

The strengthened sinnet: Distance learning from a Pasifika perspective

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Abstract: This paper presents a successful theoretical framework for distance learning. The metaphor, ‘O le maea malosi’ (the strengthened sinnet) is used to contextualise the strength of the engagement of Pasifika teachers with Pasifika students. The strands of the strengthened sinnet represents the collaborative team work of lecturers and support staff in the delivery of Early Childhood Diploma courses to students both in Auckland and Tokoroa. The Tokoroa cohort consisted of 27 Pasifika women, mainly from the Cook Islands and Samoa between 21 and 60 years of age who were already working in early childhood centres (Cook Islands Punaga Reo and Samoan Aoga Amata) but did not hold a teaching qualification. As noted in the programme documentation by the Auckland College of Education, “An aim of the programme was to provide an opportunity for people to gain a professional teaching qualification to teach Pacific Islands children in early childhood settings, particularly in the immersion centres” (1999, p. 4). The design of this programme was built around the collective knowledge, skills and experiences of the teachers that were efficacious in establishing positive working relationships and shared learning. The ‘strengthened sinnet’ suggests that it is in the strength and quality of these relationships which encouraged effective delivery and enhanced successful learning for both the teachers and students.

Keywords: distance learning; early childhood education; Pasifika education

Introduction

Between 2004 and 2007, Pasifika staff at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland travelled to Tokoroa, a small township southwest of Auckland, to deliver an Early Childhood Education satellite programme to a small group of Pasifika students. According to the 2001 census, Tokoroa had a population of over 15,000 people. It is a multicultural town with about 35% of the population being Māori and another 20% from the Pacific Islands (mainly the Cook Islands). Tokoroa has New Zealand’s largest Pacific Island community outside of Auckland and Wellington (New Zealand Statistics, 2006).

An early childhood teacher education programme in Tokoroa was an answer to the dream and aspirations of migrant parents within this small rural community. There had been concerns expressed by Pacific parents within the community that some children could lose their language and cultural identity because English was becoming the predominant language spoken in many Pasifika households.

The implementation of a level 7 Early Childhood Diploma programme was an initiative also envisaged by community leaders, church ministers, and Early Childhood supervisors and practitioners in Tokoroa who were interested in giving their young children the best education possible. This commitment was such that some parents migrated from their homelands in order to further their children’s education in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Airini, Leaupepe, Sauni, Tuafuti, & Amituanai-Toloa, 2009). Many of these Pasifika parents had migrated to New Zealand and settled in Tokoroa. The term ‘Pacific peoples’ is a collective one that is used to describe the diverse

cultures of peoples from Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia. The six main Pacific ethnic groups in New Zealand are Samoan, Cook Islander, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tokelauan (Mara, 2001). However, in this context, we make general reference to Pasifika or Pacific people(s) as migrants to New Zealand mainly from Samoa and the Cook Islands.

The Pacific Islands communities in New Zealand have been committed to enhancing early childhood education. Most parents from the Pacific Islands believed that if children have a good foundation in education at a young age, then they would enjoy learning and have a prosperous future (Auckland College of Education, 2003).

An Early Childhood teacher training programme was urgently needed in Tokoroa. Early childhood immersion education centres were established in New Zealand as a response to the wish of Pacific parents who wanted their children to be able to experience early childhood education solely in their heritage language. In Tokoroa, Pasifika teachers working in early childhood centres were either a trained teacher from the Pacific Islands, a teacher aide or a parent helper. Most were women who had shown commitment and dedication to the education of young children for many years. The Ministry of Education requires all early childhood workers to be qualified, hence the urgency to provide training and development for early childhood workers in Tokoroa.

Pasifika people in Tokoroa were provided with an opportunity to participate in an early childhood teacher training programme that promoted the importance of children's culture and languages as an inclusive part of their learning and development and to also gain a professional teaching qualification to work with young children in early childhood settings. What was unique about this Early Childhood programme in Tokoroa? What made this long distance programme successful?

The Tokoroa cohort comprised adults who were members of the church community and held strong spirituality affiliations within Tokoroa. Most of these women were returning to studies as mature Pasifika students and all displayed a readiness to learn. For this particular group of adult Pasifika students, who were usually under-represented in mainstream tertiary institutions, academic and affective support was crucial in preserving their interest as learners in the programme.

The rationale of this programme was to deliver courses and qualified professional standards of learning and practice that would assist teachers to work more effectively in their Punanga Reo (Cook Island early childhood centres) and Aoga Amata (Samoan Bilingual Early Childhood Education Centres). Delivery of classes occurred at the Wananga o Aotearoa (New Zealand Māori University) site which was a common, central and accessible cultural 'space' of learning for these Pasifika learners in Tokoroa.

