

## Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning

Teresia K Teaiwa

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article is being published posthumously. The editorial board feels it is fitting though partial testimony to some aspects of the inspiring work of Teresia Teaiwa, whose life was cut short in March 2017. A shorter version of this paper, titled "Flying while Firmly Grounded: Pacific Studies as the Fine Art of Helping Students Use Their Wings and Find Their Feet," was presented at the February 2016 "Teaching Oceania" workshop at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai'i–Mānoa. A longer version of the paper was submitted to The Contemporary Pacific and accepted by the editorial board with minor revisions in late 2016. At that time, Teresia discussed the intended modifications with the journal's managing editor, Jan Rensel. Teresia had hoped to complete the revisions herself but ultimately asked Jan and TCP editor Alexander Mawyer to make the necessary adjustments.*

*Recently promoted to the rank of associate professor, Teresia inspired so many through her scholarship, teaching, mentoring, and poetry. Through this piece, with bold and generous openness, she reminds us again that master educators do not take the craft of teaching for granted. We are grateful to Sean Mallon, Katerina Teaiwa, and April Henderson for their support and assistance in making this publication possible and to the Victoria University of Wellington for permission to reproduce the photo of Teresia.*

How does one begin to describe the enormity of the Pacific Ocean? The most prominent geographic feature on this planet, it occupies one-third of the Earth's surface area. How does one begin to describe the history of the first peoples to settle this watery region, who made sure that every one of the twenty thousand islands in the world's largest ocean had been

explored? How does one begin to honor and respect the layered, oceanic histories of peoples whose descendants today are some of the world's most misunderstood and misrepresented groups? Where does one begin?

These were some of the challenges that faced me in the year 2000 when I was hired as the first lecturer in Pacific studies at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). I was given the task of developing content and curriculum for a suite of courses that had been approved by the national Committee on University Academic Programmes in 1999. With nothing other than titles and short descriptions, my task was to map out a new interdisciplinary space for learning and teaching Pacific studies at VUW.

This was an audacious undertaking. For one thing, although I was doing my PhD in an interdisciplinary program at the University of California–Santa Cruz (completed in 2001), it wasn't in Pacific studies. Moreover, my earlier educational qualifications were primarily in history, and my most recent teaching experience had been in the history stream of the History/Politics Department at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Furthermore, all previous teaching and learning about the Pacific at VUW had taken place within the disciplines. History, anthropology, law, education, and political science at VUW had long histories of engaging the Pacific Islands region; a Pacific focus came more recently to art history and English. Creating an entirely new interdisciplinary undergraduate major was something that no other university had attempted to this point. When Pacific studies was established as a major in 2000 at VUW, the University of Auckland was still only offering Pacific studies as a minor; the University of Hawai'i, which had the world's oldest master's program in Pacific Islands studies, did not have a companion undergraduate major; and USP (my employer since 1994)—the only university in the world owned by twelve Pacific Island countries—offered no degrees in Pacific studies at all.

So, as I embarked on my teaching and learning journey in Pacific studies at VUW, I felt at first like I was heading into uncharted waters. In fact, in an essay published in 2005 I described the classroom as a metaphorical canoe or *waka* to help think through the necessity of a cooperative learning model in Pacific studies (Teaiwa 2005). With over 1,200 indigenous languages—one-fifth of the contemporary world's linguistic and cultural diversity—the region commonly known as the Pacific Islands is so huge and so varied, and the pedagogical tasks consequently so complex, that the notion of a single, all-knowing teacher delivering knowledge from the front of the classroom is ludicrous. If the classroom is a metaphorical canoe requiring the attentiveness and effort of all aboard, the field of

Pacific studies is literally oceanic in its proportions. Fortunately, there was much that had gone before that could guide me. I realized quickly that if we started with where my students and I were—at VUW—we might be able to put the ancient Micronesian navigating technique of *etak* to use. *Etak* is a system of wayfinding and navigation that visualizes the canoe as stationary while the islands move toward it (Diaz 2002). With such an approach to teaching and learning in Pacific studies at VUW, maybe we could bring all those twenty thousand islands, and so much more, to us?

