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# The Classroom as a Metaphorical Canoe: Co-operative learning in Pacific Studies

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## Abstract

In this article I use the “canoe” as a metaphor for re-conceptualizing the university undergraduate classrooms in which I teach Pacific Studies. The canoe metaphor emphasizes the idea of “a journey”, or a process of learning, over “the destination” or product. Given the immensity and diversity of the Pacific Islands region, with approximately 20% of the world’s languages spread across islands in the world’s largest body of water, it becomes absurd for any lecturer in Pacific Studies to be positioned as an authority on the region. In Pacific Studies, lecturers must be prepared to navigate into unfamiliar waters. The canoe metaphor thus also allows for a cooperative approach to learning, and fosters shared responsibility between lecturers and tutors on one hand, and students on the other. Referring to Joseph Lowman’s classic text, *Mastering the Technique of Teaching* (1984), I review fundamental aspects of teaching practice in the light of the particular imperatives of Pacific Studies.

## Introduction

I accidentally drifted into teaching. As a younger woman, I was trying to deliberately voyage somewhere else; to a career that I thought would be more exciting and adventurous. I have now been a teacher at university for ten years,

and in that time, some of the lessons I learned in the beginning of my career have helped to sustain me.

In the field I work in, Pacific Studies, it is impossible to know everything about the 1200 distinct cultural groups among 7-10 million people living in and around the world's largest and oldest ocean, in some of the world's most vulnerable and precious ecosystems. There are many different ways of learning about the Pacific; travel, dwelling, and conversational exchanges, are some of the most enjoyable.

But Pacific Studies programmes, offered at universities around New Zealand, in Hawai'i, and increasingly around the world, are another way of learning about the Pacific (see Firth, 2003; Wesley-Smith, 1995; Crocombe, 1987). The university is undoubtedly part of our colonial heritage in the Pacific. But the paradox of colonialism is that it offers us tools for our liberation even as it attempts to dominate us. Education is the perfect example of this colonial paradox. I value my "colonial" or "Western" education, even as I attempt to use it to help myself and others discover more about our pre-colonial heritage, and fashion futures for ourselves that are liberating.

The classroom as we have inherited it is undoubtedly a colonial space. It is extremely difficult to indigenize the colonial classroom. I have friends and colleagues who have tried to indigenize the classroom in different ways; decorating it with a Pacific flair, asking students to bring in photographs and collages of their families, running tutorial sessions around a kava bowl, and of

course taking their students outside of their classrooms to talk, think and learn on the grass, under the sky, in the sun, under the stars, and most magically, on a canoe!

Unfortunately, not all of us who teach in Pacific Studies are favoured with conducive outdoor options. I have taught Pacific Studies at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand for five years. The city is famed for its blustering wind throughout the year and a particularly biting winter. Our urban campus is distinguished by having one of the smallest patches of green grass I've ever seen at a university. Our lectures tend to be held in buildings of massive 1960s and 70s era brick and concrete. Our tutorials are held in an early twentieth century wooden bungalow with bay windows and a miniature English garden in the front. There have been many times when I have felt it supremely ironic that I was teaching a subject that felt so alien in the landscape. It is very different from teaching Pacific history at the University of the South Pacific Laucala Campus in Suva, Fiji, which is where I had taught for the five years before I came to Wellington.

Pursuing a career in Pacific Studies in Wellington requires the exertion of students' and teachers' imaginations. I have found it useful to conceive of my classrooms as canoes, and our task as students and teachers as fostering cooperative learning. This article begins with reference to Joseph Lowman's classic text, *Mastering the Technique of Teaching* (1984) and finds a route from it to my work in Pacific Studies classrooms.

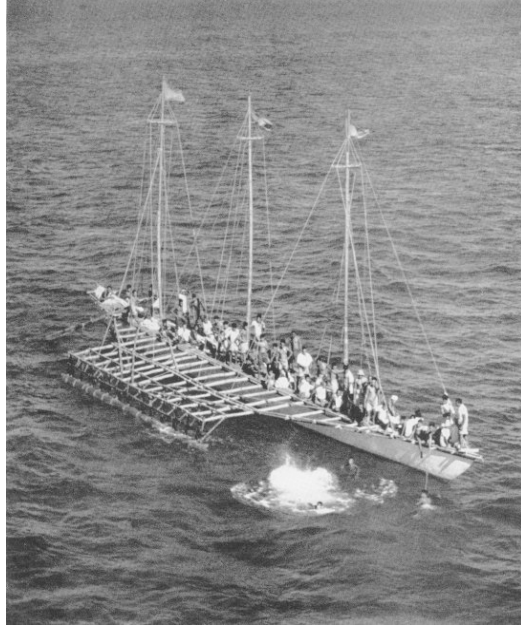


Photo: Kiribati ocean-going canoe.

