Chapter 5
Towards Cultural Democracy in University Teaching and Research with Special Reference to the Pacific Island Region

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Abstract This chapter attempts to document some of the initiatives taken by Pacific educators to address the issue of underachievement of Pacific Island students in higher education, more specifically at university. In this, their main concern has been to urge higher education teaching personnel, especially teacher educators, to create more culturally democratic learning environments for students. In so doing, Pacific educators draw on their indigenous pedagogical resources to develop the capacity of the teaching personnel. The author also reflects on the challenges they face in bridging traditional knowledge systems and the contemporary higher education context. Cultural democracy is 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. Specific references will be made of the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative (RPEIP), of which the author is a founding member, which has been in the forefront of advancing cultural democracy in Pacific education in general, and university teaching and research, in particular.

I received the education of a Tongan woman, not that of an American or Australian. My early socialization and learning occurred within the contexts of my culture, its languages and worldview. Later I was introduced to the cultures of Europe through school and university studies. These provided me with alternative ways of seeing the world and sometimes I operate in one and at other times, I operate in the other. The end results are often painful.

My experiences of formal education, especially at university in Auckland, New Zealand, have largely influenced my decision to spend a good part of my professional life trying to help higher education teaching personnel to better understand

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their students' learning needs, and contextualize their teaching in order to enable more (Pacific) students to achieve at university. It has not been an easy task because the culture of the academy is so different from the socializing cultures of most Pacific Island students (hereafter referred to as Pacific students) and evidence from around the world show how difficult it is for many teaching personnel to bridge the cultural gaps that exist between some of their students and themselves, making communication difficult. As a result, Pacific students as a group continue to under-perform in higher education, despite incidences of high achievement by some individual students. In this chapter I wish to examine some reasons for this sad state of affairs based mainly on experience as a university student, and over 30 years teaching Pacific students at high school and university, as well as studies carried out at the University of the South Pacific (USP).

When I was training to be a teacher in Auckland, my supervisor said that there were only two messages that he wanted to impress upon us before we left college: know your students; and know your subject. I had spent 3 years at the University of Auckland, learning about my subjects but I did not know much about the students that I was going to teach during 'sections' (student teaching times) at three New Zealand high schools. Needless to say, I ended up talking to myself most of the time. I knew little about the students' cultural background and they knew next to nothing about mine, so I stuck to the text books, hoping that the authors of the texts would be able to better communicate with them.

Later when I was a teacher back in my own country (Tonga), and trying to teach English literature to a class of Form 5 repeaters, I started to make up some verse about life in Tonga, in order to illustrate basic elements of poetry, before moving on to read the prescribed poems by famous English poets. The positive reaction of the students and their improved performance in the School Certificate English examination were enough to convince me that my role as a teacher, in this situation was to make learning more relevant and meaningful for students by using content to which they could relate. I finally understood what my college tutor meant when he said 'know your students'. At teachers' college, I had learned about the psychology of learning and learners, but this did not help me to deal with the everyday realities of a classroom in Tonga. It was understanding where students came from, their cultural background that made a difference to the way I communicated with them.

For my purposes, 'culture' is the way of life of a group of people, which includes their language, and ways of doing and being. Culture provides many Pacific people with a sense of belonging regardless of where they live, and they continually reaffirm their culture through behaviour and performance, often linked to various positions and roles that they may occupy, from time to time, in different contexts. For most Pacific people, culture is a dynamic force that is lived rather than debated in university classrooms or national parliaments.

Social scientists tell us that culture shapes people's beliefs and attitudes, their roles and expectations, and the way they interpret their own and others' behaviour (Eagly and Chaiken 1998). Role expectations, they say, are central to human communication including that between teacher and learner (Stryker and Statham 1985). Role expectations are learned and internalized through the process of socialization; they guide our behaviour and social interactions (Wright 1987; Widdowson 1987),