In this article, I take stock of my experience of charting the awe-inspiring waters of the Pacific and of Pacific studies. I begin by articulating the philosophy that underpins my approach as a teacher. I then present some illustrations of my practice; these include narrations about innovations in teaching and learning in Pacific studies; student evaluations of my teaching and rates of course completion in Pacific studies and graduate successes; my pursuit of professional development and attainment of further qualifications in higher education learning and teaching; and responses from students in the form of reflections and testimonials. I conclude by reflecting on the broader context of higher education in New Zealand in which Pacific studies is situated and some of its ongoing challenges.

### MY TEACHING AND LEARNING PHILOSOPHY

Undergraduate teaching has constituted the bulk of my focus since I first joined VUW in 2000. Until 2009, I taught all the core courses in the Pacific studies major (PASI 101, PASI 201, PASI 301; see table 1); since 2010 the only undergraduate classes I teach are PASI 101 and PASI 201. PASI 101 is the largest class, with enrollments between 50 and 80; in 2016 we surpassed 100 students. (PASI 101 was also taught twice a year, in Trimester 1 and 3, until 2009, when it was decided that academic staff in Pacific studies needed to be able to use our summers for research purposes.) In 2005, when our BA Honours degree was introduced, I began teaching PASI 401, our core postgraduate course. And since 2004, I have also had a regular load of thesis supervisions—beginning with secondary supervisions for students in programs such as development studies, gender and women’s studies, geography, and sociology, and gradually focused increasingly on Pacific studies. At the time of this writing, I am primary supervisor for four Pacific studies PhDs, having seen a total of five PhDs and seven master’s to successful completion. Additionally, I regularly guest lecture in other programs across the university.

Table 1 Selected Victoria University of Wellington Pacific Studies Courses

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PASI 101: The Pacific Heritage
PASI 201: Comparative History in Polynesia
PASI 301: Framing the Pacific: Theorising Culture and Society
PASI 401: Theory and Methods in Pacific Studies

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*Source:* VUW 2017b.

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I have used both the canoe and the ocean as metaphors to articulate my deliberate pursuit of a cooperative learning model for Pacific studies and my desire to encourage deep rather than surface learning about the Pacific (Teaiwa 2005, 2011). As I discuss in more detail in a later section of this essay, one of the bedrocks of my philosophy is that a teacher must continue to be a learner in order to be of any lasting benefit to themselves or their students. I focus now on two other tenets of my teaching and learning philosophy: one deals with the diversity of students' learning positionalities, and the other anticipates the students' potential learning trajectories. These two tenets are key orienting devices for my charting of Pacific studies waters, illustrating how I keep students at the center of my focus.

So how does one prepare all of one's students for a journey that is guaranteed to make each one of them feel like an outsider at different points along the way? For instance, taking ethnicity as one of many possible axes of diversity for students: of the 85 who initially enrolled in PASI 101 in 2013, VUW Student Records show that 39 identified as Samoan, 12 Tongan, 8 New Zealand Pākehā, 6 Cook Islander, 4 Māori, 4 Tokelauan, 4 Fijian, 1 Niuean, 3 Others, 1 Other Pacific People, 1 British/Irish, 1 Other European, and 1 Other Southeast Asian. Although the precise numbers may change from year to year, the proportions are generally similar. So I try to give students linguistic and analytical tools to make sense of this diversity and the challenges of teaching and learning it presents. By the second week, they are introduced to two educational concepts from the Latin: "tabula rasa," meaning blank slate, and "educare," the root of "education," meaning to draw out. (For years I mistakenly thought—and taught—that the root word was "edu-kare," from the Greek. A teacher must continue to be a learner, indeed!) I describe to the students how an education system or educator might treat students as blank slates on

which the teacher's knowledge is inscribed; alternatively, students could be viewed as arriving full of a combination of their own knowledge and potential, which the school or teacher seeks to draw out of them. I explain that, for instance, students who don't identify as Pacific Islanders might assume that they come to PASI 101 as blank slates, and students who do identify as Pacific might assume that they are in for an educate experience; but both sets of students should be prepared to swap places at some point in the course, when they will confront new knowledge, not just about the Pacific, but about themselves. This module leaves a deep impression on the students, and although "educare" and "tabula rasa" are not examinable key concepts for the course, they inevitably make their way into student reflections on their learning in final exam essays.

