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## Weaving a “Hybrid Mat”: Samoa meets the Solomons

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### Abstract

*Developed nations providing aid and educational support for less wealthy countries, have frequently imposed their own ideas and practices in a top-down manner. A recent collaborative aid project between the New Zealand and Solomon Islands Governments, has been more equitable by developing the project as a “Partnership”. As a New Zealander involved with this project, I found participation in the Partnership activities to be rewarding and enlightening. The metaphor of a “hybrid mat” is used to weave together narratives from my pre-Partnership life and career events with narratives from my partnership experiences. Clandinin and Connelly’s renowned concept of “stories” is utilised throughout to illustrate how perceptions of events can vary from person to person. “Cover” stories (the “official” narrative of events for outsiders); “secret” stories (narratives available only to insiders); and “re-storying” (placing a story within a context/place and negotiating the meanings of the story) are concepts used to illustrate the complexity and multiple explanations and understandings that come from narratives. It is through “re-storying” the combined “cover” and “secret” stories that a third space of understanding is revealed. This article traces the process and product of understanding and re-storying a particular “hybrid mat” for the writer.*

### Keywords

Narrative, Solomon Islands, partnership, staff development, relationality

### Introduction

The Pacific has been described as a vast area of sea in which are scattered many thousands of islands, some “mere specks in the ocean”, others considerably larger (Mugler, 1996, p. 1). Such a view of islands in a far sea contrasts markedly with a view of a sea of islands. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centre of power and stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands; a view that positions a speaker as gazing at an exotic other from elsewhere. The second emphasises a vast place where peoples and cultures move and mingle and stresses a more resourceful and



interdependent Oceania;<sup>i</sup> a holistic view that positions a speaker as acknowledging and valuing such resourceful interdependence (Hau'ofa, 1996).

I am imbued with this latter perspective of Oceania, but only since my involvement in the Solomon Islands School of Education Support Partnership.<sup>ii</sup> This affiliation between the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato (UOW) in New Zealand and the School of Education (SOE) at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) gave teaching staff from both institutions the opportunity to work collaboratively on professional development. My connection encompassed participating in an assortment of tasks ranging from co-writing course programmes, outlines, resources and workbooks alongside individual Solomon Islands lecturers, to facilitating whole-staff workshops on aspects of teaching and learning. From my perspective, involvement in the Partnership and the reciprocity and learning gained from working alongside these colleagues in their home environment served to strengthen and deepen my understanding of the holistic conception of a resourceful and interdependent Oceania.

However, first an explanation of the metaphor of a hybrid mat as used in the title of this article. Weaving a fibre mat of the kind frequently used in parts of Oceania requires a warp and a weft. The warp fibres create the core base, through which the weft fibres are interwoven to give form to the mat. It is the combination of the warp and weft, though, that gives it strength. Such a mat is being woven in this article: my personal Pacific connections are the warp, while the Partnership experience is the weft. Such a warp and weft form a new hybrid mat, an idea adapted from Homi Bhaba's (1994) postcolonial concept of hybridisation, where new cultural forms emerge from the interaction and intermingling of cultures. In this case, the new cultural form is the hybrid mat that comes from developing a greater understanding of Oceania as a sea of islands rather than islands in a far sea; a deeper consideration formed from personal connections weaving productively with the Partnership experience. To clarify the hybrid mat metaphor, I first establish the warp by showing family and early-career linkages to Oceania (my personal Pacific connections). The weft is then established by outlining aspects of involvement in the Partnership that I believe contribute to my appreciation of a more holistic view of Oceania.

