



COVID-19 muddles *talanoa* and *vā*: Perceived connections and uncertainties

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Abstract

Learning online from home bubbles through the use of information communication technology (ICT) stretches the engagement and enactment of vā (relational connections) between students and lecturers as well as Pacific people in the community. In this paper, talanoa is used to capture students' online learning experiences and their perceived understanding of connections. Such experiences are embodied in people's interactions, conversations, problem-solving, knowledge sharing and exchange of ideas and practice. As the vā space online between lecturer and student as well as people in the community is physically mama'o (distanced), the perceived space of learning connection raises concern over ethics and practice. Engaging in open talanoa of the uncertainties linked to online interactions within the post-COVID context and the place of vā ethics can lead to talanoa mālie that highlight possibilities and solutions.

Keywords

Online learning; ICT; *talanoa*; *vā*; connections; uncertainties; innocent internet users (IIU)

Introduction

As a doctoral student of Tongan ancestry, the key learnings within the post-COVID context has contributed to my understanding of online and cybersecurity research. The *talanoa* conversations in this paper positions *vā* (relational connections) at the centre of thinking and understanding. I ground the *talanoa* thinking and understanding from my relational positionality (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019) as a Pacific researcher located on the whenua in Kirikiriroa (Hamilton) through predominantly Tongan language and ideas. To engage in *talanoa vā* within the special section in the Waikato Journal of Education (WJE) is to locate and articulate the ways in which online learning is contextualised and made meaning within higher education and community learning and interaction.

The post-COVID context in New Zealand has impacted our daily activities and education practices. Under the alert level 4 restrictions in 2020, people were forced to stay home in their own immediate bubbles and only the essential service workers were allowed to operate (Neilson, 2020). In higher



education, students and lecturers were no longer required to physically attend classes and the move to online learning was prioritised. At the University of Waikato (UoW), it was the institution's responsibility to ensure students stayed safe and were able to continue their learning but through online means. Pacific students who did not have access to a laptop or desktop computer were supplied with a device and this was co-ordinated through the Assistant Vice Chancellor (AVC) Pacific's office. Although the UoW had planned for the shift to full online learning, not all faculties staff members or students knew what this would look like. The uncertainty was not confined only to the UoW; the majority of higher education institutions experienced the same.

This paper focuses on the general impacts of the use and implementation of information communication technology (ICT) online learning programmes within academia as well as cybersecurity concerns in the wider community.

Talanoa—a grounded approach

Talanoa is a grounded approach and practice because the conversations and experiences are shaped by the context and the people involved. One of the original definitions of *talanoa* dates back to Baker (1897). He defines the Tongan word *talanoa* as “conversation”, to “converse” (p. 183) and a “narrative” (p. 60). Fua (2014) extends the meaning of *talanoa* to include a chat, talking with someone, sharing ideas, building relationships, gathering information, teaching skills and can be used “to resolve problems” (p. 56). Central to *talanoa* is the notion of building relationships. In Tonga, the concept of building a relationship is illustrated in the traditional kava ceremony or *faikava* which is traced back to being a traditional cultural practice used by a bridegroom to find a bride. In the kava circle, the bridegroom sits beside the *tou 'a*, the bride to be, and she serves him *kava* to initiate *talanoa* and the sharing of ideas linked to marriage. In the church the pastor or church minister conveys the Word of God to church members. In the *fono* (command, proclamation, edict), the village community gathers together and the *nopele* (noble) gives *tu 'utu 'uni* (command, an order) (Baker, 1897, p. 88) to the village about their service and *fatongia* (obligations, compulsion, necessity) to the King of Tonga.

Vaiioleti (2013) further clarifies *talanoa* as “an exchange of ideas, be it formal or informal” (p. 192). Fiji, Samoa and Tonga are where the concept of *talanoa* is rooted and sourced by educators and researchers. Today, other Pacific educators and researchers in the diaspora of the United States, Australia and New Zealand have used variations of *talanoa*. *Talanoa* is used in Fiji for community meetings about the economic and social development (Aporosa & Forde, 2019). In Samoa, *talanoa* is where a free conversation takes place and is open to raising “multi-level and multi-layered critical discussion” (p. 192). *Talanoa* is common during the consumption of *kava*, or *kava* parties, circles or clubs. The kinds of *talanoa* in the *faikava* can uplift individuals’ “spirit to an elevated level of happiness, connectedness, and spirituality” (Vaiioleti, 2013, p. 193), affirming *talanoa mālie* (inspiring conversations) as a consequence of collective meaning-making.