and conflicts tend to arise when we use our own cultural cues to guide the way we behave towards others (Giroux 1992). This is because different participants in the communication process often lack knowledge and understanding of cultural norms and cues that are used to interpret the behaviour and conduct of those involved (Riley 1985). In relation to teachers and students, a role boundary is said to exist between teacher and learner and when this is breached, conflicts occur. Role boundary, however, is mediated by pedagogy – something that is believed to have a major role in the success or failure of the teaching/learning communication process (Cortazzi 1990). However, Barrow (1990) reminds us that pedagogy itself is shaped by the cultural values and ideologies of the society in which it originates and that teachers and lecturers transmit and reinforce the cultural values that are embedded in their teaching approaches (Kelen 2002). It follows therefore that in cross-cultural settings, a teacher's professionalism as well as her cultural acuteness are important considerations in student performance. The high failure rates of Pacific students in schools and universities in our region may be due to conflicts in role expectations and breaches of role boundaries; this is because at university many teaching personnel do not share similar cultural values and beliefs with their students – things that are important for shaping role concepts, attitudes and expectations.

In 2009 at a meeting of the Joint Committee of UNESCO and ILO on the UN Recommendations on the Status of Teachers and Higher Education Teaching Personnel (CEART), of which I am a member, concerns were raised about the quality of teaching of university staff and the need for member states to advocate for and support the provision of pedagogical training for all higher education teaching personnel, especially those who teach first year students. It was further suggested that higher education institutions might work towards setting up teacher-community networks to facilitate support for the on-going professional development of teaching personnel, and that studies should be commissioned to find out the links between different modalities of professional development and students' performance in different subjects.

Oceania is a culturally diverse region. For higher educational institutions, it means, in practice, providing for the educational needs of students who are from a host of cultures and languages. At the University of the South Pacific, where I work, most of the students are from Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, with less than 5 % from outside the Pacific region. Many of our staff know that understanding Pacific 'cultures' is central to improved communication with our students. We need to understand that our students have been socialized in different (Pacific) cultures that have unique systems of perceiving and organising the world around them and which influence their behaviour and ways of thinking, and in turn, their academic performance. In this context, language use is important largely because of the way it influences how we perceive and organise our work. However, because the language of teacher-student communication in the Academy is English and not the students' first language, we can rightly say that the learning environment at university is 'culturally undemocratic'.

Cultural democracy is a philosophical precept that recognises the way a person communicates, relates to others, thinks and learns (Ramirez and Castaneda 1974, p. 23).

In Oceania, formal education has been closely associated with the dominant ideologies and cultures of Europe (England and France in particular) and more recently, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. These foreign cultures and their languages and ideas, have continued to have a profound and lasting impact upon Oceanic peoples, their cultures, and of course, their education. Cultural democracy has therefore become increasingly important with the right and opportunity of Pacific Island students to study and use their own cultures, languages and knowledge systems, in schools and universities, opportunities that up until now, have been denied them. Cultural democracy may also be applied to the need for higher education in Oceania, to acknowledge and value the knowledge systems of Pacific Island cultures, as alternative sources of information and ideas upon which to base more sustainable systems of development in general and educational development in particular.

However, in a world where education is increasingly being called upon to provide the bases for modern economic development and introduction to and success in the global cash economy, teaching and learning of worthwhile knowledge, skills and values associated with Pacific cultures continue to be regarded by many, including Pacific Island people themselves, as having little contribution to make towards the achievement of the over-riding economic goals of many national governments as well as educational institutions themselves. For example, a Tongan member of parliament was reported to have surmised that students should not be made to take Tongan Studies (a compulsory subject for the secondary school leaving certificate) as it would not help them find a good job, a view that is shared by some parents.

It is my belief that the neglect of and failure to acknowledge students' cultural knowledge by formal education institutions have led not only to students' underachievement, but also to many Pacific cultures' inability to renew themselves, resulting in the exodus of young and old to Pacific towns and cities, or to metropolitan countries, where they increasingly feel isolated, fulfilling only menial functions or in many cases, no function at all. The curricula of Pacific schools and universities continue to make wrong assumptions about teachers and learners, despite the fact that many educators now agree that the socio-cultural system of a student's home and community is influential in producing culturally unique and preferred modes of relating and communicating to others, thinking, learning, remembering and problem solving (Taufe'ulungaki 2002).