### **Warp of the hybrid mat**

Like many New Zealanders of the same vintage, my before-Partnership-view of the Pacific was grounded in school social studies, geography and history; disciplines that reinforced the impression of islands in a far sea. I had a bloodline connection with Polynesia that certainly reiterated that impression. My late mother was born and raised in Western Samoa (as it was called during the time she lived there) before she moved to New Zealand at the age of 18. Her parents were of German/Chinese/Samoan descent and her stories of life as an afakasi (literal translation of the term half-caste in use at the time) in the social milieu of Samoa between the 1920s and 1930s are an essential part of my family history. In retrospect I now understand how those stories reiterated the notion of islands in a far sea. Coming to New Zealand in the 1940s, during a period when government policies encouraged new migrants to assimilate (King, 2003), my mother dutifully complied by trying to become an acceptable version of a New Zealander. For her, this meant speaking English all the time, changing her dress code from island-style comfort to European fashion, and mimicking the daily life routines

and patterns of her mainly European neighbours. Her life before New Zealand appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be relegated to the closet, the door of which was only opened when relatives irregularly descended from other parts of New Zealand or from overseas. It was then that family stories came to the surface.

There were many curiosities in our family stories, but it was interesting how they could vary according to the storyteller. Sometimes details in my mother's version of a narrative could be quite different to a version provided by her many siblings. This is exemplified in the cover and secret stories of why and how my mother came to New Zealand. Mother's cover story was that she was sent out from Samoa by her parents to be the bridesmaid at her older sister's wedding in Wellington. In her view, the ocean liner journey took too long, and the wedding was over and done by the time she arrived. Her sister's secret story was that their father did not like the way his youngest daughter was being groomed for the role of a *taupo* (ceremonial virgin) in his wife's village. He thought she deserved a better fate than to be married off to one of the older village men to breed; therefore he arranged for a letter to be delivered to the house saying my mother had been selected to go to New Zealand to become a teacher. My grandmother proudly flaunted the letter to all and sundry in the village and everyone was most impressed. However, once she realized she had been duped, the only way to save face was for my mother to actually go to New Zealand, and thus blur the teacher story until it was forgotten.

The concept of multiple versions of a story is echoed in the research of Clandinin and Connelly (1995), who amongst other story types proffered the concept of cover stories (the official narrative of events for outsiders); secret stories (the lived story told only to other insiders); and re-storying (placing a story within a context/place and negotiating meaning of the story). Although the Clandinin and Connelly's work focused on teachers, their story modes resonated with my experience of family stories. As a child, having a mop of black curly hair and dark skin already contributed to a sense of conspicuousness in 1950s New Zealand that I would have sold my soul to avoid. The challenge at school was to relate family events but dilute the idea of any blood relationship to different people or others. I now recognise that re-storying enabled me to distance myself from my kith and kin who were from the islands or islands in a far sea, because I was trying to reduce my usual position as other. I am also now aware that the experience of being an other was not so much a state wilfully imposed on me by the majority as the effect of discursive practices that operated within the social environment of New Zealand at that time (Davis, 1994; Fine, 1994; Petelo, 1997).

Such understanding made some of the political and social conditions in Samoa in the 1920/30s more comprehensible. I can appreciate how in a Samoan village the role of a school teacher was valued to the extent that family status could be inflated by a family member becoming a teacher, and can therefore understand the pride of a village woman that one of her children might be chosen to become a teacher. However, it took a further generation before my grandmother's satisfaction in having a teacher in the family could be rescued. Probably due to valuing teachers subliminally in my background, I chose to become a teacher; and in due course that teacher eventually changed function to become a lecturer in education at the University of Waikato.

One of my additional roles early on was to mentor international students gaining qualifications through the education faculty. An enjoyable aspect of this role was finding out a little about the background and experience of the students. Amongst the

group of international students studying for degrees were qualified teachers from Pacific nations who had come to the university to upgrade their home-country certificate or diploma teaching qualifications. Conversations with them frequently touched on issues and became quite personal and I surmised this was because these teacher-students felt secure in talking with me as a fellow other, that is, as a person positioned outside the mainstream culture because of ethnicity.