Vā—relational space, relational connection

Ka'ili (2005) defines the word *vā* or *va* or *wa* as a “space between people or things” or “space between two or more points” (p. 89). The same definition of *vā* is provided by Rabone (1845, p. 221) and Baker (1897, p. 203)—the “space or distance between two given objects”. Koloto (2017) provides a comparable explanation of *vā*; “the distance between or distance apart” (p. 2304). Ka'ili (2005, p. 89) states that *vā* is not a distinctively Tongan word—the word is well-known in the other parts of the Pacific. Relational space or distance between two objects is familiar and known in Rotuma, Samoa, Tahiti and Tonga as *vā*, whereas *wā* is used in Hawaii by Kanaka Maoli and Māori in Aotearoa.

Tongan families and communities aim to maintain and care for the *vā* and requires *tauhi* (nurturing). When *vā* is *tauhi* (nurtured), the relational connections are *ofi* (close) and *mo'ui* (active or alive). *Tauhi* refers to “take care of or to look after a person, assets, and relationships (Koloto, 2017, p. 2303). *Tauhi* and *vā* combine to form *tauhi-vā*. *Tauhi vā* is a mutual process whereby the persons involved aspire to maintain a “good relationship with others” (Ketuu, 2014, p. i). Kalavite (2010) defines *tauhi-vā* as “keep[ing] good relationships” (p. 3). *Tauhi-vā* is one of the fundamental elements of the four golden values or pillars of Tongan culture known as “*faa'i kaveikoula*”. The four values of ‘*ulungaanga-fakaTonga* (Tongan culture) are *faka'apa'apa* (respect), *lototō* (humility and generosity), *mamahi'ime 'a* (sense of responsibility and commitment to the cause) and *tauhi-va* (loyalty and commitment) (Koloto, 2017, p. 2303).

To keep the space or distance closer with each other, *vāofi* (or close connections) is experienced and are *mo'ui* (alive). People who are *vāofi* show *fe'ofa'aki* (to love one another). When the space of relating is *mama'o* (distanced) it means the *vā* is *'ikai mo'ui* (inactive) and can result in connections that *mate* (die). Lack of engagement is experienced because of the absence of *'ofa* (love). *Tauhi-vā ki he mate* or retaining the *vā* until death refers to the deed or covenant between a wife and a husband and maintaining this keeps the *vā* (relationship) *ke toki veteki pe 'e he mate* (until separation by death).

Higher education talanoa and concerns at the UoW

Before engaging in *talanoa vā*, I unfold COVID-19 as a contextual factor in *talanoa* linked to the uncertainties of learning and connections online and through ICT modes. On the 31 December 2019, an unknown pneumonia discovered in Wuhan China, was reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO). A month later, on the 30 January 2020, COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In February 2020, the WHO broadcasted a new name for this pandemic disease and named it COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2020). COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020).

Regular *faikava* (kava consumption) events were repeatedly conducted at the UoW organised by Dr Apo Aporosa as part of ‘*Fono at the Fale*’, a regular activity enabling Pacific and non-Pacific students to come together and *talanoa* matters that concern their lives and their higher education learning. The *faikava* gatherings were open for students, lecturers and staff as well as other participants from the community. Students raised concerns over academic issues. The collective *faikava* events provided a comfortable yet deliberate space for *talanoa mālie* in which students and staff were able to voice their opinions as well as mediate some of their frustrations associated with online learning and learning in general. The *faikava talanoa* provided opportunities for sharing ideas, raising issues, making jokes and meeting new friends. Generally, the main advantage of *Fono at the Fale* and *faikava talanoa* is to preserve Pacific knowledge and practice as well as aspire students to honour *vā* ethics through the enacting and maintenance of *vāofi* (close connections), and through the relationships and the diverse voices and opinions shared. Although higher education favours critical independent thinking, communication and competition, *vā* requires those engaged in the space of relationally to honour diversity through inclusivity. This means the *talanoa* is not only about voicing students and lecturers’ concerns, the *vā* ethics requires us to think carefully of the words and ways of doing it that is meaningful and respectful.