The second tenet of my teaching philosophy is what I call a "critical empowerment rationale." While discourses of anticolonialism and indigenous empowerment are fashionable in Pacific studies, my position is that Pacific studies students need to be able to critically evaluate all forms and sources of power, including indigenous ones, and indeed, their own and even mine. A critical empowerment rationale provides space for students to think about the racism that Pacific people might experience from dominant white culture alongside the different forms of racialized exclusion and cultural prejudice that Pacific people themselves are capable of practicing. I create the space for this kind of critical thinking through course design, readings and audio-visual materials, and my lectures. For example, in the course learning objectives for PASI 201 (see table 2), "historical agency" is a key concept that helps students see how colonization by Europeans might have been something facilitated by some indigenous historical actors and resisted by others. Also, they might come to perceive that not all Europeans worked in concert—while some may have believed that Polynesians were inferior, others strove for the recognition of Polynesians' equality with Europeans. My chapter "The Ancestors We Get to Choose" in *Theorizing Native Studies* speaks to aspects of this critical empowerment rationale, reflecting on the ways that I have introduced students in PASI 101 and 301 to notions of intellectual whakapapa or genealogy and encouraged them to continue to be simultaneously open to and critical of ideas from within and beyond their own ethnic communities (Teaiwa 2014).

In short, my teaching and learning philosophy is about being able to live and thrive in the midst of diversity. Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson wrote about the postcolonial imperative for thinking about difference through connection rather than separation (Gupta

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Table 2 Course Learning Objectives for PASI 201  
(Comparative History in Polynesia)

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- 1 Identify and describe the basic principles and methods of historical and comparative approaches to studying Polynesia.
  - 2 Define and illustrate an understanding of the key concepts of historical specificity, cultural specificity, norms, tapu and noa, structure and historical agency, mana and sovereignty.
  - 3 Describe and evaluate the possible reasons for similarities or differences in the unfolding of history in eastern and western Polynesian countries.
  - 4 Use the key themes, concepts and methods covered in PASI 201 in your own critical and creative evaluation of historical and comparative approaches to studying Polynesia.
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*Source:* VUW 2017a.

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and Ferguson 1992). My approach to teaching and learning in Pacific studies constantly navigates between difference and connection. I have a rebelib-style navigational stick chart from the Marshall Islands that visualizes this principle—the shells representing distinct islands, connected by oceanic currents. A gift from my mother, this chart hangs in my office as a reminder of both the ancient heritage and contemporary challenges of charting Pacific (studies) waters (figure 1).

#### PUBLISHING AS A FORM OF CHARTING OUR LEARNING AND TEACHING

*Learning to Teach in Higher Education* states that university teaching ought to be informed by research in the subject area and research in higher education teaching and learning, including in the subject area, where possible (Ramsden 2003, 11). I have produced a total of six articles on teaching and learning in Pacific studies (Teaiwa 2005, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014; Teaiwa and Henderson 2009). The publications appear in a variety of venues; because the audience for Pacific studies is both local and international, I try to engage in diverse publication fora.

The urge to publish arose from my horror in coming into the field charged with beginning an undergraduate program and discovering that in spite of its fifty-year history, little had been written about teaching and

