

A culturally responsive research move to enable Pacific voices to be heard: a research note

Frances Edwards

University of Waikato, New Zealand
frances.edwards@waikato.ac.nz

Abstract

Researchers in the field of education have increasingly come to value the views and experiences of students, and hearing from the students themselves. This research note explores the challenges a researcher sought to gather student voice from Cook Islands tertiary students. The combination of research design and cultural mores meant Cook Islands participants faced barriers and could not comfortably talk about improvements they would like to see in tertiary assessment practice. On exploration, an adjustment to the research design was made that was culturally accepted and enabled participants to speak their minds openly. The findings are discussed, and recommendations are proposed that may assist future researchers working within cultural worlds in ways that allow the participants to speak openly, enabling their voices to be heard.

Keywords: Pacific Research Methods; Culturally Responsive Research; Cook Islands; *Tivaevae* Methodology

Introduction

Within educational research the value of student voice as a source of data has been increasingly recognised as providing researchers with views from a very important vantage point, that of the student (Briffett Aktas et al, 2023; Cook-Sather, 2018; Gonzalez et al, 2016). The assumption is made that the contribution of student voice to research will open new avenues for knowledge generation and agency by contributing something not otherwise accessible to the researcher (Cook-Sather, 2020; Gonzales et al, 2016). Added to this, student voice can be conceived as involving “communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change” (Seale, 2010: 995) and hence this type of research can motivate participation from students who want to make a difference to the educational experiences for themselves and following students. The concept of voice is implicitly linked to identity e.g. tertiary students’ voice, Cook Islanders’ voice, researchers’ voice, professors’ voice, and the voice from this identity provides a particular lens for the data gathered. Linked to this it can provide an avenue for those in marginal groups to provide their perspectives (Cook-Sather, 2020; Mayeda, 2014).

This article arises from my (the author's) experiences while involved in a project investigating tertiary Cook Islands students' views on assessment. The project's premise was that, in order to better serve students from Pacific backgrounds in tertiary settings, it is important that their experiences are researched by directly hearing from the students themselves, especially given that no published research could be sourced that incorporated tertiary Pacific student perspectives on this topic. The project's aim was to report on the assessment experiences of Cook Islands students in ways that might inform tertiary education providers, with the aspirational outcome being that this research may lead to more culturally relevant and responsive assessment practices within tertiary education.

In this article, I intend to reflect on the cultural challenges facing an outsider researcher who set out to gather student voice when cultural protocols made it difficult for the students to talk openly. Some prompts during the data gathering phase did not elicit expected responses, especially when there were cultural protocols that limited participants' abilities to comment and critique the work of others. The value of a culturally responsive approach is discussed, and the outcomes of the research illustrate that particular care needs to be taken in the structuring of focus group prompts.

Challenges in cross cultural research in the Pacific

Educational research in Pacific countries such as the Cook Islands has historically been carried out predominately using Western research methodologies. However, the calls for more culturally responsive methodologies in research involving Pacific peoples have been getting louder and clearer over time (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014; Houghton, 2023; Naepi, 2016; Ponton, 2018; Sanga and Niroa, 2004). Examples of Pacific methodologies include *talanoa* (Vaiolati, 2006), *teu te va* (Anae, 2005, 2010), *tok stori* (Davidson, 2012; Sanga and Reynolds, 2023), and *tivaevae* methodology (Maua-Hodges, 2001).