Community talanoa and concerns

The two ideas, *talanoa* and *vā*, can be applied to the cybersecurity field in terms of cyberattack and cybercriminals. The provision of cybersecurity awareness is to inform the community of cybercriminals and their intentions online. The exchanging of ideas initiated by scammers in creating phishing scams

delivered via emails, robocalls, texts and imposter schemes is a kind of *talanoa kovi* (bad story), *talanoa fa'u* (makeup story), *talanoa ke tohoaki'i* (conversation to attract attention), and *talanoa kākā* (untruthful story). These types of *talanoa* and their negative impact are not fully understood by the innocent internet users (IIU), as scammers use professional and visual features to attract attention.

Phishing is one of the effective techniques employed by scammers to phish and harvest money from IIU. According to Fruhlinger (2020), a reporter from the CSO-United States security and risk management company, the scammers delivered: 94 percent of malware through email, phishing attacks lost US\$17,700 every minute and more than 80 percent of reported incidents were accounted for phishing attacks. According to Wade (2019), a political reporter from the *New Zealand Herald*, NZ\$23 million was lost, an average of NZ\$9801 per IIU victim, to internet fraudsters and online scammers in 2018. Within this amount, one IIU lost a stunning NZ\$5 million (Wade, 2019).

Shaun Johnson, a former Kiwi Warriors National Rugby League (NRL) player who won the Golden Boot prize in 2014 and currently plays for the Australian Cronulla Sharks NRL team, replied to criticism by Cooper Cronk, a top NRL player, by saying, “A lot of people feel it's easier to speak negatively instead of positively” (TVNZ, n.d). For Johnson, spending energy focusing too much on negative criticism is unhelpful. Through *tauhi vā*, maintaining the *vā* energy or spirit thrives on *mālie* (inspiration) and *māfana* (heart-felt and inwardly emotions). *Vā* ethics is about honouring and building positive relations and connections which is difficult online if there is no existing relationship in place between the people involved.

While the world is concentrating on searching for a cure for the global pandemic, scammers are using social media and fake websites as tools to deceive the IIU. With more citizens being locked down, isolated, under financial pressure and vulnerable, the COVID-19 environment is the perfect time for scammers to take advantage and act fraudulently. According to Waggoner & Markowitz (2021), the US Justice Department shut-down hundreds of fake websites using the heading ‘COVID-19’ which promised online users that it would deliver medical supplies and vaccines. The spreading-speed of Coronavirus scams is nearly as fast as the spread of the actual virus itself (Waggoner & Markowitz, 2021).



Figure 1. Customers queued at Pak'n Save, Royal Oak, Auckland, New Zealand.

With the national lockdown, local Kiwis were confused as to what sort of things to prioritise—to purchase food first, or to buy essential goods such as heaters, or to purchase medical supplies. People rushed to supermarkets (see Figure 1) to purchase more food stocks and essential items to serve for the

whole lockdown period. Nadkarni (2020) reported that customers rushed to the shop because of “coronavirus fears”. As a result, Countdown put “two-per-person” restrictions on products for 11 items including rice, sanitiser, and toilet paper (Nadkarni, 2020).

The Tongan government was confused about the right decision to make regarding Tongan citizens who were stuck overseas. A chartered flight was arranged to return 50 Tongans from Fiji to Tonga on Thursday 9 June 2020 but was later cancelled. As told by Radio New Zealand (RNZ) (2020), the flight was delayed due to three new confirmed Coronavirus cases in Fiji at the time. Three Coronavirus cases in Fiji were citizens returning from overseas. Also, Bradley (2020) announced losing hope of returning home for Pacific essential workers in the fruit picking industry with no exact day set for them to return. More than 1,500 Pacific essential workers who were set to return home in May 2020 stayed back in Aotearoa with little paid wages due to the fruit picking season being officially over. Workers in Hawke’s Bay suffered from anxiety and depression as they were unsure of their return time home (Bradley, 2020).

