

Reciprocal-relational teaching: culturally-responsive pedagogy in the Pacific Islands

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Teachers and principals of international schools are challenged to provide curriculum that meets the diverse needs of their students. Ways to diminish those challenges are provided through the use of effective instructional strategies based on culturally responsive pedagogy and in fostering reciprocal relationships where students and teachers are cyclically engaged in teaching and learning.

Purposefully integrated into the teacher education program at the University of Hawai'i, teacher candidates are empowered to use these pedagogies as instructional interventions in their action research projects to facilitate indigenous place-based instruction. The context and importance of culturally responsive curriculum is acknowledged and the need to provide strategies grounded in local and indigenous wisdom, such as teacher-created WebQuests, ethnomathematics problem-based projects, place-based science explorations and expository writing.

Culturally responsive teaching requires a thoughtful consideration of *what* curriculum to use (place-based/culturally-relevant) and *how* to structure the teaching and learning relationship (cyclic/relational instruction) in culturally-respectful ways. One pedagogical example originates from the Hawaiian proverb, '*A'o Aku, A'o Mai*', which roughly translated means 'in teaching, we learn', a core teaching value of reciprocal/relational teaching.

A'o aku, A'o Mai aligns with Freire's (2000) criticism of the banking model which positions teachers as authoritative depositors of information into the minds of students. In this respect, the question begs whether it is better to be a teacher that is a 'guide on the side' or the 'didactic sage on the stage'. In Hawai'i, the respected teacher, or *Kumu*, is neither, but both. *Kumu* is a highly respected sage, but humble and reciprocal in his/her interactions with students, always believing that teachers learn as much as they teach.

To understand the problems that motivated the integration of culturally-responsive pedagogy with relational teaching, we must first

briefly understand the context of location. The rich cultural traditions established over 3000 years of history position Hawai'i with deep-rooted ways of knowing and doing. Hawai'i is home to a tremendously diverse population encompassing vast cultural and linguistic diversity.

This rich multicultural society includes many ethnic groups, over 53 spoken languages and serves 185,000 students (Hawai'i Department of Education, 2011). Figure 1 depicts the most used languages in the Hawai'i Department of Education schools. There are over 20,000 students speaking more than 50 different languages.

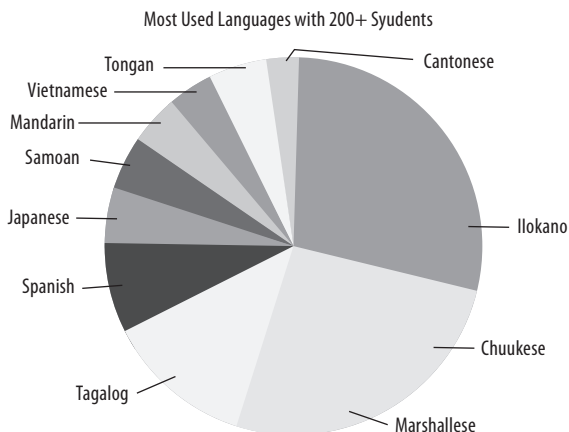


Figure 1. English Language Learner 'most used' languages in Hawai'i Department of Education schools (Hawai'i Department of Education, 2011).

Due to United States colonisation, however, students struggle with the hegemonic impositions thrust upon them as they acclimatise to mandated instruction, assessment and curriculum, which are not proving to be effective (Deering, 2006). Facing an identity crisis of serving two masters – blended Pacific and United States cultural and national identities – students are in great need of supportive, knowledgeable and caring teachers and principals who can help them navigate not only the rough waters of identity formation (Erikson, 1968), but also provide schooling that is personally meaningful and invigorating. In order for students to be successful, their teachers must provide exemplary instruction in ways that matter and are relevant to the context in which these students learn.

The diversity of student population in Hawai'i and International Baccalaureate (IB) schools has similarities. Given the IB mission to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people to help create a better and more peaceful world through *intercultural* understanding and

respect (International Baccalaureate, March 2016), it makes sense for teachers to facilitate *intercultural* teaching practices. As the saying goes, if you do not model what you teach, you end up teaching something else.

The challenge for teachers is to find balance between *intercultural* understanding and *common humanity* understanding. The IB standards can be achieved through multi-ethnic pathways, which respect cultural heritage and identity while equipping students to be influential global citizens. This type of culturally responsive instruction, that builds on the diverse student cultures enrolled in international schools, results in a unique mosaic of portfolios that demonstrate students' proficiency with the IB attributes.