One such teacher from Fiji made an appointment to see me for assistance with one of her assignments, which was to create a written plan for a curriculum topic she was to teach in one of the local schools sited around the perimeter of the university. She appeared to be finding it extremely difficult to conceptualize and structure a basic lesson plan and I was perplexed at her predicament with this routine task, because she had had several years' experience as a teacher in Fiji. She was in New Zealand to upgrade her Fijian teaching diploma to a degree, and when I asked why, a fascinating narrative about her life spontaneously spilled out. After an hour I felt compelled to bring the conversation back from the tensions and dilemmas of life as a teacher in Fiji to the university assignment task in hand. Following a micro-course on how to write a lesson plan and an offer to check her plan when she completed it, she returned the next day accompanied by a fellow teacher-student from the Solomon Islands, who also needed help with a similar assignment. Over the following week I had teacher-students of various Pacific Island ethnicities queuing at the door requesting comparable assistance.

My office became a kind of drop-in centre for international students, particularly those from the Pacific, who now felt they knew me well enough to call in when passing. During these informal chats I heard many stories and started to develop an appreciation for places and cultures in the Pacific I previously knew little about. The narratives were interesting because although they seemed different and unusual to me, they were very much a reality to the storytellers. I heard fascinating stories about missionary schools and teachers; harsh disciplinary methods; young village children attending distant community boarding schools; village schools in remote parts of the ocean; paddling to school via hour-long canoe trips; tribal wars and being relocated elsewhere to live with relatives away from the fighting; caregiver sacrifices to provide schooling for children; teacher-pupil training methods; bride-price values increasing with academic qualifications; rites of passage; tribal tattoos and taboos—and *much* more! I was being positioned as a privileged-other in the mentor role by being admitted into some of these secret stories, which prompted me to increase my Pacific knowledge with research and reading, so that I could better contextualise such stories.

I noted some common threads across the stories, despite the fact that they were teachers from different nations. One similarity was that many were dissatisfied with the accepted mode of teaching in their home country and wanted to learn more about alternative approaches, which was why they had come to study in New Zealand. Some had instinctively already experimented with what I ascertained as being a more learner-centred teaching approach than the teacher-centred approach they indicated as common in their home country. While finding such an approach more satisfying than the top-down approach they had been expected to use, the teachers also felt they needed academic justification to support a more overt adoption of such methods, hence the university study in New Zealand. Interestingly, even though they themselves had obviously been successful as learners under top-down teaching approaches, they

recognised a need to find out about alternatives that could enhance learning for students in their classes who did not respond as positively to this style of teaching. Zeichner and Tabachinck (1981) considered the thousands of hours teachers spent as pupils in classrooms as a sort of apprenticeship of observation that shapes beliefs about teaching, but beliefs that remain dormant until they actually become teachers and re-enter the classroom. Positioned by the discourse of teacher as technician, the Pacific teacher-students were not expected to make independent decisions about what, when and how they taught in their schools at home. However, their astute observations as pupils **and** as practitioners impacted on their beliefs, and motivated them to look beyond the mainstream teaching methods they were required to use. Mingling elsewhere in the sea of islands of Oceania seemed to be one way of broadening their ideas about learning and teaching.

### **Weft of the hybrid mat**

Considering the family and career background influences described above, it was probably as much logic as luck when the staff line-up to work part-time on the Partnership was being considered and I was invited by the UOW to join the team. To be able to combine my job as a lecturer with my interest in family stories and my curiosity about Oceania and the life-ways of people who lived there seemed like a real bonus. Naturally I was quick to take up the offer. In a way there was a circular sense of a homecoming, even if to an essentially Melanesian island state, rather than Polynesian.

In retrospect, one of the main advantages of being involved in the Partnership was the reciprocity of professional development (PD). My initial involvement was in August 2007, after the Partnership had been running for a year. I was asked to provide a workshop for a group of senior staff from the SOE who were in New Zealand at the Hamilton campus for 10 days of PD. The challenge was to engage for a whole day this group of people that I had never met before (but knew would be finding it cold because it was New Zealand spring and also wanting to get back to their families because their time in New Zealand was almost over). An aspect to be considered was that in two weeks' time I would be working with them again, along with their colleagues in their home territory, during my first trip to the Solomon Islands. Utilising information I had learnt from the upgrading Pacific teacher-students a few years back about preferred ways of knowing, I decided to take a learner-centred, pragmatic approach to the workshop, and utilise resources that included thinking tools and strategies but also try to add a Pacific flavour to them. The success of the day and positive response from the SOE staff was both satisfying and educative; it established new ideas in a context they could relate to, and determined the way I would endeavour to work in the Partnership from then on.