COVID-19 scams

In Auckland during the second week of April 2020, an individual found four unauthorised petrol payments of more than NZ\$250 made from his account. According to Leahy (2020), the victim from Mt Albert made only one online bill payment and remained at home with his bank card and had hardly gone out to other places during the lockdown period. The victim said the last time he used his card was in the local dairy and a pharmacy. The victim received a call from the bank to enquire about the petrol transactions as it was rare to purchase petrol from different gas stations within 30 minutes. The victim had no idea when and how this scam happened. The ANZ Bank immediately responded and closed the bank account. The New Zealand Netsafe CEO said, “Scams are up about 10 per cent on average at the moment and about 10 percent of our scam reports are linked to COVID-19” (Leahy, 2020).

In mid-March 2020, Interpol (2020) clarified recent cybercriminal cases related to COVID-19. As demand for medical supplies was high, cybercriminals set up fake online shop websites with the promise to deliver masks and health supplies to innocent citizens, but no supplies had been delivered. Other cybercriminals pretended to be health officials advising families to donate for medical payment of close relatives, but no one in the family had been admitted to a hospital. Other cases were involved with email phishing pretending to be from legitimate health authorities targeting the IIU to gain payment details or provide personal credentials or open a malware attachment. IIU lost a lot of money to scammers through COVID-19 scams, and Interpol (2020) responded promptly to close down cybercriminal false bank accounts to save victims’ money.

On 27 March 2020, there was an official press release from Razim Buksh (2020), director of the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) in Fiji. The FIU received a report of a COVID-19 scam to a local pharmaceutical company. Related Coronavirus medical products, such as disinfectant wipes, face masks and hand sanitiser, were initially advertised on Facebook. The local pharmaceutical company made further contact with the foreigner through WhatsApp and emailed to arrange shipment and payment. From the proforma invoice details, the local pharmaceutical company deposited FJD\$6,500 into the foreign bank account. In response, a return fake contact from an unknown shipment company advised the items were ready to deliver. To date, no items have been delivered (Buksh, 2020).

In a YouTube video in early April 2020, Emani Lua explained to John Pulu, the Tagata Pasifika (2020) interviewer that a message on Facebook asked his friend to donate money for a child in a hospital. Details were not clear whether the patient was from Samoa or Tonga or any of the Pacific nations. Emani Lua also warned about the regular tactics used by scammers, such as email phishing, opening infected attachments and fake websites. During the lockdown period, when asked for online payment of bills, people were told to double check the legitimacy of the contact with vendors and banks and to check for the legitimacy of the contact.

Issues pertaining to online learning and research

Fakalukuluku 'i he Moana 'o e 'Ilo, a group of Tongan PhDs and Master's students at the UoW conducted a formal meeting on Zoom on Friday 5 June 2020. The president of the Waikato Uni-Tech Tongan Tertiary Students Association (WUTTSA) raised academic issues involved with Tongan students during the school lockdown session. According to the president of WUTTSA, one student reported that their parents said to take this lockdown time as an opportunity to carry out all home duties: cooking, cleaning, washing and so on. The student complained about the lack of time to carry out the assignments and study. The student suffered from anxiety and pressure and thought about quitting study. *Fakalukuluku 'i he Moana 'o e 'Ilo* group is concerned about this issue for further follow-up. In the meantime, the WUTTSA's president already referred this case to UoW student support.

During the alert level 4 lockdown, parents took over teachers' classroom responsibilities to supervise children's learning. Without academic experience or adequate knowledge, there were huge academic gaps between children and parents. Parents stepped in to fill these gaps as a representative role but the academic quality was questionable. A crystal-clear issue that affects all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary, was the shortage in numbers of teachers. Walls (2020) from the *New Zealand Herald* commented that due to the teacher shortage, the New Zealand Government invested nearly half a million dollars in overseas advertisements to persuade foreign teachers to come and work in New Zealand, as the country was facing a teacher "supply crisis". Since September 2018, new recruitment of more than 500 foreign teachers were assigned teacher roles (Walls, 2020). On top of the issue of teacher shortage, parents without academic experience took full teacher responsibilities to teach at home during the lockdown and educational problems accumulated.