A solution to educating such a large and diverse population of students aligns succinctly with a multicultural approach termed culturally responsive or culturally relevant teaching, a pedagogy that 'empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes' (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p382). Culturally relevant pedagogy is a pathway for students to maintain their cultural identity while succeeding academically (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ogbu, 2003) where teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning' (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p3).

Researchers support that culturally-responsive curriculum can affect student achievement by understanding the student's home-community culture, and integrating these cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment (Au, 2007; Banks, 2004; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rhodes, 2013).

Relational teaching, within a context that honours traditions, knowledge and languages of the community, is essential for student academic success as well as preparing them for meaningful lives (Demmert & Towner, 2003, p9). Professors at the University of Hawai'i deemed that the integration of culturally responsive and relational pedagogy was an appropriate method to connect students to their learning, in safe, caring environments. Through instructional interventions designed in action research projects to facilitate indigenous place-based and culturally relevant instruction, teacher candidates taught by using the relational/reciprocal model of teaching.

Relational teaching can be explored through the concept of epistemological beliefs that influence how novice teachers learn their craft. In order for teacher candidates to understand and incorporate relational teaching, they first must understand themselves, their views, beliefs and long held ideas of teaching. Brownlee's (2004) research asserts that knowing *what* (content) to teach is as important as knowing

how (processes) and are grounded in one's beliefs. She states that 'the body of literature related to teacher beliefs about knowing and learning, otherwise known as epistemological beliefs, may provide insights into how to improve teaching and learning' (Brownlee, 2004, p1). Brownlee (2004) addresses the importance of epistemological beliefs in terms of relativism – or relevant to the culture, society or context – where 'knowledge was actively and personally constructed (p2). Brownlee explains that absolute truths are replaced by individuals' experiences and their interpretation of those, thus:

It may be expected that individuals who have more sophisticated epistemological beliefs, that is, that individuals construct truths, would also conceive of teaching in a similar manner. This means that they may be likely to conceive of teaching from a constructivist or transformative perspective. From this perspective teaching and learning become a two-way interaction, which implies a relational approach to teaching. Students and the teacher become co-learners.

(Brownlee, 2004: 4)

Brownlee (2004) extends this with Magolda's (1993a) description of 'connected teaching' – the intersection of one's own experiences (relational) and experts' knowledge (impersonal) as 'relational pedagogy' (p4). Brownlee's use of Magolda's (1993b, 1996a, b) findings illustrate that teachers help students develop complex ways of knowing through acknowledging students as knowers, relating students' experiences to instruction, inciting a constructivist perspective and utilising peer learning. Thus, research supports the idea that teaching is relational, where students and teachers make connections between epistemological beliefs and interpersonal relationships – connecting self and theory.

To facilitate teacher candidates' understandings and use of relational teaching, Latta & Field (2005) describe the importance of using senses in learning to teach. Incorporating both the guide on the side and the sage on the stage approaches per *A'o aku*, *A'o Mai* tradition, they suggest that through truly seeing their students, feeling compassion and care, and hearing what their students say, teachers can tap into their own 'inner' attention to the students, curriculum and classroom activity.

Noddings (1992) emphasised the importance of authentic, open-ended dialogue between teachers and students, where real dialogue is 'a search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation' (p23). Latta & Field (2005) suggest that because senses 'affect the way we feel and live in the world' (p650) relationships are a more important priority than novice teachers

focusing on manageable and measurable information. Relational teaching becomes a pedagogy of appreciation and respect between the sage and the learner.

A qualitative action research exploratory design was utilised as graduate teacher candidates established a cycle of observation, culturally-responsive pedagogy and curriculum, data analysis, and reflection/observation. A range of learning experiences and materials was used to support this model, specifically tailored to the students, content and context. Teacher candidates used teacher-created WebQuests, ethnomathematic problem-based projects, place-based science explorations and expository writing, all of which are grounded in local and indigenous wisdom.

