

The Metaphorical Canoe: Navigating and Sharing Sacred Spaces

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the concept of the classroom as a metaphorical canoe, being a medium for cooperative teaching and learning in different spaces used in the UU204 “Pacific Worlds” Course—a generic undergraduate course at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in the online mode. In “Pacific Worlds” the canoe metaphor places the emphasis on the “journey rather than on the product or destination” and has been used to encourage co-operative learning and enhance a collaborative culture among the teachers and students. The paper will further look at past and present student experiences and comments on the course to ascertain how such a construct immerses, influences, and empower student learning.

Keywords: co-operative learning, Vygotsky, Pacific culture, decolonization, MOODLE

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Introduction

The University of the South Pacific introduced the 'UU204 Pacific Worlds' in 2012. The interdisciplinary approach in the course weaves together place, history, culture, arts and politics of Oceania at an introductory level. The main focus is to encourage a “sense of Pacific consciousness” in the graduates. This course was first offered to the students of the University of the South Pacific’s 12 member countries on blended mode and now an online course. This is a rich “ocean” of diverse knowledge that requires careful nurturing. In this UU204, course the cultural concept of “navigation” and the model of the “vaka” or “waka” (canoe) is used to help learners and teachers find their way around learning and knowing through the five thematic areas of: (1) Naming and Mapping the Pacific; (2) Roots and Routes; (3) The land and Sea – past present and the future; (4) Waves of power: Religion, Colonization and Development; (5) Contemporary Issues in Oceania (USP Handbook and Calendar 2012:283)

Background

The canoe is a common feature in many Pacific cultures and played a key role in the early migration and settlement of the Pacific. The double-hulled canoe or *drua* from Fiji, a *kalia* from Tonga or the *‘alia* from Samoa is a collaborative design, believed to be the result of sharing of cultural knowledge by the Pacific peoples as they traversed the Pacific Ocean in the past. The concept of the double-hulled canoe and ocean travels provides an interesting backdrop to the learning and teaching processes and the classroom. The late Teresia Teaiwa highlighted in her article (2005) how co-operative learning can be enthused into the

learning and teaching in Pacific studies classrooms. This paper examines how this concept has been incorporated in the UU204 course at the University of the South Pacific (USP). The information gathered from the narratives, comments, and experiences of students past and present who have taken the course UU204 provides the basis for the findings discussed in this paper.

The two main concepts discussed here are the pedagogical approaches at decolonizing the classroom and the sharing of sacred spaces in the UU204 course. This paper will first look at how the UU204 course incorporates ways to decolonize the classroom through “re-conceptualizing the teaching and learning” of Oceania through the framework of “the classroom as a metaphorical canoe” (Teaiwa, 2005). Being part of the UU204 Pacific World’s teaching team has provided me the opportunity to reflect on the course content and the different pedagogical approaches we share with our students.

When Pacific Island students leave their home countries and travel to an unfamiliar environment to face the demands of studying at the University of the South Pacific, the experience can be daunting. Providing room for “Pacific cultural spaces” eases the pressure of learning for many of the students taking this generic course. In recognition of the wide and diverse cultural knowledge background from which the staff and students in the course come from, the UU204 course draws on familiar cultural approaches to enhance student learning. Building on Vygotsky’s social constructivism learning theory of education (Zhou & Brown, 2014), it includes knowledge constructed through interactions between the environment and people, and extends from what is known to the learning journey in this UU204 course.

This approach takes into account how the Pacific learner thinks, learns, and communicates with others and their rich cultural backgrounds, capitalizing on making the learning environment more “culturally democratic” (Thaman 2009:2). This is a feature lacking in many teaching and learning environments of formal educational institutions in Pacific Island nations (PINs), which are “culturally undemocratic” in their pedagogies used and in how the student learning is assessed and evaluated. Furthermore, the course takes on a familiar Pacific approach in the use of vernacular and navigational concepts in class by engaging the model of a *vaka* as a cultural space in the teaching and learning process.

The *Vaka* Metaphor

Decolonizing the learning environment of the classroom is an important process that has helped students in the UU204 course. Reconceptualizing the classroom as a canoe in which both the teacher and the student are on a journey and the process of learning reflects Lowman’s suggestion of “moving beyond the performer-spectator model” (Lowman in Teaiwa, 2005). There he stated that this is when teaching and learning is not cold and technological but warm, exciting, and personal and can be an experience in which emotions and magic abound. In the Pacific, a canoe in general is called the *vaka* or *waka* or *waqa*. Specifically, there is a special type of double hulled canoe called ‘*alia* or *Kalia* or *drua*, which is steered by many people. Teaiwa (2005) referred to this as “a group of people with different roles on board the vehicle on a journey.” In this learning space the canoe is used metaphorically to convey a sense of cooperative learning that enhances a collaborative culture among students and teachers. The double-hulled canoe maintains stability as a result of the position of the hulls rather than their individual shape. In the classroom this

relates to the focus on sharing and cooperative learning and not on individuality in order to further one's learning.