As the *vā* between the students and lecturers is *mama 'o* (distanced), there are potential opportunities for students to act unethically. The online test is one of the major critical issues. Inside the home bubble, without any monitoring system, the lecturer or supervisor cannot detect if someone is assisting the student with the test. On the computer screen during the online test, more than one student can observe the test and they can contribute to the answer. A student could pre-organise to have friends to assist and sit beside the computer screen. For example, assistant number one is to focus on reading the number one question, assistant number two is to concentrate on the number two question and assistant number three is to do the same thing on question number three and so on. Another possible instance related to the hiring of another ex-student who has already sat the exam to come and sit beside the screen to give the right answer to the current student or the hired student sits the whole test.

Due to local border restrictions in New Zealand plus the uncertainty of reopening for travellers to fly in and out of the country, there is no chance for students to conduct overseas research. The author of this paper arranged to travel overseas to conduct survey and data collection. Data collection plays a key element in this study, but border restrictions delayed overseas travel. The original plan is to stay in Tonga for several months to undertake face-to-face interviews. A new plan is set to find another convenient way to connect with the participants in Tonga. The restrictions on international air travel due to COVID-19 has put a stop to this plan and there is uncertainty when the border restrictions will ease.

Possible solutions

Online learning assists students in different ways. The main advantage deals with the safety of students. Students manage to study from home in their bubble, free from contact with other Coronavirus carriers. Other advantages of online learning include flexibility, self-motivation, time-management, gaining new computer skills, cost-effective, wider interaction and global knowledge. There are several issues of online learning, such as the need for the students to be computer literate, students wanting to talk to

other students and students not being able to carry out practical works. The priority is the health and safety of students from COVID-19.

There are possible manageable solutions for the unethical issues conducted by students dealing with online tests. To have a clean and honest test environment, open-book tests are encouraged if the UoW agrees to future online tests. Online interviews between the lecturer and student are another technique to consider as a test. The lecturer can provide test questions to a student through an online-shared screen and a live interview can take place. During the interview, there is a chance for the student to get the mark from the lecturer after the interview.

Faikava at the UoW is to be an ongoing activity not only for cultural preservation but the ongoing relationship of the students and other staff. Teachers and lecturers come from multidisciplinary areas, including law, science, education, indigenous Māori, social science and computer science, to search for *talanoa mālie* and keep the ongoing relationship of *tauhi-vā*. More opportunities for students to ask academic questions and other personal issues and the *vā* between students and lecturers are always *ofi* (close). The students that attend ‘*Fono at the Fale*’ often feel supported, less isolated, cast-off or abandoned.

Online scamming can be controlled. To cut off the *vā* between the online scammers and the IIU, the application of look before you leap, to envisage the likely effects before making a crucial decision which cannot be reverted, is a defensive technique to prioritise. With any link or attachment delivered via email with the request to download or open the link, without any ICT, the best choice is to think twice before opening or clicking. The attachment or link contains disguised malware to infect the computer’s system. With cheap items advertised on online media, it is advisable to spend a few minutes searching online for previous records and complaints from customers about the sourced company. It is wise for the customers to check with banks for the integrity of the account number to deposit the money in and the address and destination. Consumers should not be ashamed to ask questions or report to police or authorities any suspicious contact from an unknown source.

Conclusion

Online learning within the post-COVID context can present concerns and possibilities through the ICT utilised and implemented. Higher learning and community *talanoa* of the *vā* connections when engaging online has highlighted the significance of ethical practice grounded in Pacific and Tongan language, worldviews and values. The cybersecurity space seeks to confront the unethical practices through scams that negatively impact IIU (innocent internet users). The use of *vā* ethics has provided a Tongan cultural view of how concerns and possibilities can be conceptualised and understood in higher education and the wider community. *Talanoa* and *vā* have emphasised the perceived connections and uncertainties inherent in online learning and engagement.

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