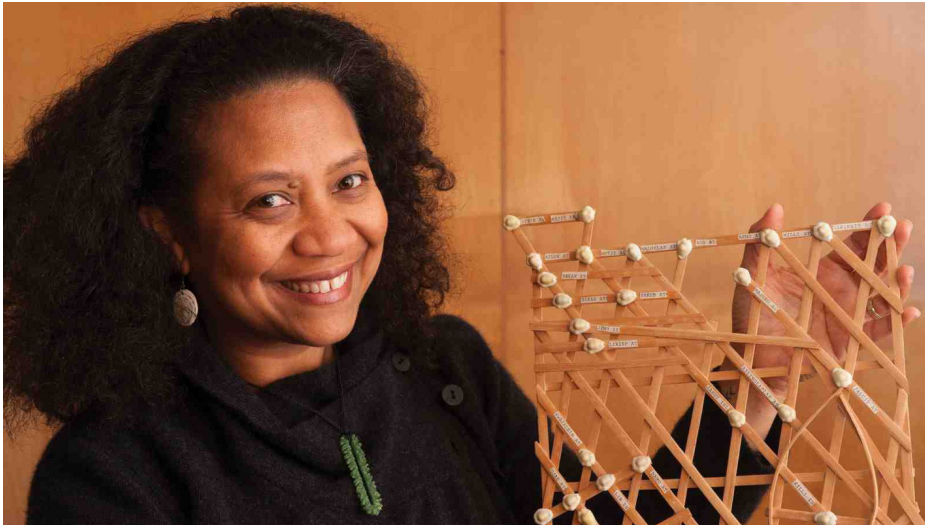


FIGURE 1 The author with Marshall Islands stick chart, 2014. Copyright Victoria University of Wellington; photographer Robert Cross, vuw Image Services. Reproduced with permission.

learning in Pacific studies. Had it not been for finding the solitary article published on Pacific Islands studies by that time (Wesley-Smith 1995), I would have been lost and floundering in this vast ocean of knowledge. Reading around the literature on higher education teaching and learning, engaging in research on learning and teaching, and writing reflectively about Pacific studies are ways of charting my journey . . . and leaving a map for others who might follow in my wake.

Since vuw established the first undergraduate program in Pacific studies in 2000, other universities have followed suit, and now it is possible to do a BA in Pacific studies at the University of Auckland, the University of Otago, the University of Hawai‘i, and Brigham Young University–Hawai‘i. Also, in recent years USP has not only introduced Pacific studies but has also made a Pacific studies course compulsory for all its students, regardless of their majors. What we are witnessing is a potential sea change in the valuing of Pacific knowledges in our regional institutions of higher education. Some of my articles have become useful charts for other Pacific studies programs. But while it is gratifying that my peers appreciate my articles, I also actively encourage all my colleagues to engage in research and reflective writing on their own teaching and innovations,

so that our collective charts and maps of this wonderfully challenging interdisciplinary space can grow more detailed and precise and hopefully produce more critically empowering educational journeys for our students and ourselves.

### STUDENT EVALUATIONS AND COMPLETIONS AS CHARTS

The VUW Centre for Academic Development (CAD) provides guidance for, processes, collates, analyzes, and archives data on student feedback on courses and teaching. For the purposes of promotion and performance review, CAD issues a concise summary of teaching evaluations over time to academic staff; this is called a Teaching Performance Profile.

VUW teaching evaluations ask students to rate five areas of a teacher's effectiveness: clarity of communication; organization of teaching; stimulation of interest; attitude toward students; overall effectiveness. With 1 being highest and 5 being lowest, my ratings have been mostly in the 1 range, with the lowest being 2.1, with a few dramatic dips, such as in 2007–2008 due to accumulated stress from teaching four trimesters in a row. However, after I enrolled in the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching (PHELT; see next section) in 2007, the dips in my teaching evaluations seemed to occur with less frequency. More recently my ratings for clarity of communication, attitude toward students, and overall effectiveness, have been in the high 1s. In addition, the Teaching Performance Profile shows that since 2007 the proportion of students completing the teaching evaluations is improving, with the percentage steadily above 50 percent in my larger classes. This demonstrates an increasingly shared commitment between my students and myself to evaluating teaching and learning.

In New Zealand, "Pasifika" refers to people who have migrated from a Pacific Island or who identify as Pacific Islander through ancestry or heritage. According to New Zealand's Tertiary Education Commission figures for 2012, at VUW the course completion rate for Pasifika students was 68 percent, compared to an overall rate of 86 percent (TEC 2013). Our PASI 101 course completion rate for Pasifika in 2013 at about 78.95 percent was therefore well above the 2012 average course completion for Pasifika across the university.

As one of the few VUW programs with a majority of Pasifika students, our academic and pastoral efforts impact directly on the university's achievement rates for Pasifika students. In 2000, when I first taught PASI



101, with 67 students registered, 19 or 28 percent did not complete the course; the majority of those were Pasifika students. In 2013 with 70 students registered, 11 or 19 percent failed to complete the course; all of them were Pasifika students. In fourteen years, then, we were able to increase the achievement rates in this first-year course by almost 10 percent; I attribute this not only to changes I have made in my pedagogy but also to effective liaising with student services.

