

THE DIGITAL VĀ

Pasifika education innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the world to stop. It has halted societal modes of being and operating, and collective responsibility is now premised on a discourse of prevention or fear. These tensions are also relevant to higher education. In this situation report we aim to elucidate such tensions through Pacific Indigenous philosophy that affirms collective and relational ontologies by way of transnational Pasifika engagement in the university. This report is produced by two Pasifika researchers who have never physically met. However, through the digital vā, their voices are connected to tell this story.

Keywords

digital vā, transnational indigeneity, Pasifika education, Pasifika pedagogy, decolonisation

While much of the national and international discourse across education presents minority groups (ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples) as the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, these narratives ignore their collective innovations and resilience. As Pasifika researchers and academics, what concerns us are the continual deficit ideologies which pervade minority groups during the pandemic. How do we counter these negatives narratives? Such counterproductive discourse is particularly pertinent at university institutions, where programmes continue to frame Pasifika engagement as crisis-control or mitigation cesspools. Through the perspectives of two Samoan Pasifika academic researchers, COVID-19 innovations in our communities are privileged, and virtual collaborations are explored.

In relation to COVID-19 crisis among Māori, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2020) recently stated: “This is not our apocalypse.” We draw upon this

example for Pasifika peoples in Aotearoa, who are ethnically connected to nations across the Pacific regions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, n.d.). Pasifika is an umbrella term frequently used in describing all people from the Pacific Island areas who are living transnationally (Matapo, 2018; McGavin, 2014). As Pasifika, we are connected to our own relational vā (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2016). Through the vā, Pasifika peoples respect the importance of space and relationship (Simati-Kumar, 2016) and draw upon the teachings of their ancestors (Efi, 2007; Simati-Kumar, 2016).

This is a time to show the innovations and persistence of our people, particularly in traversing education and the various new modes of distance learning. Through the sudden shift towards digital, virtual education, we are reminded of Pasifika education pedagogy and research, which spans over 30 years in Aotearoa and which engages

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Indigenous Pacific epistemology as the core of educational frameworks (Chu et al., 2013; Mara et al., 1994). This synergy is conducive to relational intersubjectivity and positioning the learner as a relational being at the heart of learning.

How is this connection supportive of the ways in which we navigate such online modes, and why must it be taken seriously? Our conversation positions the pandemic crisis as an ongoing continuum for the future of Pasifika engagement. Much of the discourse around Pasifika pedagogy focuses on face-to-face interaction and the value of being physically present in the learning environment (Chu et al., 2013). We see in the literature of Pasifika education, particularly around pedagogy, that Pasifika learners engage best through social-constructivist modes. For Pasifika, the context of learning is as much about the content as it is about the social context in which these knowledges are lived, applied and exercised (Matapo, 2019; Si'ilata, 2014).

What we have observed through various interactions in the digital space is an opening and opportunity to reconceptualise the relational vā and pedagogy through a virtual framework. Numerous academics have questioned if online learning inhibits Pasifika student engagement (see Chu et al., 2013). We believe online platforms provide new ways for teachers and Pasifika learners to reconstitute a relational space between one another, where the relational vā becomes entangled in the digital vā, generating new modes for engagement and connection. The digital vā is a form of indigenising the digital environment to embed cultural ways of being and knowing (Tielu, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that the digital space must not impoverish, distil and strip the rich cultural significance of Pasifika ways of knowing and being (Tielu, 2016).

The reasons Pasifika peoples engage in the digital vā are varied, from learning Pacific languages to performing arts and traditional cultural