It was significantly important in this new context of learning that the course content and delivery of the courses reflected the philosophies and principles of teaching and learning that would shape the paradigms of learning for these Pasifika students. To give recognition to students' prior knowledge from their cultures and the opportunity to use their heritage languages (mainly Cook Islands Māori and Samoan) would enhance and empower them as Pasifika women in tertiary studies.

The philosophy of the programme was based on the excellence and quality of early childhood education to retain and promote cultural language, and cultural identity for young children in New Zealand. The Tokoroa students started their journey of learning in this programme with a vision to maintain the different cultures and languages of their communities in New Zealand (Ministry

of Education, 1996). Therefore, the attitudes, values and skills of the Pacific teachers and their communities were critical factors in assisting these students through effective programmes that would ensure preservation of their heritage language, culture and identity.

The collaborative work of the lecturers and support staff created a learning environment where students felt a sense of belonging. Group work was a successful teaching and learning strategy. This practice created a spirit of trust and loyalty that encouraged students to have constant dialogue and open communication with one another. As a result the lecturers and the learners celebrated their differences but also valued each individual's culture and language.

The implementation of culturally appropriate practices, the pedagogical delivery of the course content and the natural ability of Pasifika staff to collectively draw on the cultural and pastoral aspects of the learners was necessary in strengthening positive relationships within Pasifika contexts of learning. For these Tokoroa students, they had demonstrated a high level of cultural knowledge and were well grounded in their cultural heritage and traditions of their community. Allowing students to use their own cultural experiences and heritage languages was empowering and strengthening for their learning.

Lecturers made a commitment to providing the best possible contexts for practice and participation. The intention of lecturers in the programme was to introduce learning strategies that would nurture students' personal and professional development and facilitate opportunities to reach their full potential. Vygotsky's notion of ZPD (zone of proximal development) had a powerful influence on teaching these Pasifika students—through knowing and understanding that the students had a wealth of knowledge from their own cultures. These Pasifika teachers accepted every individual student and embraced the socialisation processes which optimised learning between the teachers and the learners.

Beyond the framework of this project, there was also the need to grow and establish strong connections between two posts, that of Auckland and Tokoroa. How were these interconnections strengthened, enabling the students to achieve? Teachers made a commitment in supporting and motivating these learners by going the extra mile. The Tokoroa cohort witnessed successful transformation based on the principles of love, respect, care, encouragement and positive reinforcement from these Pasifika teachers during classes but often during cultural events and celebrations. For example, staff from Auckland were invited to attend weddings, birthdays, festivals and funerals of students and their families. These gatherings were always warm, respectful, friendly and nurturing. The teachers were passionate about holistic development of the students, and "promoting quality in the professional practice of teachers in early childhood education" (Ministry of Education, 2002). The teacher's knowledge regarding their roles within this early childhood service was a key factor for successful learning and achievements of the Tokoroa students.

The timetable was organised to allow flexibility for the lecturers to travel to Tokoroa when their individual courses were scheduled. One of the unique features of this programme was that each course was taught on two consecutive evenings over a period of four weeks. This meant that the course lecturer travelled either by car or bus to Tokoroa, and would teach from 4:30pm until 9pm then stayed overnight at a nearby motel. The following day was spent on course preparation then teaching would begin again from 4:30pm until 9pm, then the lecturer usually travelled back to Auckland on the same evening. The lecturers readily adapted to the routine and took advantage of working and building relationships with the Tokoroa students and community based on early childhood curriculum Te Whariki (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 13) which defined the principles as "Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, and Relationships

and its strands of Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration” were fundamental for understanding the holistic nature of children amongst Pacific communities (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 13). Therefore, the challenge in the programme “...was to produce graduates who would blend a holistic centred, interactive view or learning with the best of traditional child rearing and upbringing, understandings and practices” (Auckland College of Education, 1999, p. 30).

The Tokoroa community was a place for continual learning to take place. It was like a home away from home. The ‘strengthened sinnet’ encapsulates essential elements that created an environment where it is possible for successful learning to take place for Pasifika learners. This early childhood satellite programme was an innovative approach that may add to an increasing body of research done by and for Pasifika peoples.

The metaphor

The metaphor strengthened sinnet refers to an essential process in building or construction. This process is common in most Pasifika cultures. When a coconut is picked from the coconut palm tree, it is left to dry in the sun. After two days the external kernel is removed and discarded, or husked, and the inside fibres are pulled from the kernel. Sinnet is made from these coconut fibres. When single fibres are twisted forming a thin strand it is unusable; however, when the process is repeated a braided strand is formed. Three braided strands form a sinnet. Once dried, the sinnet is ready to use to lash beams and joints together. This is the traditional technology used by a craftsman or carpenter.