The suggestion for cultural democracy to be the foundation for teaching and learning in higher education in the Pacific, has been largely ignored mainly because of the way university curricula is influenced by the experiences and ideologies of European cultures. At best, the most that higher education institutions could do is to acknowledge, value and emphasise the cultural backgrounds of students in teaching, learning and research. This would go a long way towards realising the goals of cultural democracy. At the institutional level a culturally democratic learning environment would mean policies that take into consideration the home cultures of our students, especially in relation to the three critical components of language, values and teaching/learning styles, where there exist marked differences between what many students may learn formally and what they know to be true as a result of their

informal learning and socialisation within their own cultures (Thaman 1988; Nabobo and Teasdale 1995).

For example, unlike Western, scientific traditions of inquiry, the Tongan tradition of inquiry is less abstract and analytical and more practical and substantive. It does not place great emphasis on logical thinking as described by Western philosophers although this does not mean that Tongans are not able to think and analyse; rather it means that learning and knowledge are closely tied to the realities of everyday life, and experiences and ideas are expressed through people's experiences over time, suggesting a strong utilitarian emphasis (Helu 1999). In my experience, most university teaching personnel are preoccupied with clarity and precision of expression of thought in their students' work, often de-emphasising subjective, emotion-filled expressions of language, the very things that characterize many Tongan and Pacific students' expressions and use of language. Many Pacific languages, including my own (Tongan)do not clearly distinguish between objective and subjective statements nor have they the equivalent structures to describe these; yet they are ideal for communicating beliefs, sentiments and attitudes and in the context of culture, they are highly functional and practical. For most students who were socialized in Pacific cultural contexts, thinking and learning were integrated into a cultural system where human relationships as well as human activities were extremely important (Thaman 1988; Nabobo-Baba 2006). The implications of this for the use of an additional language such as English cannot be over-emphasised. As a high school student, like most students in my class, I had much difficulty learning English, so much so that I grew to dislike the subject.

Cultural values, because of their nature, form and expressions, also present some difficulties as well, for many Pacific students. This problem is further complicated by the on-going indifference of our higher education institutions to the teaching of Pacific cultures and values, which could have exposed many students to the sociological, psychological and anthropological characteristics of different ethnic groups that constitute Pacific island populations. The reason that is usually advanced for this neglect often has to do with the perceived difficulty of choosing which cultures or languages to include (or exclude) in the curriculum. The real reason, I suspect, may have something to do with the Euro-centric perspectives of most higher education institutions as well as staff themselves. What is disappointing though, has been the tendency of some Pacific staff and students to view their own cultures and values as unimportant for their advancement as academics and/or researchers. At our university, we are hoping to change some of these perceptions through the recent inclusion of Pacific Cultures and Societies in a list of research priority areas for research well as the landmark endorsement last year (2010) by Pacific Forum Education Ministers of a Regional Strategy for Culture and Education, which calls for culturally inclusive teaching at all levels of education.

If we turn to students' learning styles, the work of people such as Bernstein (1995), Hess and Shipman (1965) and Harris (1980) are useful in that they tell us that ethnicity and differences in cultural values are as important as socio-economic class, if not more so, in determining the characteristics of a student's learning style. Since learning styles are primarily the result of a unique, culturally determined

teaching style, there is an urgent need to examine the teaching styles that are characteristic of different cultural groups, including our own. Research conducted at USP by Landbeck and Mugler in the 1990s point to predominantly teacher-dominated communication and learning at the university and suggested more student-based teaching, with teaching staff taking on a more facilitative role. While I agree that student-centred learning may work with many students, my experience with most of my students tells me that it is not so much getting students to work on their own, as assisting them and showing personal interest in their progress, that is important. This is certainly supported by findings from recent Pacific studies including those of Manu'atu (2000), Silipa (2005), Nabobo-Baba (2006), Johannson-Fua (2006), Kalavite (2010) and Vaioleti (2010). Most distance learners at our university continue to ask for and prefer face-to-face interaction with tutors despite the university's attempt to move towards online teaching and learning. Surveys that I have conducted with my own postgraduate students showed their preference for lecturers who speak slowly, clearly, and have empathy with their learning needs.

