indigenous peoples, since they make up majority populations in most Pacific Island nations.”

The onus is on Pacific educators today to bridge the gap between these dominant, imported ideologies and others that acknowledge the Pacific students’ own cultures.

*Talanoa* and *matai* as assessment methods are attempts in the direction of making learning more culturally democratic as they draw on the students’ own Pacific backgrounds using concepts familiar to them.

### **Pacific Learning Spaces — Past, Present, and Future**

The village is the indigenous Pacific Island student’s first classroom. Within this village, the student learns the values, principles, and norms of his/her culture from parents, elders, and specialists in the community. The traditional physical space associated with living and learning in the Pacific villages has included the *bure* (Fiji), *maneaba* (Kiribati), *maneapa* (Tuvalu), *fale* (Samoan) and *nakamal* (Vanuatu). In traditional Fijian society young people acquired the necessary social and technical competence while participating in the daily activities of the patri-clan, or *mataqali*, into which they were born. (White in Campbell & Sherrington, 2007:81)

There were seven distinctive *mataqalis* representing different occupations. These included the “*turaga mataqali* or chiefly clan who was formally installed by elders of the *sauturaga mataqali*, or the deputy clan; the *matanivanua* or official heralds, who were the spokespersons for, and companions of, the chief as well as intermediaries between the chief and the commoners; the *bete mataqali*, or the priestly clan, who were the gatekeepers of supernatural knowledge and had the power to summon the gods for supernatural assistance in daily life; the warriors, or the *mataqali bati*, who served as bodyguards for the chiefs as well as guarding the people and the land. Members of the fishermen clan, or the *mataqali gonedau*, sailed on the open sea and were exclusively responsible for the chief’s nourishment. The *mataqali mataisau* or carpenters, produced the utensils and eating vessels, ornamental hair combs, war clubs, axes and spears, oil dishes for body paints and objects. They also carved the chief’s wooden *yaqona* bowl and were responsible for building the chief’s canoes and for maintaining the chief’s dwelling house.” (p82)

Specialized knowledge and skills associated with the different occupations were passed on through modeling and apprentice-type training by elder and more experienced community members. (White in Campbell & Sherrington, 2007:81)



A Kiribati *maneaba* which is a meeting house and the center of village life and village governance.

**Source:**

<https://travelsintotheheartofhumankind.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/community-spaces-what-i-found-in-kiribati/>

The formal classroom is the Pacific student's second classroom, which was first introduced by the missionaries. When the student begins university education, the learning is shifted from the physical classroom to the online classroom. In Samoa, formal education was established by the London Missionary Society missionaries in the 1930's, with the establishment of village pastor schools. (Coxon in Campbell & Sherrington, 2007:269) While its missionary origins are rooted in Bible study, this form of education developed into a Western-based curriculum including subjects such as English, mathematics, social studies, basic science, and the like. This learning is conducted in English or French (depending on who their past European colonizer was). If the student is from the Melanesian region (Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), which has a diversity of

languages/dialects, the student must learn in another vernacular dialect different from their mother tongue, with English-language instruction on top of it. For example, the standard Fijian language is Bauan, in Vanuatu it is Bislama and in the Solomon Islands it is Pidgin English. These languages are usually not the indigenous student's first language. During my undergraduate years at USP, I once met a student from Vanuatu who spoke five languages — English, French, Bislama and both her parents' languages. I personally speak five Fijian dialects apart from English. This is not a unique situation in the Melanesian region of the Pacific.

## **Discussion**

According to the *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners* document, "an effective pedagogy" that is "culturally responsive to Pasifika" is one that "ensures that the curriculum provides relevant contexts, engages learners from different cultures, where Pacific learners can draw on their own knowledge of the world, and builds on activities and experiences with which they are familiar or confident."

(<http://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Improving-Education-Outcomes-for-Pacific-Learners-May-2012.pdf>) The two collaborative methods of assessment discussed in this paper are based upon a variety of theories: Bandura's social cognitive theory, constructionist theory and Vygotsky's social cultural learning theory of education. (Zhou & Brown, 2014) These theories are deemed culturally appropriate for the Pacific student.