The classroom dynamics that Teaiwa (2005) referred to links the varied features, roles and expectations carried out in the *vaka* in juxtaposition with experiences, similarities, and collaborative learning in the “classroom” or the course. The “Navigator” is the course coordinator, while the “coxswain” is the other teaching staff, who should be well versed in navigational skills (the course content) and can guide the students safely through this *vaka* journey. The students are the “crew” on this *vaka* (learning groups in the course) journey (learning process). The paddle or oar symbolizes the energy that students need to put into the study, the canoe sail represents the MOODLE learning platform that students need to refer to for guidance and progress in the course. For Pacific Island students, making the connection between the *vaka* journey and the UU204 course is not only interesting but makes the learning less daunting.

The use of concepts and terms in vernacular that are familiar elements in students' cultural backgrounds creates a warm sense of bonding and a safe learning environment. Greeting students through emails or MOODLE chat sessions in their own language draw them closer to their Navigator. Providing examples from the different Pacific backgrounds enables the learning to be more meaningful for the Pacific learner. Once this bond has been created, students, especially those located outside the main campus in Fiji, find it easier to communicate with the teacher throughout the semester and, in the process, keep up with the demands of the course.

Ninnes (1992) relates the holistic approach in the success in schooling in the Solomon Islands, which capitalizes on “co-operation and interdependence.” The *Ausae*

Pedagogy (Sangha 2004) utilizes a similar metaphor for teaching and learning that refers to the traditional fishing methods in the Malaita province in the Solomon Islands. This is a concept that encourages teachers and education stakeholders to factor in the culture and belief systems and backgrounds of the students and work collaboratively and cooperatively with those students to enhance their learning. Other similar culture-centered frameworks that provide resources for teaching and learning in higher education in the Pacific region include *Kakala* (Thaman, 1992); *Kurakaupapa Maori* (Smith, 1999) and *Vanua* (Nabobo – Baba, 2006). Thaman (2009:5) reiterated the need to be culturally sensitive to ensure student success. This is imperative in the UU204 course, where the students from the 12 member countries come from extremely diverse cultural backgrounds.

The interdependence on the journey is crucial because everyone on the *vaka* has to pull their weight and participate in the different tasks outlined in the course. For example, in the “*Talanoa* Discussion Forums” (TDF), students need to post and respond to each other’s views on issues relating to the Pacific in a friendly and open manner by a designated Lifeline. This engaged sharing of ideas encourages and underscores the notion of cooperation. The use of terms like “lifelines” instead of “deadlines” eases the pressure when referring to the dates on which a particular activity is due, the idea being that some negotiation can be made with the Navigator for the extension to the due date of a particular assessment. The *matai* assessment further encourages group work and nurtures a collaborative cultural learning experience for students from varied cultural backgrounds.

The word *matai* means the first or best or one who is most adept at something. This assessment was borrowed from “*Aka mai*” (Teaiwa, 2005) of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. It is part of a culturally sensitive curriculum that reflects the core values of

the culture that the students come from. Students are asked to examine a contemporary issue affecting the Pacific and suggest solutions to the issue based on their cultural background. Pacific-specific genres are used to portray the issues, which include song, dance, drama, poetry, storytelling, art, or a combination including modern technology in videos or other graphic forms. The use of vernacular language (with written English translations) is encouraged, and many of the students perform in their traditional attire with pride and eloquently and gracefully represent their culture and identity through chant or dance.

The Journey

One of the early tasks that students are asked to perform in the course is to introduce themselves to the rest of the crew by drawing from their cultural backgrounds to explain what was important to them. This could mean highlighting their genealogy and totems in a culturally appropriate way or even presenting this information in the vernacular, followed by an English translation. It is from their indigenous background that students draw strength, as well as from having the opportunity to showcase to others the factors that make them unique and to make a social connection with others in the same *vaka*.

Seemingly mundane things, such as greeting students in the vernacular, encourage a connection with students and play a crucial role in sensitizing students to learning at higher education institutions. But the subtleties of body language, language itself, and nuances in the delivery of the lesson are lost when the course is fully online. The concept of staying connected and maintaining a link to where one comes from and to others around you was reiterated by Hau'ofa (1994), who discussed the network of connections with which a

Pacific individual can identify. For many Pacific island cultures, staying connected is a strong element. Thus maintaining a constant online presence is enabling for students, even at higher education levels. Thaman (1990) reminds us to adapt the educational systems to enable students to survive in the modern world without forgetting their cultural identities. The weekly “chat hours,” personal and MOODLE mail help students and teachers stay connected.

Deeper research and reflection on Unit themes bring out student critical thinking skills that are captured in the Reflective Writing Papers (RWP's). This is where the students are asked to do research on their own cultural backgrounds and indigenous knowledge (IK) and relate it to the course content. Through this process, both the students and the teacher share and learn from one another. Some of these shared narratives may delve into traditional spaces, which once were only kept within the family, so sensitivity in discussion is imperative.

