Of Gaps and Bridges: Educational Challenges for the South Pacific

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“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”
James Baldwin

This paper contributes to the dialogue regarding a perceived cultural gap in the learning experiences of South Pacific higher education students. The gap is suggested to be the conflict between students’ home cultures at one pole, and a combination of globalisation, internalised colonisation, and the transition to tertiary education at the other pole. Culture is defined as a process of understanding, and the implication for interpersonal understanding between teachers and students is presented as a means for bridging the cultural gap in South Pacific higher education.

Some South Pacific educators have suggested that local higher education students are encountering difficulties in their learning experiences (Mel 2003; Taufe’ulungaki 2003; Thaman 2003a, 2003b). They attribute the difficulties to a gap that exists between students’ home cultures and the expectations of formal education. In fact, “for many people/students, higher education is seen to be perpetuating the task, begun in school, of systematically changing and alienating them from the cultures of their parents and grandparents” (Thaman 2003a:5). Thaman cited gaps in values, language and teaching/learning styles as problematic for students in higher education.

The metaphor of a gap, or more specifically, an empty space between two poles, can be exploited to further a dialogue about concerns with higher education in the South Pacific. Clearly defining the opposite poles of gaps would be helpful in discussions of how to bridge those gaps. To that end, Harvey, Hunt and Schroder (1961:86) suggested that:

The discrimination of extreme opposites can be made more easily than the discrimination between less different stimuli. Once these opposite poles have been discriminated, the person is in a position
to make finer and more difficult discriminations. The reference points placed around the extreme limits of a given conceptual system (that is, the two poles) therefore serve as anchorages for making finer discriminations within the “gap”.

In keeping with this strategy, an important preliminary step would be to discriminate the opposing poles that cause gaps for South Pacific higher education students. As noted, several writers interpret the difference between two conflicting cultural forces as causing a learning gap for students.

The purpose of this paper is to define opposing poles that may cause gaps between higher education students and their learning environments, and to suggest that these gaps are based more on ineffective interpersonal relationships between teachers and students than on conflicting cultural forces.

**Home cultures**

The force perceived to be at one side of a gap is the home culture of each South Pacific higher education student. This force exerts a cognitive and emotional pull in the direction of all that the student has learned to value and believe. South Pacific higher education students represent a diverse collection of local cultures that can be described and differentiated based on distinct sets of values, beliefs, and practices, e.g., “faa Samoa, the Samoan way; faka Tonga, the Tongan way; vaka Viti, the Fijian way” (Thaman 2003a:3). While it may seem attractive to combine the local cultures into an aggregate and call it ‘the South Pacific way’, such a homogenous cultural description would minimise the unique cultural characteristics of each individual student. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the home culture of each South Pacific higher education student will be designated as the force at one pole of the gap.

**Opposing cultures**

The opposing force on the other side of a gap is more elusive to isolate and define. That forces do exist that entice students away from the cultures of their parents and grandparents is undoubtedly true. Many refer to the antithetical force simply as western, the west, or western models. Although the exact meaning of these terms is unclear, very likely they are metaphors
for the policies and practices of a meta-culture that originates from several ‘developed’ countries. Those countries (similar to South Pacific local cultures) exhibit differentiated cultural and educational characteristics, e.g., a British way, an American way, a French way, which makes a comprehensive definition of western educational and cultural characteristics problematic. Perhaps a less geographic and less personal term, such as globalisation would be more appropriate for describing concepts vaguely expressed by western.

Globalisation is the tendency for similar policies and practices to spread across political, cultural and geographical boundaries, and does describe a contemporary force that threatens local cultures of the South Pacific. The effect of globalisation, whatever its origin, is that it tends to ignore local cultures, which merely serve as the media for the spread of ideas and practices throughout the world. These ideas and practices include the concepts and characteristics of formal schooling. Students from local cultures may adopt, adapt, or reject the educational ideas and practices of globalisation, but they are always affected by them (Dimmock 2000). While globalisation does, and will continue to, influence educational ideas and practices of higher education (which in turn affect each student), South Pacific students must also contend with other cultural forces.