Learning curves, flexibility and stories became key facets of participating in the Partnership: from being stranded alone in a rental car with two flat tyres at dusk in a rural area of Honiara considered dodgy at the best of times, and not being able to phone for help because of the very limited cell-phone range; to being stranded with a colleague on an outer island with a storm brewing but needing to take a heart-stopping small-boat trip through extremely rough seas to get back to Honiara before dark. However, adventure stories were just part of the background of working in partnership. The really exciting part was working alongside talented staff at the SOE on cover stories (what was actually happening) that revealed secret stories (only made known to

insiders). The combination of these cover and secret stories, along with observations made over seven working trips to Honiara, provided me with the opportunity to eventually re-story what I learnt from the whole experience.

The cover stories or the official events, started on my first trip when I was included in the team of UOW staff co-writing resources with SOE staff for the Teachers in Training (TIT) programme. The resources (course outlines, readings and assessment task booklets) were for block courses soon to be held on-site at the SOE for large numbers of primary and secondary school Solomon Islands teachers experienced in classroom teaching, but without formal training or qualifications. Such teachers had been part of the group of teacher-students from the Pacific that had I mentored at the UOW, therefore I had empathy for the challenges the programme would provide for the multi-ethnic group of TITs coming from a range of Solomon Island provinces. I was also aware of SOE colleagues' expectations of academic rigour and their valuing of the multilingualism that the TITs would bring with them to their course; competent skills in vernacular, dialect(s) and pidgin. The best part was the eagerness with which SOE colleagues adopted thinking tools and strategies into their own practice but also incorporated them into the TIT programme. There was irony in trying to locate teaching resources with a distinctly Pacific flavour. Create-your-own became the catch-cry—for example, utilising photographs of Solomon Island people going about daily activities (snapped while out walking the streets of Honiara at dawn), articles and pictures from in-flight magazines, and local newspaper advertisements and stories.

An issue that the partnership project was attempting to address was how the SOE staff with heavy teaching responsibilities could reduce assessment workloads that had become quite a burden. Therefore, a challenge for the TIT courses in Literacy and English I was directly involved with was to maintain a level of academic rigour while easing the assessment issue. A collaborative solution was to professionally and pragmatically bring together the primary and secondary TITs during their block courses, under the supervision of SOE staff teaching both groups. This meant the secondary teachers could authentically practise what they were learning about content and pedagogy and actively contribute to the teaching and assessment of the primary teachers. Introducing alternatives to essays became a plus, especially when later back in New Zealand I received an enthusiastic and positive email from Solomon Islands colleagues, soon after their first experience of viewing and marking multilingual group presentations of learning by the TITs.

The cover story on a return trip was that I was to help my SOE colleagues negotiate and translate certificate-level courses into diploma-level papers for new diploma qualifications, after ascertaining the differences between 100 and 200 level courses. A test to face up to with this new role was the range of curriculum disciplines I needed to help with. These included Primary: (English, Literacy); Secondary: (English, Social Studies, Professional Studies, Business Studies); Primary and Secondary: (Special Needs, Special Education and Inclusive Practices), as well as the development of a new course, *Curriculum and Assessment*. It is legend that primary school teachers are equipped to deal with and teach a range of disciplines; however with absolutely no fiscal bone in my body, secondary Business Studies was probably going to provide a real challenge. Nevertheless, I researched requirements for all the courses to be assisted and garnered flash-drives of ideas and resources before leaving New Zealand (which were well received by resource-hungry Solomon Islands staff). Working with such

colleagues across all these disciplines was the perfect way to get to know a wider group of staff than during my earlier visits. In my view, it was the relationality of this experience that changed my status from being positioned as other, to being positioned as insider by the Solomon Island staff.