Talanoa, an existing method of communicating and connecting to others, especially in Samoa and Tonga, depends on the development of strong relationships and the openness of conversations during research (Fa'avae et al, 2016; Violeti, 2006, Houghton, 2023). The notion of talanoa has been described as a comfortable platform upon which reciprocal engagement and open relaxed dialogue can occur (Te Ava and Page, 2018; Violeti, 2006) and it is recognised as a concept in many Pacific Island nations (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012; Prescott, 2008). Teu te va recognises the special connections people have within communities and the principles that need to be adhered to in order to maintain social cohesion and communication (Anae, 2005; Ponton, 2018). Tok stori is a holistic approach, and the Melanesian process of discussion within context (Sanga and Reynolds, 2023). Tivaevae methodology uses the metaphor of traditional quilt (tivaevae) making to describe the process of interacting with others, and specific values such as reciprocal engagement and sharing experiences that are important to Cook Islanders (Futter-Puati and Mua-Hodges, 2019). As a tivaevae is constructed, pieces of fabric are cut and appliqued onto a backing sheet. The quilt, when finished, has fabric shapes representing traditional leaves and flowers such as kuru (breadfruit) leaves, tipani flowers. Futter-Puati and Hodges (2019) described the multiple layers of the tivaevae as illustrating how alternative commentaries can be concealed below the top surface of the quilt. The fabric not covered with the shapes acts as a background. The choice of this background fabric can affect how the appliqued designs stand out so even though it is plain it can greatly impact the overall effect of the tivaevae.

Although these methodologies all arise from different cultural settings, there are some commonalities related to Pacific worldview that are evident. All are holistic and recognise the links between people, nature, and God/gods, and place cultural values such as the importance of relationship, family, and land centrally (Ponton, 2018). They also acknowledge the "communal

construction, spirituality and interweaving of past knowledge... not often recognised within mainstream research models” (Enari, 2021: 63). These examples of Pacific methodologies have been developed by Pacific peoples and their use is encouraged by Pacific researchers. They each highlight the importance of Pacific worldviews being upheld during all stages of the research process.

Challenges are encountered by non-Pacific persons wishing to research in a Pacific context, and they must carefully navigate all aspects of the research journey from access to participants and research design through finally to dissemination of findings. An important consideration when conducting research in the Pacific is the need to use strategies that are Pacific in nature i.e., the process of research must be relevant to Pacific people, and acceptable within the Pacific context (Sanga and Niroa, 2004). There are increasing numbers of researchers of European or mixed origin working to incorporate elements of culturally appropriateness into their work. Amundsen (2019a, 2019b), for example, has described approaches that she adopted to engage appropriately in indigenous research / te ao Māori in New Zealand, including the process of decolonisation through reconciliation. In the Cook Islands context, Te Ava and Page (2018), and Futter-Puati and Maua-Hodges (2019) describe the use of Tivaevae methodology as a model for teaching and research. A number of researchers have demonstrated the use of a mix of methodologies that best fit the criteria of being relevant and acceptable in their context and enabling the research questions to be answered (e.g. Enari, 2021; Futter-Puati, 2017; Houghton, 2023). Cultural responsiveness by a researcher can only happen when they understand the underlying cultural beliefs of potential participants. In the Cook Islands this understanding naturally leads to research design that is inclusive of a Cook Islands lens and accounts for cultural perspectives and findings that report participant perspectives accurately (Guntzville, 2017; Ponton, 2018).

Research study context

The study that initiated the writing of this paper was completed in the Cook Islands, a small island nation in the South Pacific (population approximately 17 000 people). As background information for readers, post-secondary and adult students from the Cook Islands who want tertiary education can either study in their home country through the limited provision available, or travel to larger nations such as New Zealand or Australia. Cook Islands tertiary students are often minority students living and studying in tertiary institutions in foreign places (e.g. Cook Islanders who have moved to New Zealand or Australia to gain a degree). Cook Islands has a political link to New Zealand, enabling Cook Islanders to have New Zealand citizenship. Many tertiary programmes available in Cook Islands are available in conjunction with New Zealand education providers, and a number of students are offered scholarships to attend New Zealand universities each year. There has been some research that focuses on the success of Pacific students in New Zealand tertiary programmes (e.g. Mayeda et al, 2014), but none focussing on the assessment experiences of students. Although there is now a call for culturally responsive assessment (Baidoo et al, 2023) no recent research has been found that could inform such practice for Cook Islanders or more generally for Pacific students.