The residuals of colonisation profoundly affect South Pacific higher education students. Colonisers imposed an educational model based primarily on the philosophy of realism, a model that emphasised hard work, discipline, factual truth, lecturing, and objective evaluation (Ozman & Craver 1995). This model offered little epistemological relevance for the students of the region yet, while colonisation ended a third of a century ago, the educational model lives on. “The historical fact is that Pacific nations have modeled themselves on their colonizers, even though many have been independent for decades” (Hereniko 2003:16). The educational ideas and practices of colonisation have been internalised, and have resulted in what Hereniko called “colonization of the mind.” Sinavaiana-Gabbard (2003:23) characterised internalised colonialism as presenting “a more clear and present danger to our cultural survival in any number of ways, chief of which are the countless ways it operates to sever connections rather than seek them.” The educational ideas and practices of colonisation continue to offer little relevance for many higher education students of the South Pacific, and serve to separate them from the knowledge and epistemologies of their home cultures.
In addition to the effects of globalisation and colonisation, the transition from secondary to tertiary education represents an intellectual, emotional, and cultural shift for students. The regimented nature of their primary and secondary schools was, in many ways, consistent with the regimented nature of their home cultures. Over time, cultural groups in the South Pacific have developed clearly defined roles, values and norms for their members. Children learn their culture early, and rely on the security of its orderliness for their comfortable existence. While epistemologies may differ between formal school learning and learning in local cultures, on another dimension the two domains are similar in terms of orderliness and structure as defined and maintained by authority figures. When students leave the familiar ‘way’ of their regimented schools to enter the world of higher education, it is as if they are leaving the familiar ‘way’ of their home cultures as well. This can be a disquieting experience for students who enter the less regimented, less secure culture of higher education; an experience that may distance them from their home cultures.

Therefore, the cultural force situated across the gap from students’ home cultures includes a complex combination of globalisation, internalised colonisation, and students’ transition into higher education. Each South Pacific higher education student potentially experiences the simultaneous, opposing pull of these forces. One force pulls in the direction of values, beliefs, knowledge, understanding, and language of his/her parents and grandparents, and the other force pulls in directions that are foreign to him/her.

View of culture

Before broaching thoughts on bridging cultural gaps, a brief discussion of the term *culture* would be useful. Taufeʻulungaki (2003) presented various attempts to define the term and intuitively it does seem important to isolate and define the concept of culture before attempting to discuss it. However, Watzlawick (1990) cautioned about reifying a term, because the logical progression is to then attach properties to the term and treat it as a ‘thing’. When culture is treated as a definable ‘thing’, the cultural definition of a group of persons becomes a cross section, or snapshot, that freezes their cultural process in time.
Mel (2003:38) suggests that any meaningful dialogue about culture should look for an “alternate perspective; to move away from this idea of culture as a ‘thing’ and abstain from viewing culture as a communitarian entity that shapes and moves a collective.” Mel’s alternative perspective is to view culture as groups of persons who are engaged in a process of trying to understand themselves and each other through actions (and most certainly through language). Mel cites Clifford and Marcus who state: “culture is not an object to be described…culture is contested, temporal, and emergent.” That culture is a dynamic and evolving process, rather than a static entity, is illustrated by teachers in local cultures who select the knowledge they pass along to future generations (Nabobo 2003; Teaero 2003). As stories are passed from one generation to the next, they are embellished and edited by the storyteller, which suggests a dynamic process. If culture is more a process than an entity, then how shall the process be described?

**Culture as a process**

Culture begins with individuals. Definitions of cultures typically describe groups of people. However, those same definitions may also be applied to individuals as representatives of the larger cultural group. Just as the shared culture of groups is developed and maintained over time, individuals have values, beliefs, knowledge, understanding and language learned over time that are the sum of all their personal life experiences. However, each individual is not a clone of each other individual in the cultural group, or a clone of the group to which he/she belongs. Since no two persons share identical life experiences, each person’s personal culture is unique. While two persons may share membership in a cultural group, they will retain individual characteristics that will differentiate them from each other and from all other members of the group.