VUW also has one of the most enviable infrastructures for student learning support in the country. As a medium-sized university, the impact of such services has a far wider reach than those at some of the bigger institutions. I am especially proud that a significant number of the Pasifika staff in student services are either graduates of Pacific studies or have taken Pacific studies courses as part of their degrees (VUW 2016). For instance, the senior Māori and Pasifika outreach coordinator, Fa‘afo‘i Seiuli, is one of the early graduates of Pacific studies; Vaisagote Keneti, the Pacific navigator and subject librarian, is a BA graduate of Pacific studies, and Jenny Taotua, Pasifika transition coordinator, is a BA Honours graduate in Pacific studies; Jenny’s colleague, Sera Tokakece, and Tapu Vea, the Pasifika liaison officer, both took Pacific studies courses as part of their respective education and geography degrees. It is gratifying for me to have contributed to the development of these dedicated front-line staff members, whose belief in enhancing educational opportunities for their fellow Pacific people is truly inspiring.

Many of our other graduates actively stay in touch with us on a personal level, and several make the effort to pop in to see us at our premises on campus. Several of our graduates agreed to be profiled in the Pacific Studies and Samoan Studies Career View brochure (VUW 2010), and in his invited speech at graduation ceremonies in 2012, Arden Perrot, who had majored in Pacific studies and education, mentioned me by name as one of three lecturers at VUW who influenced his educational success (VUW 2012).

## TEACHING TO LEARN, LEARNING TO TEACH

In *The Enquiring University Teacher*, Stephen Rowland cited Heidegger to say: “Only the teacher ‘who can truly learn—and only as long as they can do it—can truly teach’” (Rowland 2000, 2). Growing up in a family that valued education, and being the third generation of teachers on my mother’s side, I couldn’t conceive of the PhD as a terminus to my learning. The Hawaiian ‘ōlelo no‘eau or proverb also resonates with me: “‘A‘ohe

pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau ho‘okāhi (All knowledge is not taught in the same school. One can learn from many sources)” (Pukui 1983, 24). Whether it was learning to drive (I did not earn a license until 2006) or weaving a mat of coconut leaves in our village back in Fiji, I have always pursued learning with fervor.

One of the first courses I enrolled in after completing my PhD in 2001 was MAOR 101, an introductory course in Te Reo, the Māori language. I took this in the summer of 2003 (while I was also teaching PASI 101), motivated by a desire to learn more about the indigenous culture of the country where I live and work, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and to be able to solidly place Pacific studies in a local context. In the summer of 2006 I enrolled in SAMO 101, the introductory course in gagana Sāmoa. Given that Samoan is the third most widely spoken language in Aotearoa and that the majority of my Pacific studies students are of Samoan heritage, it only made sense to try to learn more of the language. I would have dearly loved to pursue more studies in both languages, but work pressures and financial strain prevented me from enrolling in any further language courses.

In 2007, however, VUW offered to cover fees for academics undertaking the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching (PHELT) course, and I did not hesitate. I had already been participating in teaching workshops offered through the university’s Teaching Development Centre (now the Centre for Academic Development [CAD]), and I had received a lot of support from colleagues there who were willing to engage me in discussions on pedagogy. But PHELT exceeded my expectations in that, for the first time, I was being exposed not just to “techniques” of teaching but also to theoretically informed approaches that actually changed my own understanding of what learning at university needed to be. PHELT was not easy. At times I thought I was going to be one of those dismal Pasifika statistics in education. But five years later, I finished the last of the three thirty-point courses required for the certificate. The experience was valuable, therefore, not just in terms of the content I learned but also for the experience of struggling to complete a qualification in New Zealand’s higher education system. When I graduated in 2012 alongside many of my undergraduate students, I was no longer an empathic observer but a sympathetic fellow survivor.

One of the PHELT reading assignments was Philip E Ross’s “The Expert Mind” (2006). It’s a reading I now assign to my postgraduate students in Pacific studies because it summarizes so well the fascinating research into the learning processes that take someone from being a novice to an

expert. I use it to get my students to think critically about what it means to become an expert in Pacific studies or an expert on the Pacific. I do not actually believe that it is possible or appropriate to try to become an expert on the Pacific, so the key lesson for me from this article is in Ross's statement that experts-in-making are people who always keep the lids of their minds open (Ross 2006, 52). Rather than striving to be experts—rather than seeking arrival—I want my students in Pacific studies to take the approach that I have, which is that of the expert-in-making—forever learning and valuing the journey as much as the destination of achieving their qualifications.