If only one single strand is used, it may be possible to secure two posts of a ‘fale’ (house) together. However, this would only be temporary as the joint will be weak and finally collapse, defeating the purpose of building a stable abode. When construction of a fale takes place, the foundation and posts are very important aspects, but so too is the roof. The rafters of the roof are numerous and it is the essential purpose of the sinnet to keep the rafters together so that the roof will be firm. The sinnet binds and increases the stability and strength of the whole fale structure. In Samoa, a fale may stand for many years, not necessarily because of its foundation, but also because of the excellent crafting of sinnet, skilfully twisted to provide strength and perseverance in its initial structure.

The metaphor of the ‘strengthened sinnet’ highlights three central areas which influenced and impacted on students’ successful learning in this distance learning programme. Firstly, when Pasifika learners and their Pasifika teachers were collectively engaged in specific activities, they would draw on their spiritual and cultural experiences. Spirituality is a strong component of Pasifika life and education (Airini, Toso, Sauni, Leaupepe, Pua, & Tuafuti, in press) and it underpins the philosophy of the Pacific Islands Early Childhood Education Diploma programme. Spirituality was influential in establishing commonalities between lecturers and students. “To value spirituality is to acknowledge it as worthwhile knowledge. Valuing and respecting the diverse spiritual beliefs of the individual learners was important as aspects for strengthening culture, identity and self-esteem.” (Auckland College of Education, 1999, p. 31)

In most Pacific societies there are similar worldviews and perceptions about spirituality which are usually embedded in the beliefs and values of different ethnic groups. One of the most inspiring times for this spiritual experience is the beginning of each class when before delivery of the course content, there would be time set aside for students to have a short devotion. For example, students would sing a Cook Island traditional hymn or a gospel song in contemporary English

followed by a prayer. This spiritual connectedness is unique because regardless of religion, ethnicity, values or beliefs, like the sinnet, it had a strong and binding impact on the interactions of the lectures and students and also their attitudes towards one another. On one occasion, the Tokoroa cohort travelled especially to Auckland to share their spiritual and cultural experiences with students there. This was an inspirational experience for both the teachers and the learners.

The special meeting together provided an opportunity to acknowledge cultural differences and celebrate each individual's uniqueness. These students and their lecturers had a shared vision. They not only shared and articulated from their intellect but followed the beliefs of the heart. Spirituality is often related to the basic orientation or dispositions of life. It has to do with our deepest motivations, and when we have the right motivation, we will do something in the right spirit. (Taggart, 2001). Spirituality was the first strand of the strengthened sinnet.

The second strand of the 'strengthened sinnet' was related to the effective use of language and culture. The teachers provided opportunities for students to utilise their languages in class or group discussions and express their opinions and feelings on issues. Recognition of students' cultures and languages was implemented in all the courses as a means of empowering and strengthening their learning and relationships. As an assessment task for a Performing Arts course, students were given an opportunity to work collaboratively on a presentation using their cultural symbols, songs, chants, costumes and languages. Each group could choose a celebration from their own culture to dramatise. The practice of using heritage languages was an important approach and unique feature for classroom teaching. An integral part of this programme was to ensure the languages and cultures of each individual was respected, valued, and protected within the learning environment.

As Hunkin-Tuiletufuga (2001) noted, establishing and maintaining a sense of a Pacific identity is highly dependent on language. Language resources and activities were presented in a variety of ways including power-point presentations, videos and DVDs, role plays, songs and drama, debates and group activities indoors and outdoors, on campus and off site to build bridges of understanding between the lecturer and the learners. When working with Pacific students, good practice is using your intuition to find the starting point to establish the relationships and this is often finding out what is going on in the learner's life and making a personal connection with them. The many opportunities to utilise the students' cultural knowledge and languages thus provided the second strand of the 'strengthened sinnet'.

The third strand of the 'strengthened sinnet' focused on pedagogical knowledge, concepts and teaching approaches used between the lecturer and the learners. To engage with Pasifika students, means making sure that they achieve their goals and succeed in their studies. The programme's philosophy informed teachers' pedagogical approach and interactions in both formal and informal situations. The involvement of qualified Pacific Islands early childhood teachers who were energetic and culturally sensitive was a critical factor in assisting these students. Sharing knowledge of the students' background and personal factors that they bring with them into the classroom where teachers provided a safe and positive environment for learning.

The Tokoroa cohort witnessed successful transformation based on the principles of love, respect, care, encouragement and positive reinforcement from teachers. Building on the principles of respect, love and service, the lecturers were able to create trust, confidence and loving relationships towards the students. McDonald (2004) refers to having "the Samoan heart" which means that the cultural values of love, respect and service were inseparable in understanding the different experiences, characteristics and qualities of people. One cannot work without the others.