Source: Dame Dr. Jane Resture, with permission,

<http://www.janeresture.com/canoes/main.htm>

## **Expectations in/of the Classroom**

In Lowman's discussion of classroom dynamics he talks about some common sense things; student and teacher expectations, and the fluctuations in classroom climate (Lowman, 1984, pp.23-44). As students and teachers, we expect to be both intellectually challenged by the course material and personally affirmed by our learning companions. As students and teachers we also know that our moods change with the pressures of assignments and the varying pertinence of course material to our lives. Keeping these common sense aspects of classroom dynamics in mind helps us realistically embark on our journey.

## Re-conceptualizing the Classroom

After reflecting on Lowman's assertion that success in the classroom depends on moving beyond the performer-spectator model (Lowman, 1984, p.24), I have conceptualized the classroom not as a static space but as a vehicle on a journey. This conceptualization creates the opportunity for interactive learning to generate the energy for the journey.

Let's imagine our classrooms as various canoes of the Pacific. While there are certainly canoes in the Pacific that can be maneuvered successfully by one person alone, the model I am interested in exploring is one in which a collection of people with different roles board the vessel. Lecture theatres would thus be like large ocean-going canoes. The lecturer (or professor, in American terms) could be either the chief standing regally in the stern, or the navigator lying on the bow to better assess the vicissitudes of the wind and ocean currents. Tutorial rooms would be like smaller outrigger canoes. The tutor (or teaching assistant) is the coxswain who steers as she rows with her crew of students.



Photo: Kiribati ocean-going canoe.

Source: Published in "Pacific Islands: War finds its way to Gilbert Islands" by Arthur Grimble in

National Geographic Magazine for January 1943,  
Volume 83, pages 71-92.

Such models require a certain level of mutual commitment from the 'traveling' companions to cooperation, communication and coverage. Metaphorically, if the chief or navigator of the ocean-going vessel is not at peak performance, the coxswain and crew of the outrigger canoe have to work harder on maintaining their morale as they row away from their familiar island into open seas that their vessel is not the best to handle.

In reality, if the chief or navigator of the ocean-going canoe is unfit, the lives of his crew are endangered. The life-and-death urgency and survival humility that featured in pre-colonial Pacific societies is clearly lacking in most of our post-colonial education systems and pedagogies.

### **Coverage**

Although this 'voyage' is more about exploration (process) than discovery (product), it is a reality of modern teaching that there is a syllabus to cover, and students are expected to read books (or multilith course readers), produce essays and answer questions. As both lecturer and tutor for my Pacific Studies courses, I fulfill my commitment to coverage by helping students through the exploratory process. To keep myself "fresh" while going over course material that might not change all that much from year to year, I try to relate our regular readings and texts to current events in the community and internationally. While I find it useful to allow course material a period of "sedimentation", it is also important to periodically reassess course materials in light of new scholarship, and reassess pedagogical strategies in light of new technology and changing

student demographics.

It is possible that material presented to students in your course is not entirely new. In Pacific Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, we have students who may have come across some of the ideas we discuss or material we assign in other courses like Anthropology, Art History, Geography, History, Māori Studies, or Samoan Studies. But there is not enough overlap in our course materials, and there is enough variety in our pedagogical strategies to make each learning journey unique for our students.

In any event, preparation and punctuality are the most important factors for coverage of course materials. For both teachers and students, preparation involves reading the assigned readings. For the teacher it may mean reading them at least twice, drafting a lesson plan, rehearsing introductory comments and checking multimedia equipment before class. When I first started as a teacher, I tried to arrive at the classroom at least 15 minutes early to write an agenda on the board and give myself time to mentally relax. I could greet students as they came in and then I would always start on time. This set the tone for the students and they were rarely late to class; punctuality helped us make the most of our time together.

As the years progressed, I found myself getting slack on time, and arriving a few minutes late to my lectures. Needless to say, this had unsatisfactory results, not the least of which was falling behind in coverage. "Island time", that is a casual approach to the strictures of modern schedules, is not good enough when our Pacific Studies students are burdening themselves with debt to gain tertiary education, and I have recently renewed my commitment to punctuality.



The process which has been most helpful to me in achieving maximum coverage in tutorials is the "conceptual overview". By reviewing the previous readings and discussions at the beginning of tutorials, previewing the forthcoming readings at the end, and demonstrating their conceptual relationships in between, we become more familiar with the material ("territory"), yet open to the new perspectives which each reading lends to an other.

### **Co-operation**

There is a general assumption of shared responsibility in any tutor-student or "coxswain-crew" relationship, but in the field of Pacific Studies it is often the case that the lecturer-student relationship is also one of shared responsibility, as lecturers can never claim omnipotence over this vast region. Sometimes, this idea of shared responsibility has to be specified for the students, who tend to think that the lecturer and/or tutor should be able to carry the project entirely.