PHELT helped me appreciate the primacy of student-centered learning in higher education. Two initiatives exemplify my student-focused approach to teaching. One of them, “Akamai,” is a creative option for assessment in PASI 101 that has been offered annually since 2001. The second is “Key Concept and Question” papers (KCQs), adapted from PHELT and used to replace the midterm test in PASI 101 and PASI 201; it is also used as an assessment in PASI 401. KCQs have radically transformed the culture of learning in my classes and in Pacific studies at VUW in general.

Akamai builds on the ideas of groundbreaking indigenous Pacific intellectual Albert Wendt, who wrote: “Oceania deserves much more than an attempt at mundane fact; only the imagination in free flight can hope—if not to contain her—to grasp some of her shape, plumage, and pain” (Wendt 1976, 49). As I explained in the 2013 PASI 101 course outline:

PASI 101 students are . . . offered the opportunity to exhibit or perform their major assignment in an artistic medium. Students who select this option come together to present their work in a production entitled “Akamai”—meaning “smart, clever” in Hawaiian. . . .

The idea behind Akamai is to give PASI 101 students the opportunity to actively engage in the creative processes related to learning about the Pacific heritage or creating a heritage artifact of your own. You may compose an original or “cover” a song or rap; you may choreograph a dance; you may write and dramatize a short play; you may present a painting, a collage or do an installation work; or you may choose to integrate different art forms using a multi-media approach. You may choose to be assessed individually or as part of a group. Your exhibition/performance must be conceptualized around themes raised in PASI 101. You are advised to discuss your ideas with your tutor or lecturer before turning your proposal in.

You will be required to present a 300-word synopsis (i.e. summary or description) of your performance, and a bibliography of at least five sources

that you've consulted for the production. You will also be required to attend workshop sessions in addition to your regular tutorials in the last three weeks of the term.

You will be assessed on the care and attention to detail shown in the overall production and presentation of your work; the relevance of your work to the course themes; and the quality of your synopsis and bibliography.

This assignment builds students' critical and creative thinking skills and in particular provides students with the opportunity to:

- Explain the basic principles of a Pacific Studies approach to studying the Pacific Heritage;
- Use the key themes and concepts of PASI 101 in your own critical and/or creative analysis of particular case/s where issues relating to the Pacific heritage are at stake.

The assessment is worth 20 percent of a student's final grade and involves library-based research, a bibliography, and a written proposal for a work of art or performance that engages with key concepts and themes explored in the class. A quarter to a third of the class generally participates in Akamai every year, while the remainder routinely chooses the essay option. Akamai students can choose to do group or individual projects, but all students, including those whose final piece is a group project, are assessed individually on reflective journals that each of them must submit documenting their individual learning through the process. Groups and individuals are also required to attend two workshops to get feedback on their creative work from teaching staff.

Akamai has become an annual fixture in VUW's Pacific community outreach calendar, attracting audiences of around three hundred every year—mostly students, friends, and family members. Clips from past Akamai students can be found on YouTube by searching for “Akamai VUW” or “Akamai PASI 101.” The following excerpts from students' reflective journals for the Akamai assignment capture some of the impact of this innovative assessment on their learning:

After the final presentation I was able to reflect on the Akamai process from beginning to completion. I feel as though it has offered me more than any other assignment as I could fully engage and explore the ideas I was interested in. (PASI 101 student, 2013)

Throughout the whole process and preparation for Akamai I have learnt a lot. Of my whole three years here at University I now have a deeper understanding for my purpose and why my parents pushed me so hard to go university. I understand that we are all still on our journey from migration because we

haven't reached the desired destination yet for my education, because my success is their success. (PASI 101 student, 2013)

Through Akamai, students start to understand art and performance not just as artifacts of cultural heritage but also as crucial elements of the intellectual heritage of the Pacific.