Another highlight event of this long-distance learning programme happened during the supper breaks taken between 6pm and 7pm, because this time enabled lecturers to have a more personal conversation with the students and to learn about their families and responsibilities in their community. Interestingly, others at the Wānanga would contribute to the conversations, even the cook and cleaner found time to share their point of views around the dining room table. Sharing and caring for one another are important concepts and ways of interacting and strengthening relationships within Pacific contexts; and as one student stated, these sessions were a time when everyone felt they belonged to 'one big happy family'.

Reciprocity is the constant principle of giving, sharing and exchanging gifts, material wealth or knowledge between people (Sauni, 2005). This was manifested through supportive partnerships and clear communication. In establishing these reciprocal relationships, it was vital to consider the practical ways of engaging with students' prior knowledge, using culturally appropriate methods and engagement, and the exchange of cultural knowledge, values and heritage languages. Fostering students' cultural knowledge and understanding was a positive strategy to use for strengthening and affirming these relationships in distance learning.

Learning occurred as a collective feature through the numerous meetings and study group sessions. The use of library facilities and information technology facilities were utilised by the students as a group. All learners were adults, and learning and teaching strategies encouraged by the lecturers stimulated the cognitive process that was internal to the individual learner (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

The three key areas that show the relationship between the 'strengthened sinnet' and the strengths of this successful distance learning programme were spirituality, language and culture and the pedagogical approaches common to Pasifika learners. These were the three strands of the 'strengthened sinnet' which made significant difference in the lives of these students and the lives of young children and members of their communities. As the 'strengthened sinnet' was a vital component to the construction of the fale, so too was this model of practice, a vital tool for the success of the students in this pre-service education programme.

Throughout the delivery of the programme, academic success for the students and cultural consciousness were the ultimate goals in the formation of interpersonal relationships. Students were encouraged to be proud of their ethnic identities and practice their skills in different community and classroom contexts. The skilled professional teacher is one who is able to draw on dispositions and knowledge in a responsive, critical, informed and considered reflexive manner; processes and skills that are already familiar to Pacific Islands people. Gay (2000) supports this notion that responsible interaction supports the development of critical thinking and empowers learners. This empowerment enhances success in what they undertake.

The concept of reflection was an important component of the practicum course. It was used to extend professional growth and assist teachers' understanding of the moral and ethical issues related to their teaching practice. The students had the opportunity of placements for their professional practice in early childhood centres within Tokoroa and Rotorua communities. Because they already had an affiliation with other teachers working within the early childhood centres, they would be able to establish good positive working relationships. "Reflective thinking was an integral part of their learning" (Auckland College of Education, 1999, p. 37).

Pacific Islands people involved in this distance learning programme were passionate about preserving and passing on shared common goals, ethics, objectives and treasured values in order to improve self esteem, identity and pride in other Pasifika learners. The high level of

commitment to education demonstrated by quality Pacific Island educators in this early childhood programme provided the best possible context “to raise achievement success for Pasifika students in tertiary programmes and to promote excellence in adult education” (Airini & Sauni, 2004).

In summary, essential elements for successful learning within the Tokoroa programme was consistent with the Pasifika education plan which focused on increasing participation and improving the quality of Pacific early childhood education services. These goals would be achieved by community groups working together to strengthen the links between parents in the community and the teachers. Promoting quality teachers who had commitment to high achievement standards and the expectation that all students are able to achieve were needed in the education. Pacific students in Tokoroa were successful in their learning because they were able to access academic support and pastoral care.

In conclusion, the relationships that were established between the teachers and students throughout the four years delivery of this long distance learning programme were strong and continued to be strengthened further over time. The learners were Pasifika. The lecturers were Pasifika. The learning support was Pasifika. The languages and cultures were celebrated within group work (Pale & Airini, 2004; Zepke, Leach, & Prebble, 2003) and many Pasifika ways of doing things and beliefs in structures were created to support learning.

These perspectives were used by the two Samoan lecturers who taught the programme and the consultation and construction for this long distance education programme has generated success for all of the Pasifika learners within the Tokoroa cohort. We used ‘O le Maea Malosi’ the strengthened sinnet metaphor as a model for learning and to validate the use of appropriate knowledge, understandings and skills necessary for Pasifika teachers and learners to succeed in distance education.

The three strands are essential for strengthening the sinnet. Sustainable and holistic relationships which these teachers were able to build through constantly encouraging spiritual values, give recognition to language and culture of these Pasifika women students through innovative pedagogical approaches that were culturally appropriate. This successful distance learning programme for Pasifika students enhanced their learning and empowered them to become qualified teachers in their workplaces and communities. The metaphor of the strengthened sinnet highlights three central areas which influenced and impacted on students’ successful learning in the programme. This model provides Pasifika early childhood educators with a culturally specific tool that can help them understand how successful learning opportunities for Pasifika learners can be maximised.

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