To emphasise the interdependence that underlies any voyage in Pacific Studies, guest lecturers are often invited to share their particular knowledge and expertise. In some senses, this is a bit of a departure from the model of some lived canoe cultures of the Pacific, where the primacy of a navigator (lecturer) would be jealously guarded, and rival navigators would be held at bay. In Pacific Studies, however, the invitation to guest lecturers does not undermine the authority of the course coordinator or regular lecturer: like the canoe navigator, the regular lecturer has the final responsibility in setting or charting the course of the voyage.

The co-operative relationship between lecturer and tutor, can usefully be seen in parallel with the master-apprentice model of navigation. The tutor should ideally be guided by the lecturer, and should be able to learn how to successfully navigate the course from the lecturer. The tutor gets to practice navigating, as coxswain of a smaller canoe in the sheltered waters of tutorials; but if required, the tutor should be able to stand in temporarily for the lecturer.



Photo: Banaban outrigger canoe.

Source: Raymond A. Dillon.

Nevertheless, even with a navigator, and a trusty coxswain, without a crew there would be no major or ocean-going canoe voyage. As higher education becomes more and more commercial, and the students are encouraged to think of themselves as clients or customers, it is important that lecturers and tutors remind students of some of the fundamentals of education. Today's students do not always want to share responsibility for their learning, but even though it can be burdensome, it will be more productive for them in the long run.

Facilitating small group discussions in tutorials is one way to demonstrate shared responsibility, thereby increasing students' stakes in learning. Dividing the class into groups of four or five students and giving each group the task of discussing in depth one of the major themes from the readings, they are instructed to designate a discussion facilitator and a person who would report back to the larger group. This format makes it difficult for individuals not to participate, for they are held accountable to small groups.

At the same time, this format makes it easier to participate because many students do not feel comfortable talking in a large group. After twenty to thirty minutes of group discussion, the students reconvene and share reports of their discussion with the large group. Once, a student made a suggestion that the reconvening be conducted in a circle rather than with the students all facing me; this showed that he had begun to take on his share of responsibility for the course

Another format for sharing responsibility is giving students the opportunity to make individual or group presentations or performances. This is especially appropriate where students are engaging media like music, literature or art. These are occasions when students are asked to put themselves at risk by taking the floor - metaphorically taking the helm or steer - and the lecturer or tutor affirms their efforts from an audience position. Most of all, such presentations and performances are occasions of "cooperative learning", which encourage students to relate to each other mutually as resources.

In Pacific Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, we have tried to impress upon our students the value of shared responsibility and cooperative learning. Students in their first year of study have the option of doing a performance or creating art as a major part of their assessment, and by the middle of the term just under a half in a class of 60-80 are willing to risk taking the helm themselves.

Students in their final year of study are required to make public presentations of their research work in seminars held off-campus in local communities. This experience helps them realize that the reading and research they do for university grades may be of relevance and interest to wider audiences, and therefore they need to be thorough and thoughtful in the preparation and presentation of their work.

### **A Climate for Communication**

As for the ocean-going canoe, climate is very important in the classroom. Coverage and cooperation set the scene for a good classroom climate, but communication is what fills the gaps. Through verbal and written channels of communication it is possible for both students and teachers to share our expectations and constructive criticisms.

Having a personal interest in a course helps to establish a good climate. Most students who come to Pacific Studies have a personal interest in this area of study. Many hope to discover more about the histories and cultures of their migrant parents or grandparents. Some hope to learn more to strengthen relationships with neighbours and friends. And most say they want to learn more about themselves through our courses. Knowing students have such high

expectations can be daunting for a lecturer or tutor, and part of our role is to prepare them to enjoy the exploration even if they do not discover what they initially set out to.

It is also important to get to know each student. Tutorials are more conducive to this than lectures. Requiring or encouraging students to schedule appointments with lecturers and tutors to go over their progress in the course helps to maintain a favourable classroom climate. (This is not to say, however, that there will not be tense moments in the classroom, but in the way a stiff wind or choppy seas can test and challenge a canoe crew's skills, such moments in a classroom can generate intellectual and emotional growth.)

The most valuable communications skill for anyone in education on either side of the classroom, is listening. In the first few tutorials of a term it is apparent that students do not pay attention to each other and seem to value only the comments of the lecturer or tutor, and their own individual responses to readings or concepts covered in lectures. In these days of short-attention span television, and permanent background music, active interpersonal listening is not a common skill. It is therefore crucial that students have good role models for listening, and their lecturers and tutors should be ready role models for them. The lecturer, if she were to imagine herself as a navigator of an ocean-going vessel, would need to be supremely attentive to all the elements of her environment. The tutor, as coxswain of an outrigger-canoe, similarly needs to be attuned to the environment as well as her crew's strengths. If lecturers and tutors are good listeners for their students, students still need to be given the opportunity to practice active listening themselves.