In 1996 the University of the South Pacific offered, for the first time, a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, aimed at assisting our own staff as well as staff of other tertiary institutions in the region, to improve their teaching skills. This program has now been upgraded to Diploma level with the addition of courses in distance and flexible learning and research. These courses are currently available through distance and flexible offer, including online and flexi schools. While this initiative is a welcome addition to USP's attempt to improve the teaching skills of its own staff, the fact remains that not everyone is taking the opportunity to learn not only about teaching but also about their students, with some insisting that they already knew how to teach and that they treat all students equally. Others continue to see themselves as helping not only to educate but re-orient students, thus perpetuating a cultural deficit model of teaching which reinforces the idea that there is something wrong with a student's ways of thinking and learning and that everyone must conform to the cultural standards of the university, which in practice means the lecturers' cultural standards.

The perceived need for university staff to treat all students equally is of course based on the assumption that students are a homogenous cultural group. Such an assumption prevents educational institutions from formulating a coherent teaching/learning policy that recognizes the goals of cultural democracy. This form of cultural blindness stems from a reluctance to acknowledge that students come from a diversity of cultural backgrounds and that they experience different socialisation practices that often affect their behaviour, including their learning. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear teachers and university lecturers lament their students' communication problems, lack of initiative, passivity during class discussions, and refusal to confront teachers directly. Few if any, see the irony in the fact that many students' language (in)ability, the basis for both cultural transmission as well as learning, has been severely compromised in the process of their school education and their own societies' push to modernize/westernize, a factor that is reflected in the way many Pacific governments allocate higher education scholarships with far more being granted in disciplines such as Business, Accounting, Economics,

Management and Computing and few if any in areas such as Sociology, History, Geography, Marine Studies; Botany; or Pacific Languages – subjects that are central to understanding Pacific cultures, peoples and environments. While we understand the needs of modernizing Pacific nations for economists, accountants and information technologists and the like, I believe that our various island nations need graduates who understand the cultural contexts in which they plan to work when they graduate.

The balance of this chapter refers to some positive development in the struggle to improve teacher-student communication in higher education in the Pacific. The Pacific Strategy for Culture and Education has been mentioned earlier. It would go some way in encouraging culturally inclusive teaching and research as well as the documentation and publications of research and studies in the general area of culture and education. Advocacy about the importance of culture in education has been a major part of the work of the UNESCO Chair in teacher education and culture, since 1998. The Chair also promotes the development of Pacific Research Methodologies and Frameworks as well as the documentation of traditional knowledge especially in relation to sustainable development. In 2003 a resource book on 'Educational Ideas from Oceania' was published for use by university and teacher training college staff to better contextualize teaching. A revised edition came out in 2009. The authors of this publication were Pacific staff and students of the USP's School of Education. The publication of the book was a milestone in our School's work in encouraging staff and students to critically analyse, theorise and reclaim their education and learn about the educational ideas and values of other Pacific cultures.

Earlier, in 2000, a series of Teacher Education Modules on selected aspects of the teacher education curriculum was published targeting teacher educators as well as teacher trainees. Titles already published include: Towards Culturally Democratic Teacher Education (Thaman 2000); Vernacular Languages and Classroom Interaction in the Pacific (Taufe'ulungaki 2000); Incorporating Local Knowledge in Teaching about Society (Nabobo 2000); Making Sense of Human Development: Beyond Western Concepts and Universal Assumptions (Tupuola 2000); Ways of Mathematising in Fijian Society (Bakalevu 2000); and, Learning from Indigenous Leadership (Sanga 2000). Feedback from some teachers training college lecturers indicate that their students also found the Modules useful.

As well as materials production, staff in the School of Education are encouraging postgraduate students to use and/or develop Pacific frameworks for research and develop their own personal philosophies of teaching. A recent study by Nabobo-Baba (2006) on Fijian epistemology, is evidence that an increasing number of Pacific scholars are looking towards their cultures for inspiration in academic pursuits. Existing Pacific research frameworks such as *Kakala* (Thaman 1992); *Kurakaupapa Maori* (Smith 1999); *Fa'afaletui* (Tamasese et al. 1997); *Tivaevae* (Maua-Hodges 2001); *Manulua* (Vaioleti 2010), and 'Iluvatu (Naisilisili 2011), continue to provide inspiration also to many staff and students as they strive to discover metaphors from their own cultural backgrounds to use in their study projects. A regional research project on sustainable livelihood funded by NZAID and coordinated by the USPs Institute of Education used an enhanced version of the *Kakala* framework. The project, part of the Re-thinking Pacific Education Initiative