Individuals carry their unique personal cultural characteristics with them wherever they go. They are mobile cultural entities. When they contact another individual cultural entity, even within their cultural group, they initiate a mutual, reciprocal attempt to bridge the gap that separates them — to understand and to be understood. As Schwandt (1999:457) aptly put it, “understanding is not contained within me, or within you, but in that which we generate together in our form of relatedness.” Every group of two or
more people must bridge gaps by generating and negotiating shared values, beliefs, knowledge, understanding and language through their relatedness with each other. This is a process without end, and describes the ongoing dynamic nature of culture. (Because language is both an outcome and the medium for the process of understanding, the importance of language cannot be overstated).

**Culture in classrooms**

The view of culture as an ongoing, dynamic, and interpersonal process is significant for education, because learning environments are contexts where the process of understanding can occur. Classroom interactions among teachers and students develop specific cultures. When teachers and students enter a classroom for the first time, they must establish a way of proceeding with the business at hand. They must define their respective roles, and must negotiate norms that will guide their interactions. The process and outcome of their deliberations will influence their future interactions.

Psychologists who study groups have found that cooperative group structures produce better cohesion and performance (Brown 2000), and learning theorists Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget emphasised the importance of interaction among participants in learning processes (Snowman and Biehler 2000). Cooperative classroom structures that encourage exploration through participation are educationally sound. (However, participation need not be limited to verbal discourse. Other expressive and visual media as methods of participation may be more meaningful for some students.) Conversely, uncooperative classrooms where teachers or students ignore, minimise or passively accept the values, beliefs, knowledge, understanding and language of the other impair the process of understanding and learning. Gaps between teachers and students are formed or widened.

**Bridging gaps**

The metaphor of building bridges has been used to describe connections between poles of the gaps that exist in South Pacific higher education (Bakalevu 2003; Taufe’ulungki 2003; Thaman 2003a, 2003b). It is worth noting that bridges of any size are built from both shores and connect in the
middle. Teachers and students must both contribute to a process of understanding as they construct democratic learning cultures in each classroom. Democratic classroom cultures encourage and validate the participation of both teachers and students in dialogues that increase knowledge and understanding. Neither teachers nor students should be expected to make unilateral concessions to the other. While it may be true that “…teachers must be transformed”, and move away from the existing hierarchical power structures in their classrooms (Gegeo 2003:32), students must be transformed as well, by taking more responsibility for their learning. They must be encouraged by teachers to become more than passive recipients of information, and they must respond to that encouragement. When students attempt to relinquish their responsibility and place the burden for their learning on teachers, they default to undemocratic learning environments. The familiar lecture-exam scenario is perpetuated, and students and teachers alike avoid the need to understand one another. Complementary teacher-student roles of dominant-submissive that too often exist in classroom cultures must be transformed to roles that are more symmetrical.

**Teacher-student roles**

Persons involved in interactions tend to adopt interpersonal behaviours that complement other persons in the interactions and, during these interactions, those behaviours become confirmed and reinforced for each person (Kiesler and Watkins 1989; Tracey and Hays 1989). For example, the complementary roles of dominant and submissive are reinforced during interactions involving dominant and submissive persons. Each participant elicits from the other those behavioural tendencies, or roles, that were already present. The roles may appear satisfying for both participants, but the cost of maintaining the roles is the perpetuation of gaps between the participants. Dominant teachers and submissive students are potential roles that may be confirmed and reinforced during classroom interactions.

Understanding is bilateral. Each player in the game of understanding must commit to and contribute to the process without retreating to such established roles as dominant and submissive. However, “to be in a dialogue requires that we listen to the other and simultaneously risk confusion and uncertainty both about ourselves and about the other person we seek to
understand” (Schwandt 1999:458). Teachers and students who would seek to understand, and be understood, must risk the possibility of experiencing frustration in the process. To leave the security and familiarity of one’s own personal culture, and attempt to understand the personal culture of another is a risky and demanding task that requires the surrender of dysfunctional roles.