I am so glad that I chose to do Akamai. I did it because I wanted to challenge myself because I can write a really good essay, I wanted to do something different. I have learned so much about the . . . language and culture which gives me more indigenous knowledge because . . . was willing to share her knowledge with us. I did not only learn how to dance but how to work as a collective, how to make a lei and different ways to tie pareu [wraparound]. It was a process where I learned about discipline, demonstrated my agency and experienced interdisciplinarity. I believe I learned more doing Akamai than what I would or could ever learn doing an essay. I am so thankful for my kumu [teacher] and my peers for taking me on this journey. (PASI 101 student, 2013)

I learnt so much more about my aunties' lives before they migrated to NZ in preparing for Akamai, the theme of migration and reflecting on their experiences still gets to me now when I think about it. The only way I can think of describing it is that I was so blind before to the issues that we have discussed in this course and it never occurred to me how important my Samoan identity and culture were. I thought about this also when I was trying to watch as many Akamai performances as I could to see what people had taken from PASI 101. I came across a film by some Akamai students last year called *Two Blind Mice*. They shared their experiences of their Samoan identity conflicting with their NZ born Samoan identity. Tate Simi's poem "O oe o se a?" has had a huge impact on me also in learning about this also and has helped me to see why it is important. (PASI 101 student, 2012)

As the last two excerpts from students' reflective journals illustrate, one of the exciting aspects of Akamai—and a key component of transforming the process from one of "cultural production" or "cultural performance" to one of "exploring intellectual heritage"—involves the students linking what they are doing to readings and concepts, and, most important, to learning from each other and from previous students as well.

If Akamai represents Pacific studies in full flight, Key Concepts and Questions represent my commitment to ensuring its solid academic grounding. In 2010, I introduced three-hundred-word KCQs as a form of assessment into my undergraduate teaching. Having completed UTDC 501 (Foundations of Higher Education Learning and Teaching) in 2007, I found the KCQs required in that course a useful way of engaging with

the assigned readings. I also reflected on the research that Mary Ruth Davidson-Toumu‘a, a former VUW Pasifika student-learning advisor, had done in her MA on the experiences of first-year students of Pacific heritage with academic reading at university (Davidson-Toumu‘a 2005). Struck by her highlighting of the invisibility of reading as an activity, I felt challenged to make reading in Pacific studies more visible. KCQs would assist by directly assessing how students were reading. I trialled them in 2010 with my PASI 201 class, replacing the 20 percent midterm test with KCQs. In 2011, I introduced KCQs into PASI 101. It has taken some trial and error to settle on the optimum number of KCQs to require and from an initial requirement of 9 in 2010, I have now settled on 6 in PASI 201 and 5 in PASI 101. I have also tweaked the format of KCQs across different courses: at 100-level, they are more open-ended, seeking to find what students consider interesting, important, and essential about the readings. At 200-level, I hold on to what’s interesting and important but now guide the students toward making links between the readings and the overarching key concepts identified in course learning objectives. Students comment regularly in their course evaluations that KCQs have helped them keep up with their readings and that they’ve appreciated the regular feedback that they get from teaching staff on their engagement with the readings. Robert Nicole, a former colleague of mine from USP, wrote that my use of KCQs has inspired him and colleagues to similarly make reading an assessable activity. But perhaps the greatest testimonial to the effectiveness of KCQs comes from a postgraduate student who came through our program as an undergraduate before KCQs were introduced and has also tutored in the program and seen how they have changed the learning dynamics for both undergraduates and postgraduate students:

The engagement in PASI 101 throughout the semester is significantly enhanced by scheduled mini assignments called Key Concepts and Questions (KCQs). KCQs ask students to connect with readings, audio visual (AV) and guest lectures by stating essential, important and interesting points from the material as well as ask critical questions of the works. My own PASI 101 enrollment of 2005 did not feature KCQs in the coursework, and I was first made aware of this new formula in 2012 upon my return to study Honours and tutor PASI 101. It’s evident that its introduction has encouraged both understanding and retaining information in an impressive academic manner. For a first year course, it greatly assists a learner’s ability to critically engage with academia and formulate scholarly discussions around seemingly non-academic occurrences. This was made evident to me through tutoring; I was a PASI 101 tutor in the first semester of 2007, 2012 and 2013. In both 2012 and 2013, I dis-

covered tutorial planning was minimal as students had a lot to share in general discussion, and this would direct a lot of the activities in tutorial time. By completing compulsory KCQs, this allowed students confidence to voice thoughts on authors, theories and arguments they were exposed to. KCQs also formed the base of student's study notes and I have seen students keep these still today as a quick point of reference when working on assignments that are possibly related to similar themes.