A final input the following year was to facilitate some staff professional development (PD) as part of a small team helping some Solomon Islands colleagues extend their understanding of teaching and learning. By then I felt like one of the family and definitely an insider in terms of what was now known about the Solomon Islands and SOE colleagues. The first two modules to be covered early in the year were Learner-centred Pedagogy and Reflective Practice. Although some researchers contest the value of learner-centred teaching in developing countries (Jansen, 2009; Mtika & Gates, 2010), the new outcomes-based school curriculum in the Solomon Islands demanded knowledge of this pedagogy and related topics (such as reflective practice and formative assessment). Modules to be covered later in the year were further processing of the earlier modules, plus Formative Assessment, Teaching Experience Evaluative Visiting and Equity. At last, topics I knew well; therefore I could walk the talk with relative ease. My flight luggage was heavy with tools of the trade that were planned to pre-empt previously experienced problems: teaching resources photocopied and ready to use; charts on large paper; standard stationery items; DVDs and other teaching visuals loaded onto my computer (plus flash-drive back-up, of course); as well as my trusty attention-getting \$2 shop bicycle bell for crowd control.

Facilitating most of the above 2010 professional development modules proved to be the most satisfying of all the Partnership experiences. In my view it was a combination and culmination of personal life-history experiences, UOW teacher-student mentoring experiences, previous Partnership involvement experiences and familiar module topics, all rolled into one. The challenges and learning gained from these sessions were enormous in terms of better understanding Solomon Islands colleagues. Interestingly, I addressed the notion of assumptions theoretically in a workshop session, and yet continually made assumptions. For example, I was surprised when staff responded with enthusiasm to a short item I wrote to introduce the topic of learner-centred teaching and learning—an item that showed such teaching and learning was inherent in traditional Polynesian and Melanesian educational practices when passing on life-ways from one generation to another. I had made the assumption this content was merely revision; however, the written item was later described by one SOE staff member as uplifting and enlightening.

I was also made aware of the daily constraints these colleagues lived with in their job. Recycling photocopy paper wrappers for chart-making, and changing tack from using postcards that cost money to using newspaper pictures mounted on card to create group-determiners became second nature. In essence during these PD modules an attempt was made to acknowledge the multicultural diversity of staff, role-model learner-centred teaching practices, utilise Pacific-flavoured teaching resources, employ pragmatic activities, and foster gender balance with group interactions. It was pleasing to overhear staffroom talk, even if at times in jest, referring to and incorporating terminology covered in the modules. For example: assumptions, hegemony, RiA (Reflection in Action) and RoA (Reflection on Action) and critically reflective practice.

The cover stories or what was on the official list of tasks to be done are only half the narrative. It was secret stories surfacing during and towards the final sessions of the

Partnership that really indicated the developed trust and quality of the Partnership. Some were revelations about personal life that indicated tensions in values and principles; for example, the situation of marking assignments written by wontok or extended family members and the dilemma of being pressured by relatives to pass assignments that were not up to standard. Some were admissions of difficulty in understanding new course content to be covered therefore questioning personal efficacy in delivering lectures and tutorials. Some revealed perceived inadequacies with using technology (and just required a crash course on how to actually create PowerPoint presentations on a computer to reverse this perception). Others were about capacity to translate earlier-learned overseas concepts to the local environment. Some regarded the effects on staff morale of the ethnic tension political situation. Some were about personal difficulties experienced when government treasury issues impacted on the regularity of lecturer salaries. And some concerned politicians and political jostling, with consequences on educational policies and funds, so that the reputation and capacity of staff to deliver consistent services was reduced. However, the most engaging secret story moment for me came towards the end of the teaching and learning modules at a debriefing session. Bracing myself when I thought a mature staff member was standing up to complain about the modules, he instead publicly declared in front of peers how he now recognized after all these years he had only been *talking* about quality pedagogy to student teachers but never actually *demonstrating* or role-modelling it. The PD role-modelled sessions had amplified his awareness of the crucial importance of demonstration; and the fact that he recognised this necessity himself from the strategies used during this PD experience was extremely gratifying.