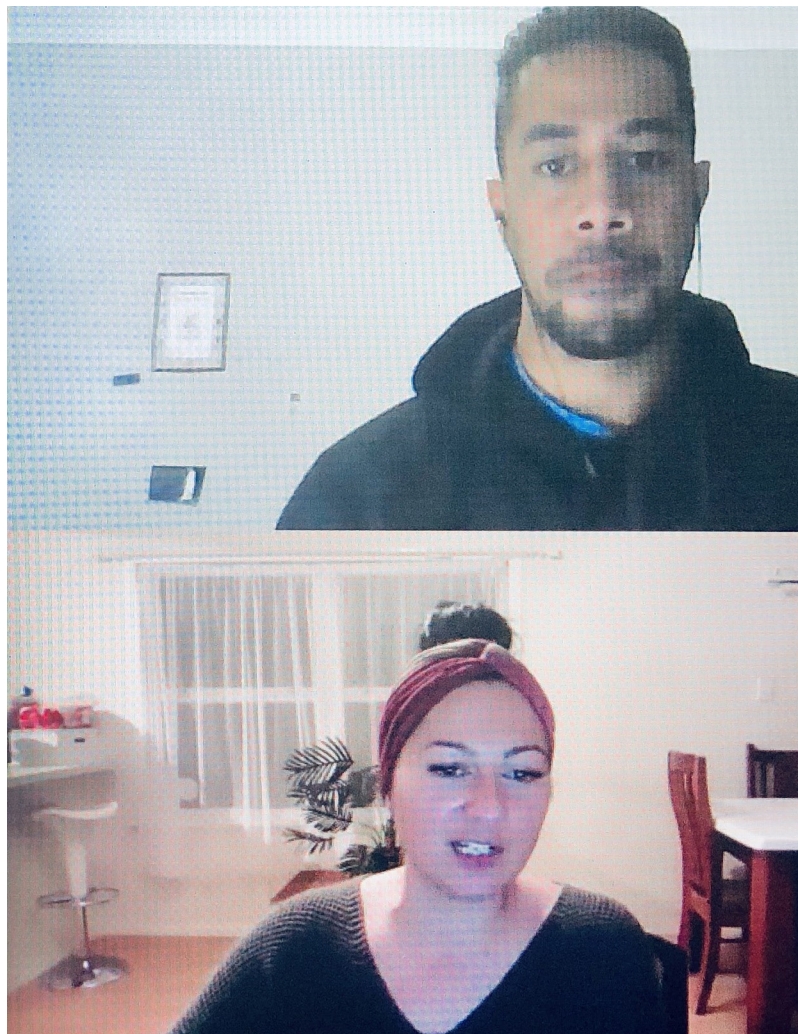


FIGURE 1 Pasifika academics negotiating the digital vā—meeting for the first time

knowledge exchange (Tielu, 2016). It is not our intention to advocate for the replacement of face-to-face teaching interaction with distance learning. We acknowledge learning to be premised upon how students connect content to context. In fact, there are instances where Pasifika people simultaneously engage in both distant communications by video and physical face-to-face interaction via platforms like Facebook, Skype and Messenger (Faleolo, 2020).

These learning innovations among Pasifika people are not new. However, what is of interest is how these practices continue to expand during a pandemic. Through the digital vā there is a direct connection not only between the students, but also with their kainga and family. COVID-19 and the digital vā have allowed for an increase in interaction between teachers, Pasifika students and their families. An example of this is students who participate in online tutorials with their parents, cousins, aunts and uncles also watching and learning. We authors first met through Zoom to discuss research, teaching and learning of Pasifika students from our respective institutions in Australia and Aotearoa (see Figure 1).

In terms of new opportunities for engagement, we could think about how Pasifika peoples are already using such modes, and our relationships with our Pacific Island nations. We could also explore the use of Facebook and Messenger to communicate and uphold the relational vā with family in the Pacific Islands. Thanks to the digital vā, from Australia and Aotearoa, we have both remained connected to our nu‘u, including engaging in live streamings of village developments and partaking in family meetings in Samoa. Through the digital vā our students have been able to learn, question and reshape cultural ceremonial practices from

their relatives both nationally and internationally. Our parents have also been able to use the digital vā to partake in familial and oratory knowledge exchange with relatives around the world.

How can such innovations which are already present among many Pacific families be used to reconceptualise modes of delivery and online pedagogy? As a collective we must ensure knowledge is communally available and shared with the intent of benefiting the collective. For many Pacific peoples, traditional education was always situated within the collective, meaning that learning occurred within the village with a commitment to every learner having a broader relationship to the community. A concerted commitment to retaining such knowledge systems is needed to ensure Pacific ontological ways of being and knowing are present (Matapo, 2019). Figure 2 reproduces a digital image of a grandmother and grandson negotiating deeper meanings behind the Samoan gagana names for days of the week. The image was part of an online schooling task the second author’s youngest son was given during the lockdown period in Aotearoa. The task involved learning Samoan words in preparation for Samoan Language Week. Here the child learns more than just pronunciation, as his grandmother explains: “Aso gafua is the day when the Matai would meet together in our village, that’s how I remembered it is Monday and you will remember too” (Matapo, 2020, para. 17). This is valuable learning for Samoan and Pasifika children, as it binds personal and cultural stories that affirm identity and connections to aiga and nu‘u.

In essence, Pacific families have shown that online pedagogy and delivery are for the benefit not merely of the individual learner, but, more importantly, the wider collective. Pacific families



FIGURE 2 Samoan intergenerational exchange and storytelling via the digital vā

have also revealed the co-constructive nature of open collaborative learning between students, teachers and community. This is contrary to the individualistic top-down hierarchical style of education.

Pasifika student engagement must be valued beyond merely a form of equity provision. The effectiveness of Pacific epistemology and ways of being requires more than acknowledgement: it needs to be implemented and embedded.

Tagaloa (2008) has stated that a Samoan child “gathers information through the senses and comes to know through those sensory experiences in the immediate past and the present” (p. 114). Aspects of Pacific ontology such as learning through observation and listening are attuned to modes of relationality, by understanding one’s gafa and relationship to that knowledge. We must reconfigure the position of ontology within the online virtual space. It must be inclusive of observation, listening, and establishing a deep understanding of the Pasifika student to bring out their story (oratory) through a connection of concept to context.

We need to acknowledge that Pasifika people have not forsaken their traditional ways of knowing and being. Kame‘eleihiwa (1986) expounds on the importance of traditional knowledge: “It is as if the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past . . . for the future is always unknown whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge” (pp. 28–29). Pasifika people have drawn upon their cultural knowledge to adapt through both technological change and the current pandemic. It is exciting to see our Pasifika students thriving within institutions and their passion and ongoing commitment to educational excellence. It is our humble prayer that they continue to nurture and proliferate these initiatives not only for themselves but the collective aiga, nu‘u and atunu‘u.

Glossary

Māori

kainga home

Samoan

aiga family
 Aso gafua Monday
 atunu‘u country
 gafa genealogy
 gagana language
 nu‘u village
 vā relational space

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