While I have focussed on PASI 101 here, I am aware that KCQs have filtered into many if not all of VUW's PASI courses. In my first honours paper, PASI 401 Theory and Method in Pacific Studies, I am thankful for KCQs which forced me to engage with the literature we were reading as a class in the weeks they were relevant. Rather than wait to incorporate, pick and choose ideas as part of a final essay or project and dismiss the rest, I gained an in depth knowledge of the range of theories and methods that we covered. KCQs would force me to read and write hours on end to ensure I understood the intentions and contexts theories were developed in, as well as reflect on the way in which they were used in research of the present. For the first time in my own educational journey, I started to feel like I was forming a strong body of knowledge that included theories and methods and this enabled me to contribute with greater confidence in a scholarly forum regardless of the discipline or content. From my experience and the experience of my students, it's fair to say that KCQs have been nothing short of revolutionary in ensuring students' participation, preparedness and commitment to course. (Rachel Yates, VUW Pacific studies postgraduate student and tutor, 2013)

In addition to these innovations and others, tried-and-true methods of stimulating learning such as field trips have helped to make Pacific studies an exciting and eye-opening program for many of our students. Although government policies restricting the use of student loans for overseas field trips have meant we can no longer take trips like the one we did to Rarotonga in 2002, I have taken great pleasure in showing students how much of the wider Pacific can be found in Wellington itself—whether in museums, libraries, archives, churches, communities, or in the natural world. Through etak, we bring the islands to us!

### NAVIGATING THE CURRENTS OF NEW ZEALAND'S TERTIARY ENVIRONMENT

The Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC) Pasifika Framework for 2013–2017 has as one of its four focus areas “continued and accelerated performance at all levels” for Pasifika students in tertiary education. As the agency responsible for funding the tertiary sector in New Zealand, the

TEC seeks an increase not only in the numbers of Pasifika students enrolled in tertiary education but a raising of achievement and completion rates so that Pasifika students are on par with all other students. At present the profiles are disturbing, with Pasifika completion rates close to or below a quarter at some tertiary providers, and the gap between Pasifika and overall course and qualification completion rates at many institutions exceeding 20 percent (TEC 2013).

I take the responsibility of being a teacher, especially for my Pasifika students, very seriously. But there are some structural barriers to educational achievement that are truly formidable. While the majority of our students are enrolled full-time at university, the cost of living in Wellington and the economics of higher education in this country require them to be “part-time learners.” The tragedy of student debt is that it rarely allows students to devote their efforts to full-time study. Most of the students in my classes have educational loans while also taking on debilitating hours of waged employment just to cover their rent, food, and transport. Whether they are Pasifika, Māori, Pākehā, Asian, new migrant, or international exchange students, I celebrate the successes of all my students. It is truly amazing that some of them are able to complete their courses and qualifications at all, given the barriers and disincentives around them. We journey on through these rough waters.

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### *Abstract*

In this article, I chart my experience of learning and teaching in the awe-inspiring waters of the Pacific and of Pacific studies. I begin by articulating the philosophy that underpins my approach as a teacher. One of the bedrocks of my philosophy is that a teacher must continue to be a learner in order to be of any lasting benefit to themselves or their students. I have used both the canoe and the ocean as metaphors to articulate my deliberate pursuit of a cooperative learning model for Pacific studies and my desire to encourage deep rather than surface learning about the Pacific. I focus now on two other tenets of my teaching and learning philosophy: one deals with the diversity of students' learning positionalities, and the other anticipates the students' potential learning trajectories. I present some illustrations of my practice, including narrations about some innovations in teaching and learning in Pacific studies; student evaluations of my teaching and rates of course completion in Pacific studies and graduate successes; my pursuit of professional development and attainment of further qualifications in higher education learning and teaching; and responses from students in the form of reflections and testimonials. I conclude by reflecting on the broader context of higher education in New Zealand in which Pacific studies is situated and some of its ongoing challenges.

KEYWORDS: Pacific studies, pedagogy, teaching philosophy, learning positionalities, critical empowerment