### **The hybrid mat of new understanding**

It is through re-storying (placing a story within a context/place and negotiating meaning of the story) in retrospect, after the completion of the Partnership, that a broader understanding of Oceania becomes evident. Not only did I gain a better appreciation of the cultural diversity of the Solomon Islands, encompassing Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian ethnicities and their geographical and provincial locations; but also insights into the reality of the earlier-told stories of everyday life from Pacific teachers studying in New Zealand. Intermingling with SOE staff living in Honiara was enlightening; however it was weekend excursions to outer island retreats in different provinces (e.g., Savo, Maravagi and Sanbis) that served to cement earlier-described fundamentals of village life. Traversing an island by foot and passing through several small villages, climbing to a caldera through locally farmed and inhabited bushland, and taking opportunities to get closer to the lives of the indigenous people (e.g., attending a local village church service and a larger town church commemoration service) were highly illuminating experiences.

Such experiences drew attention to the value of people and relationships in Oceania. It is most apparent in a village that everyone knows everyone and everyone else's business because of the intimacy of village life and the close proximity of privacy-unguaranteed dwellings designed for coolness and a through flow of air. I am now able to understand why teachers from Oceania studying in New Zealand told me it was much more important to stop and talk at some length to friends if they came across them on campus than get to a pre-arranged meeting with a lecturer on time or to hand in an assignment by a deadline. It is also now comprehensible that wontok obligations for



lecturers at the SOE are considered fairly sacrosanct, which is why wontok pressures can create dilemmas and stress.

In addition, it is obvious when a church is the biggest, most expensive and solidly constructed building in a village that spirituality plays a large part in everyday life. And therefore when a school is a similarly important institution within the same locale, it is clearly palpable why students with an acceptable academic record are shoulder-tapped to teach in the local school as untrained teachers by someone of position in the village. As well, it explains why having a trained teacher in a family can increase the status and standing of that family within the village and surrounding neighbourhood.

My excursions into various areas of the Solomon Islands also confirmed the physical effort required to meet daily needs in a hot climate when there is limited running water (at times just one fresh-water tap or water well for a whole village) and restricted energy provision (bottled gas, generators, kerosene or open fires). Just meeting the basic essentials of life can be demanding of personal endeavour and time; for example, fishing for regular dietary protein; tending horticultural patches (often some distance away) to supply root crops and vegetables; doing household chores, such as washing clothes, by hand; and gathering/preparing/cooking food. Similarly, getting from one place to another by walking along tracks or paddling in a canoe (with the added danger of sharks) demands stamina. I had been made aware of such life-ways from the cover and secret stories of teachers from Oceania studying in New Zealand; however the stories became less academic and more legitimate during the Partnership experience. I can appreciate now that a teacher or lecturer who spends the majority of her/his daylight hours teaching, and using any remaining daylight hours to meet family necessities, has a very different concept of time to a New Zealander with ready access to running water, electricity, press-and-go appliances, supermarkets and vehicles. I can also appreciate the constraints daily life can have on teaching practice; implementing a time- and energy-demanding learner-centred teaching approach requires more belief and fervour than classroom teacher remuneration warrants.

It is my belief that re-storying the warp and weft (prior and Partnership experiences) has provoked a hybrid mat. That is, a new third space hybrid mat of appreciation of teachers from Oceania and their commitment to their work; yet at the same time, self-appreciation that having a Pacific background and being an other *can* be an advantage. It is through weaving the warp and weft that the hybrid mat gains strength; from the New Zealand and the Solomon Islands Partnership's resourcefulness and interdependence; and from the author's new appreciation of a more holistic conception of a resourceful and interdependent Oceania.

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<sup>i</sup> Oceania: a large group of islands in the south Pacific including Melanesia and Micronesia and Polynesia (and sometimes Australasia and the Malay Archipelago) (Definition from [wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)).

<sup>ii</sup> A New Zealand Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs-sponsored project from 2006 to 2010.

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