A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which students interact with information gathered primarily from resources on the internet (Dodge, 1997). Students enjoy freedom as researchers by accumulating multiple resources based on students' backgrounds and interests. Teachers, as the guide on the side, integrate internet technology into the curriculum while encouraging students to experience learning in the construction of their WebQuests. Excellent resources such as Zunal.com and Questgarden.com – online templates for designing and maintaining integrated culturally-responsive units – were introduced to the students. Examples of place-based WebQuests created by teachers in Hawai'i for Pacific students include an inquiry into the Big Island of Hawai'i (<http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=314347>) and the Hawai'i Pidgin language (<http://zunal.com/webquest.php?w=318896>).

Real contexts, problems and people (D'Ambrosio, 1997) were explored through the use of ethnomathematics, which focuses on mathematical cultural practices. 'Academic' classroom math is replaced by solving real life problems, such as learning about math through constructing homes or creating woven items. Ethnomathematics provided a powerful mechanism for Pacific Island students to be empowered by and personally engaged in a curriculum where they saw themselves, their communities and their cultures represented (Rosa & Orey, 2011). Indigenous teacher/researcher Dr Paul Tauiiili utilized ethnomathematics in American Samoa, creating four culturally-based lessons that provided powerful teaching and learning. 'These lessons have been an important part of my *learning* about both my culture and the wealth of mathematics embedded in it' (Tauiiili, 2015, p88).

Ethnomathematics, as a celebration of local culture, acknowledges the indigenous knowledge of elders who practice mathematics, often gained through apprentice-like relationships across the generations. The teacher candidates learned how to incorporate ethnomathematics into their teaching by focusing on the relevant and important cultural aspects of

the communities in which they taught.

Studies in science also hold an important place in culturally responsive and reciprocal teaching-learning pedagogies through the use of placed-based science. Traditional Hawai'ian navigation, as represented through Polynesian voyaging canoes – the Hokule'a and Hikianalia – provided opportunities for students to discover and learn about global sustainability through understanding the voyages and importance of these vessels and their crew.

For centuries, the students' ancestors have travelled across the earth and brought people together using a method called 'wayfinding' (Polynesian Voyaging Society, 2015). Using the website <http://www.hokulea.com>, students tracked the voyages as they learned the historical and present-day significance of their ancestors' journeys. Wayfinders use only the sun, moon, and stars as a map, relying on the patterns of waves, currents and animal behaviours when the 'map' is not available, creating stories from which to learn:

Stories of hope and local solutions that blend indigenous wisdom with other best practices can be found all over the world. If we find and share those stories with each other, we can help chart a positive course for our planet (Polynesian Voyaging Society, 2015: 1).

Indigenous knowledge can also be learned and shared through teaching students expository writing to maintain and preserve the tradition of storytelling. While there lacks sufficient traditional Hawai'ian and Samoan literature to share with students because it was mainly produced in oral form, students can add to their histories by writing their own stories. Indigenous knowledge can include how to make local products, use traditional recipes, make hunting weapons and share family cultural practices. Students share book and artifact presentations as well as creating iBooks or PowerPoints representing their stories or traditional folktales.

Students also create journals, documenting their understanding, thoughts or feelings about the stories, thus adding another dimension to the historical record. These culturally responsive stories may also include interviews with community elders – who keep local legends alive through storytelling – while students preserve this rich history through the product that they develop. Meaningful reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks are engaged in the process of developing these cultural artefacts.

Repeated graduate level case studies of teacher candidates utilising culturally-responsive pedagogy and reciprocal/relational teaching as their action research instructional interventions revealed many forms of increased teaching and learning. Through the integration of these forms

of pedagogy academic achievement was positively impacted as revealed through the following emergent themes:

Engagement in their learning.

Importance *to* their learning.

Collaboration in learning with classmates and community members.

Creating relevant real life products.

As a result of multiple case studies in the Pacific, we believe that these pedagogies had a positive effect on students and teachers. The use of place-based, culturally responsive curriculum integration and reciprocal teaching resulted in positive results for the students' and teachers' overall feelings about themselves and their learning. The case studies revealed the impact of this pedagogical approach through the graduate teachers'/ researchers' creation of classroom environments as connections were made between the academic world of schooling and their real world on the island.

The graduate students were able to create classrooms where they saw themselves in the curriculum, found connections to their identities and felt a true sense of belonging. Far from the hegemonic impositions of United States colonization and mandated instruction, they grew to respect and appreciate indigenous knowledge, cultural practices and skills – and the importance of maintaining artefacts for the future.

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