Teacher responsibilities

For South Pacific higher education to be more ‘user friendly’, teachers must factor students’ existing cultural knowledge and ways of knowing into the learning equation. For meaningful learning to occur, students must merge new information into their current cognitive structures (Harvey, Hunt and Schroder 1961; Novak and Gowin 1989). “It is the person’s present knowledge that supplies the power for new knowledge to be acquired….thus the problem of learning can be stated simply: to make connections between what is to be learned and what is already known” (Gowin 1981:124).

What students already know (knowledge) and how they arrived at knowing (epistemology) depend on students’ local cultures, and that information is not important to teachers who are not culture-sensitive. Culture-insensitive teachers may react to their students in one of three ways: (a) they may ignore students’ present views of knowledge and ways of learning and promote their own, (b) they may ignore their own views of knowledge and beliefs about learning and attempt to completely accommodate their students, or (c) they may attempt to find a pedagogy that includes approaches to knowledge and learning that reflect the beliefs of their students and themselves. Thaman (2000:1) assumed that “[t]he content, processes and contexts of teacher education in PICs [Pacific Island Countries] are almost entirely western” and “…most academic staff believe in the superiority of their own ideologies, value systems, and worldviews…” If Thaman’s assumptions are accurate, most academic staff members are culture-insensitive and choose option (a), thereby effectively constructing gaps between students and themselves.

To avoid these gaps, teachers must be curious about, and open to, the existing knowledge and epistemologies of their students in order to structure educative experiences that will connect new knowledge to students’ existing structures. Rather than believing in the “superiority of their own ideologies,”
teachers must encourage students to analyse, synthesise and evaluate (Bloom 1984) the information they introduce and support the students in their efforts. Because students emerge from prior authoritative and restrictive learning and home environments, culture-sensitive higher education teachers may need to encourage with patience and persistence.

Student responsibilities

Students are consumers. They, or those who sponsor them, pay providers of higher education for a service, and the transaction should be beneficial to both parties. A higher education student should not be satisfied with receiving education that will be irrelevant for him/her, any more than he/she should be satisfied with leaving a clothing store after paying for clothes that are the wrong size. When students face teachers who are culture-insensitive, they have the same three options that are mentioned above. While culture-insensitive teachers often choose option (a), students are more likely to choose option (b) because their history of restrictive school experiences that demanded obedience to authority may have conditioned them to submissively accept what teachers present. Neither options (a) nor (b) will contribute to democratic learning environments expressed as option (c).

Students must accept the challenge of defining and testing their own values, beliefs, knowledge and understanding, as they interact with others who may think differently. They must “interrogate all ideas and theories that are presented to them” (Thaman, 2000:4) and evaluate them for relevance. If offered the opportunity, students must express their confusion or disagreement during classroom interactions, even though as children they may have been excluded from taking part in conversations (Nabobo 2003). Students who avoid the responsibility of classroom participation, and who avoid the risk of thinking critically, default to undemocratic processes. These students may leave their higher education experience with learning that is ‘the wrong size’ for them.

Conclusion

Dimmock (2000) argued that globalisation (and formal schooling) need not be viewed as negative, nor should local cultures be viewed as obstructive.
Rather it is that the processes that occur between these forces needs to be more culture-sensitive. Dimmock’s position is defensible, but cultural forces do not interact with cultural sensitivity; *individuals* interact with cultural sensitivity. All gaps between philosophies, ideologies and cultures eventually translate to interpersonal gaps between individuals. It is only when individual teachers and students show respect and curiosity for the values, beliefs, knowledge, understanding and language of the other, that the process of building bridges will be effective. Democratic learning environments are not built upon the comfortable roles of dominance and submission. Individual teachers and students must each share the burden of establishing democratic learning environments and, together, narrow the gaps that exist in higher education.

References