This project originates from my own work and research in assessment at a New Zealand university. I am a New Zealand researcher and have knowledge of culture and life in the Cook Islands, as I previously lived and worked in this country within the field of education.

The study

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology and was designed to gather voices of resident Cook Islanders who had or were still studying at tertiary level. As a first stage in this project, ethical approval was required both from the New Zealand university I work at and the

The study adopted a qualitative interpretive methodology and was designed to gather voices of resident Cook Islanders who had or were still studying at tertiary level. As a first stage in this project, ethical approval was required both from the New Zealand university I work at and the Cook Islands Research Ethics Committee (CIREC). This process with the CIREC was a long one, with several revisions to documentation needed in order to satisfy their criteria and specific requirements. After approval was gained, I was able to apply for a Research Permit from the Cook Islands Government. The research design employed face to face group discussion, as this was seen as the most culturally appropriate method to collect data. Face to face meetings included an opening prayer, an initial phase in which participants and I would talk to establish relationships, making sure that participants understood the purpose of the research and the process they would be involved in. After this initial phase the group discussion would begin, and this was audio recorded. Following the patterns of Enari (2021) and Houghton (2023), group sessions were planned to be open and run in the fashion of talanoa where participants were able to lead the direction of the discussion. It was anticipated that the following open-ended prompts could be used to stimulate open discussion if required:

1. Tell us about your experiences of assessment.
2. What has helped/hindered your assessment at university?
3. How well do assessments give you the opportunity to provide evidence of what you know and can do?
4. In an ideal world how would you like to be assessed?
5. If you were asked to improve university/tertiary assessment practice, what would you suggest?

Participants' responses

The participants were relaxed and able to speak openly about their own experiences of assessment. They explained in detail what had helped or hindered their own assessment at tertiary level. The discussion ranged from the variety of assessment tasks they engaged in to how they were graded and included mention of their emotional responses to being assessed. However, an interesting methodological dilemma was encountered in the first group meetings of the study. When participants were asked to comment on *how university/tertiary assessment practice could be improved* (Prompt 5) many of them were noticeably uncomfortable. They avoided discussing this prompt or moved to make general comments on topics already covered earlier in the discussions. This surprised me, as I thought the prompt flowed on well from the earlier discussion. When probed about this, I found that participants perceived this prompt as one that encouraged or forced them to criticise their lecturers, professors or tertiary teachers, i.e., by suggesting improvements, they felt they were in effect saying that their lecturers and professors were not doing a good enough job. Because their cultural upbringing strongly instilled the importance of respect for elders and others in places of authority, this meant they did not want to comment on this prompt. Consequently, the inclusion of this prompt posed a cultural challenge.

As discussed by Guntzviller (2017), it is very important for scholars to consider the participants' cultural influences and how these can affect how participants view, interact with, and respond to the research methods. In this case, an aspect of the participants' culture was overlooked in the design phase of the project. In order to give the participants in this study the opportunity to talk about the future design and improvement of assessment practices, the research had to be redesigned in such a way that it was culturally sensitive, acknowledging the participants' perspectives.

A culturally responsive move to facilitate open participation

In order to provide a way forward so that participants were able to talk how university/tertiary assessment practice could be improved, the final prompt needed to be changed. That is, instead of asking participants what they would suggest if they were asked to improve university/tertiary assessment practice, a prompt that removed the notion of critiquing their lecturers, professors and tertiary institutions was required.

As a replacement for the prompt, participants were asked to imagine that they were the boss of the university/tertiary institution they attended. They were then asked ‘as the boss’ what they would do to improve the assessment practice within their institution. By asking the participants to step into a role and think as another person, they gained the freedom to suggest improvements without feeling they were personally criticising their own lecturers. Operating in a fictional context as an ‘other’ with different authority and competency has been found, in educational settings, to empower learners and give them agency (Aitken, 2021; Swanson, 2017). It was considered that this might happen for participants in this study, and indeed this was found to be the case.