Sharing sacred spaces

The second part of the discussion is a sharing of narratives gathered from learners and teachers in the sacred spaces in the UU204 “journey” across the Pacific. The sacred spaces referred to are the ancestral, social, personal and physical spaces. The use of the term sacred carries with it a cultural reference. For some Pacific communities, the term refers to a special link with the Gods and for some communities this could mean God. The term *mana* in the Pacific denotes spiritual power and may be used to explain one's relation to one's ancestors or their powers that should be respected. For many Polynesian communities, like that of the Maori, *mana* is seen as both a personal and collective strength, pride and identity

(Winitana, <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-meaning-of-mana/>.) In the reflective assessments that the students of UU204 are required to submit, they reflect on personal stories from their cultural backgrounds. Many of these narratives allude to their ancestral histories and the *mana* that is evoked with respect to the land and the people.

In sharing of their narratives, a sense of belonging and connection is maintained and shared with their Navigator. Some of this information may be long-held family or clan stories and be privy to only to a few. This is especially true when students draw on information for the unit on “Roots and Routes” (Unit 2). Other narratives may require that students dig deep and do research into their own cultural backgrounds. Students will then need to make a concerted effort to elicit answers from elders in the community and thus re-establish relationships when carrying out interviews on finding solutions to a contemporary issue (Unit 5). The social and personal spaces look at the exchange that students share with their Navigator regarding personal choices on topics that are sensitive, for example on their sexuality in LGBTQI. In the marking and feedback of assessments, the Navigators also rekindle a culture of sharing as they impart some of their own experiences, thus furthering a collaborative culture between Navigator and students. The section below provides feedback on what the learning spaces meant for past and present students who have taken the UU204 *vaka* journey.

Discussion

Education should begin where the student is. Arguments for the decolonization of higher education propose bringing in a more culturally sensitive model to make education for indigenous students in the Pacific more engaging and thus more effective. The canoe

metaphor can be a vivid and powerful interdisciplinary pedagogy to be adapted and adopted at the University of the South Pacific. The “canoe journey” encourages students to look into their rich cultural skills, knowledge, and values and to build on what is being taught in the classroom—a process underlined by Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism learning theory.

The inclusion of vernacular languages, reference to cultural motifs like the canoe, and prior knowledge and values of the students into the course content and discussion allows a student to better understand his or her identity, which further enhances the learning and teaching process. The lessons for the Pacific learning and teaching facilitator is to continue to decolonize the Western construct of the classroom to one that becomes a safe learning space for both the student and the teacher and to draw on a variety of pedagogies that foster a culturally supportive curriculum. In response to Thaman’s (1992) suggestion that “some answers to our questions regarding teaching and learning could come from our cultures,” we suggest that the canoe concept could be one of the answers.

A committed and conscious approach to making the context of the students’ cultural background matter makes a great teacher. It requires one to be open to critical thinking and creativity by adapting the learning and teaching process to accommodate the change of time and technology—a stage in the *vaka* journey, which Kouvaka (2016: 134) alluded to as the “birthing” of the canoe. I interpret this to be similar to times when the Navigator and crew pause to take stock of the journey, its direction, supplies, and health of the crew in order to sustain the next leg of the journey.

The canoe metaphor framework re-establishes the need to build on the Pacific cultural components of the student’s background. The cooperative culture of learning

between teachers and students in the decolonized classroom also calls for preparation and commitment from the teacher. Attending to the diversity within the different *vaka* allows for a wider learning of each other's culture heritage, and also sensitizes one to the possible mismatch that might exist within the classroom. Language check-in is important, for this determines the quality of bonding with the students. The teacher must walk through the checklist expected of the students first of all. Before asking students to identify who they are the teacher must be able to first identify who he or she is.

Student Voices based on the Student Evaluation Surveys Semesters 1& 2, 2016 and Semester 1, 2017

- “The *vaka* or the canoe is a symbol of our Pacific journey throughout the course and I enjoyed it.”
- “Having an imaginary voyage which your learning journey to help you do well as a crew listening to the navigator.”
- “I identify myself as a coconut—it cannot be sunk/ drowned in the sea so I learn to keep afloat like the canoe.”
- “The canoe metaphor helped me commit more to my studies.”
- “The *vaka* journey allows for encouragement and supportive approach to learning.”
- “I learnt to re-look at my identity and find out more about the Pacific as I travel on this discovery *vaka* journey.”
- “Learning and sharing experiences in the course (*talanoa* discussion forums, chat sessions with the navigator) is like an exciting *vaka* journey.”

Conclusion

The colonial construct of the classroom has changed over time. Its content has been transformed to improve the teaching and learning process so that it focuses more on the student. The canoe framework visualizes a classroom learning and teaching space as being on a journey and not static. The canoe concept provides an opportunity for curriculum developers and education stakeholders alike to look again at capturing the learner's cultural background in the curriculum. Thaman (1990:2) reassures us that "curricula development based on culturally sensitive models can be implemented when subjects that are considered 'worthwhile' to teach and learn are incorporated in the curriculum." The metaphorical canoe framework could be just the example that captures both a culturally sensitive curricula and the "worthwhile" component to be taught.

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