At the beginning of each semester, students from the 12 member countries registered in the UU204 course are randomly selected and grouped by the Course Education Technologist into Vakas (means canoes in some Pacific languages). Students are

drawn from the different campuses to form a Vaka group to ensure diversity in composition, which subsequently enables them to offer a wide range of views and contributions in their online interaction. The Course Coordinators (CC's) or the Teaching Assistants (TA) in charge of a group are called navigators. The students in their Vaka groups are called the Vaka crews. This grouping is based on Teiawa's (2005) metaphor of a canoe as a classroom and in UU204's case, the Vaka is an online classroom. Within these Vaka groups, students interact online through talanoa discussion forums (TDF's) and they also collaborate in the major assignment, called Matai, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Pacific cultures are very people-oriented and people-centered, as demonstrated in their traditional communal way of living. Kinship links transcend land and sea boundaries. Despite the high rate of urbanization and migration in many Pacific island nations, the essence of communalism is still woven through the fabric of relationships in the Pacific islands.

Let me provide a personal example as an illustration. Last December (2017) three of my colleagues and I transited through Sydney Airport on the way to Adelaide to attend an education conference. As I made my way out of the international arrivals area to check in for my domestic flight, I noticed two men standing near the entrance to the domestic check-in. As I neared them, they looked at me and we instantly recognized each other as Fijians. We exchanged smiles, handshakes and greetings in our native tongue and made introductions. We realized that we all originated from the same province (Eastern islands of Fiji) but from different islands, so we switched to our mother tongue from the standard Fijian language we were speaking. In our brief talanoa, which probably didn't last more

than ten minutes, I received an invitation to visit their home for a meal, which I graciously turned down, as I was on my way to catch a connecting flight to Adelaide. As I said goodbye to my newfound friends to go and check in, one of them reached out to me and gave me some money for coffee. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness and kindness, said goodbye to them both before I proceeded to the check in counter. There are many other similar personal experiences I could share.

Talanoa in the Fijian, Tongan, Tokelauan and Samoan languages means to communicate. It is also used as a Tongan research methodology. (Thaman in Dorovolomo, Koya-Vakauta and Lingam, 2014:132) While it has been argued that “the concept of talanoa is predominantly Tongan, Fijian, Tokelauan and Samoan” and “does not resonate with epistemological processes of most Melanesian and Micronesian cultures” (Tunufa’I, 2016:8), that does not take away the fact that this is still a Pacific concept and thus is relevant for Pacific island students. In attempting to contextualize the learning environment for its students, the course draws on the Pacific communal way of living and incorporates it into the discussion forum called a “talanoa discussion forum” (TDF). It is a rich place of dialogue where students from the 12 member countries—both indigenous and non-indigenous Pacific Islanders—get together to discuss relevant issues based on the five themes of the course. For each theme, students are required to engage in these TDF’s, discussing issues relevant to the unit theme.

“Matai” in the Fijian language means skillful, clever, a craftsman or the first. In the Samoan language, a *matai* is a leader or chief who plays an integral role in the Samoan culture, as they are the appointed leaders for family clans and village councils. The major assessment in our course is called *matai*. It draws on Pacific arts in its various forms, for

example singing, dancing, storytelling, painting, and poetry, which students can utilize to depict a contemporary issue affecting their community, nation, or the Pacific region. This type of assessment is very relevant to the Pacific context and also ensures the sustainability of the vulnerable Pacific cultures in a rapidly modernizing world.

### **Student Voices – Feedback to the *Talanoa* discussion Forums and *Matai***

- *“Topics discussed in this course added new information to my mental database and explored areas I did not have any insight into.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*
- *“Learning more about the Pacific is very interesting and has helped me developed a stronger feeling of longing for my own culture and history of my people. I have come to understand of the origins of our Oceaniac, and I am grateful for it.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*
- *“I enjoyed writing and evaluating discussions of colleague crews.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*

The best things about this course was:

- *“We get to perform our Matai in front of everyone, students which is frightening and cool.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*
- *“The Matai getting (to) know other student(s) and learning from them.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*
- *“I enjoyed giving our thoughts within each members of the vaka group in the talanoa forum, and seeing how individuals think about the Pacific and I also love the Matai act where*

*you learn from others when performing about their cultures.” (UU204 Student Evaluation Report, Semester 1, 2017)*

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined how the two methods of assessment used in the UU204 course—*talanoa* discussion forums and *matai*—are effective in meeting the need for cultural democracy in the Pacific learning experience. Furthermore, it has attempted to outline the development in the learning spaces of the Pacific Islander from the traditional physical learning spaces in the villages to the online learning environment. However, there is still room for more contextually and culturally relevant assessment and teaching methods for the Pacific island student and more research in this area would greatly benefit the learning and teaching experience in the Pacific Island region.

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