(RPEI), illustrated some of the advantages of using Pacific Research Methodologies and Frameworks to carry out research among Pacific communities and similar research projects are being planned for other Pacific communities. Apart from promoting Pacific Research, RPEI has also sponsored national and regional conferences in the Pacific region on a variety of topics including Re-thinking Education in Vanuatu, Re-thinking Educational Aid, and Culturally Inclusive Curriculum. Leadership Pacific is also an important part of RPEI and a series of workshops on leadership and governance utilizing Pacific leadership structures and processes have also been conducted in the Pacific region, including in New Zealand. Several publications have resulted from these conferences and workshops all of which are used by students and staff in higher education institutions throughout the region. RPEI is a network of Pacific educators from around the region who are united in their commitment to improving the quality of education in the region.

The issue of ethics in research has been our most recent concern in relation to staff research and what our students are being taught in research methods courses. Because Ethics has to do with appropriate behaviour it follows that its interpretation in one community may not necessarily be the same in another, especially one where people have a different worldview. Wax had suggested that while both researchers and researched have standards for assessing conduct in most cases, these standards are incommensurable for the parties, if they do not share a common moral vocabulary or a common vision of the nature of human beings as actors in the universe. As suggested by Smith, much of the thought behind the idea of respect for human dignity, for example, might have served to create and perpetuate unethical conduct, attitudes and behaviour in the practice of research by Europeans on aboriginal people (Smith 1999, p. 121). The desire for an ethical framework in an aboriginal context therefore is an attempt to restore order and balance to continuing daily life, which comes with the assertion of traditional values and ethics (Castellano 2004; Maka et al. 2006). In analyzing ethical issues we are looking at such themes as: interpretation of ethics; depiction of Pacific people in research; scientific methods; academic freedom; Pacific experts; appropriation of knowledge; collective ownership and consent; benefits and distributive justice; and confidentiality.

However, perhaps the most important issues that people have been grappling with in relation to research have had to do with ownership, control, access and possession of knowledge (OCAP) – issues, linked to the agenda of self-determination (Schnarch 2004). They serve as guides to the re-appropriation of research activities and outcomes in Pacific research within the context of trying to develop a Pacific indigenous worldview-based research paradigm. OCAP provides a framework for the Indigenous Research Agenda (Castellano 2004), and serves to enhance capacity building of indigenous researchers by bringing concepts of ownership and control to the attention of Pacific communities (Johnson and Ruttan 1992). At USP the pilot research project mentioned earlier was an attempt to develop community based research guidelines and agreements, paying attention to how communities-based research information is accessed and how research is conducted. We wanted the various communities that USP serves to have some control over research activities in their domain. This empowerment would engender a sense of interest and

responsibility at the community level as people become more involved in the processes of research and activities that support the institutions where their young people study.

Many people in Australasia would know that in Aotearoa New Zealand, Maori community research guidelines have become valuable tools for asserting indigenous people's jurisdiction over community (cultural) resources. Community guidelines usually differ from institutional guidelines, which often do not recognize indigenous rights and jurisdictions. I am personally concerned about the effectiveness of institutional guidelines to address local and indigenous issues in our part of the Pacific and I find the Canadian notion of ethical space a useful and promising framework. USP is in the process of establishing appropriate mechanisms for approving and reviewing staff and student research proposals involving Pacific peoples, as a way of raising the awareness of non-Pacific teaching personnel to the diversity of students' cultures.

In this chapter I have tried to share some personal reflections about the importance of inter-cultural understanding to the teacher-student communication process in higher education. I know that many Pacific Island students have excelled in what they do at university in spite of the ignorance of their lecturers of their cultural backgrounds. They are not the concern of this chapter. Rather it is the majority of students who do not achieve at university or who are struggling to understand what is expected of them, or who are not able to attend classes because they have to attend to sick or aged relatives; or skipped class just because they could not understand the lecturer's accent. All these and more are linked to students' cultural milieu, the one that teaching staff in higher education need to understand better in order that they may be able to communicate with them more effectively.

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