A key to active listening in the classroom is knowing and caring about the

identity of your classmates. At the beginning of the term, I tell the students that one of my benchmarks for a successful term is whether the students in a tutorial know each other's names by the end of it. I tell the students that if I have to learn all eighty of their names, the least each of them can do is learn the fifteen or so names of the other students in their tutorial groups. I remind them that in the days of the ancients, people remembered whole genealogies. The great Polynesian ethnologist, Peter Buck, took note of one man in the Cook Islands being able to recite 90 generations of his family tree (Buck, 1938). In our times, we leave remembering up to books, notes, and digital technology, and meanwhile our brains are atrophying. I tell students that remembering each other's names is a small way to begin exercising the most important muscle in their body - their brain!

Learning to actively listen is another way of exercising our brains. I try to model a listening exercise at least once a term in class. Along with a student volunteer, I emphasize the listener's focus on the speaker, the listener's clarification of understanding, and the pair's keeping to task. In pairs, then, the students engage over an assigned question (having to do with the topics needing to be covered in the session) with one person speaking and the other listening.

At the first interval I asked them to describe the process of listening and identify its problems and possibilities. They usually raise issues of interruption and body language. I then ask them to switch roles, having the person who previously spoke as the listener. At the second interval they are asked to describe their new double-consciousness of process as well as content. They are usually able to label aspects of the process, but I might have to intervene and clarify some of the categories we are working with such as writing/reading in

and for the classroom; speaking/listening interpersonally; comprehending/interpreting language and world-view interculturally.

The students are then quite adept at showing the interrelationships among categories. Students usually agree that the listening exercise has challenged them to think more critically about their responsibilities as writers, readers, speakers and listeners, and not to make assumptions about their own or another's knowledge. To participate most effectively in a classroom, one must listen to the elements, as successful canoe-voyagers know to listen to the wind, the ocean and each other.

My use of this metaphor here has undoubtedly been theoretical. I make no claims on mastery of practical canoe knowledge, and stand in admiration of my colleagues, students, and cousins who do.

### **Pacific Studies and Indigenous Knowledges**

I consider myself an indigenous person of the Pacific. I have roots and claims to land on three islands; Banaba and Tabiteuea in the Republic of Kiribati, and Rabi in the Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji, as it is officially known. I also have roots outside of the Pacific; in Washington, DC, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and various other parts of the USA. According to my father's Banaban culture, however, no one can ever be "part-Banaban". You either are or you are not Banaban. So I am.

What makes me a Pacific person most is not so much the blood in my veins, but my experiences of growing up and living in and traveling around these islands. I was born in Honolulu, Hawai'i, and raised in the Fiji Islands where I completed

high school. After a few years in the continental U.S.A doing an undergraduate degree, I returned to Honolulu to pursue a Masters in Arts degree in Pacific History. During this time I traveled to Nauru and Kiribati for the first time, and also to Guam.

These trips became the first of what has been a most exciting adventure for me, and while completing a PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz, my work in Pacific Studies took me to Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Tonga, Niue, Samoa, Cook Islands and French Polynesia. These trips have been good for grounding the bookish knowledge I have acquired over the years about these places and their peoples. I do not assume, however, that I know a place after having spent a few days or weeks there. The truth is, I cannot even claim to know my own family histories in full. Learning is a process, not a product that ever comes to us whole or complete.

Pacific Studies is necessarily always an exercise in stepping outside one's own experience of indigeneity and one's own knowledge base. One can never be an "insider" all of the time in Pacific Studies. As such, the classroom provides a potentially neutral space for students, who may feel overwhelmed and occasionally disoriented by the enormity and complexity of the field and their companions in it.

A Cook Islander student cannot claim to know the experience of a West Papuan any more than a *popa'a* or *palagi* (European) student can; a Niuean-born Niuean may have less in common with a New Zealand-born Niuean and more in common with a Tuvaluan; a 55-year old *palagi* (European) student may have more in common with a 60-year old Samoan student than either of them would have



with their younger classmates. And as a thirty-something woman of Banaban/Kiribati and African American heritage born in Hawai'i and raised in Fiji, I cannot dream of teaching any of my students anything about themselves. But it is my responsibility to impart my knowledge of academic and non-academic methods of enquiry, criticism and documentation.

## Conclusion

Indigenous knowledge is not always transparent or accessible to all, nor is it meant to be. Pacific Studies can only treat indigenous knowledges partially, because our classrooms, our metaphorical canoes, cannot be expected to carry cargo for which they were not designed. The Pacific Studies classroom, however, can begin to take each of its "passengers" on a journey of cooperative learning towards alternative spaces where indigenous knowledges can be more fully reclaimed, affirmed, and revitalized.

Ki mua! Let us go forward!

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