A change in response was noticeable immediately. On being asked to step into the role as ‘boss’ the participants were able to talk freely about the improvements they would make to tertiary assessment practice. They took on the mantle of the ‘boss’ of their institution and suggested improvements that they thought would genuinely make a positive difference to Cook Islands students’ learning and assessment experiences. They used language which indicated that they were in role as the boss, as seen in the following examples:

I will tell the teachers or the lecturers that they must understand their students. Understand their strengths, understand their weaknesses, and then think out of the box in order to bring them to the level that you want them to be at.

[Participant A]

I will encourage the lecturers to basically just to help the students so when they leave here, the reflection of [the institution] has a high standard. [Participant D]

We have to encourage them as students, we have to encourage them in the school. And I think also look into where they struggle with their study as well.

[Participant F]

[I would tell the teaching staff] just to get to know your students. [Participant G]

The change in the participants’ willingness to respond to the prompt from this new perspective was quite compelling to witness. It allowed for data to be collected that reflected the participants’ views on how tertiary institutions could improve assessment practice, and what tertiary teaching staff should focus on to make it more culturally responsive to their needs. Some participants fully entered the role and went beyond the topic under discussion to talk about other aspects of what they would do as a boss e.g. how they should pay their staff, and what training they should give them. This became quite light hearted at times, which was a natural response given that humour is such an important element in Cook Islands culture. It was evident that using the role play was culturally responsive move that facilitated participation, giving these Cook Islands participants the opportunity to speak freely.

Links to Pacific methodology

Links can be made between a simple shift made within the research design of this project and the Cook Islands methodological lens of the Tivaevae methodology. The move provided a

space from which the participants felt free to speak within their cultural context, so can be considered a culturally appropriate research move. This space was facilitated by moving away from asking a direct question about how to improve the assessment practice of esteemed elders/lecturers, to using an imaginary scenario in which participants could speak as someone else, thereby allowing them to give voice to thoughts without causing them to feel they were directly criticising their tertiary teachers. Research traditions bring with them values and approaches to knowledge time/space, and Pacific methodologies are seen as being more culturally appropriate in Pacific settings (Te Ava and Page, 2020). The move provided another space where participants felt free to speak and have their voices heard, and could be linked to the metaphor of the Tivaevae. As explained above, the tivaevae can be made by sewing colourful fabric shapes onto a background fabric, and the areas of background not covered act as a contrast to the applied pieces. The space that was provided to allow participants to speak openly can be likened to this background fabric. The move allowed participants to partake in talanoa within the background space between the fabric shapes applied onto the quilt. The background space allows participants to talk in other ways maybe not originally conceived, but nonetheless valuable and most importantly culturally congruent with their beliefs.

Conclusion

This paper shows that a respectful culturally responsive approach is possible by an outsider (non-Cook Islander), and that these actions can link to Pacific methodologies. The change in design of a small section of the project, in response to a cultural challenge, opened doors enabling participants to be able to fully participate without feeling a sense of culture clash or awkwardness. The acknowledgement of cultural norms that influence protocols is always important (Ponton, 2018) and the adjustment in the planning stage to prompts that led to spaces where people felt they could speak openly. This in turn meant that it fit with a Pacific worldview and that allowed Cook Islands voice be gathered. We trust that this will in due course benefit Cook Islanders in their tertiary education endeavours as tertiary providers pay attention to their voices.

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Author's biography

Dr. Frances Edwards is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Waikato, where she teaches in Initial Teacher Education and Postgraduate Education programmes. Her research interests stem from a varied career in education as a teacher, school leader, professional development facilitator and educational consultant both in New Zealand and the Pacific region. She has a particular interest in assessment at all levels of education, and in teacher development. Her current research focuses on the development of culturally responsive assessment in the tertiary sector.
