Culture, Literacy and Livelihoods: Reconceptualising the Reform of Education in Oceania

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Purpose: This paper seeks to reconceptualise the strategic planning and implementation of education in Oceania and to develop principles to guide curriculum reform. It pays particular attention to programs in the field of Literacy and Livelihoods (L&L) in the TVET sector, and to the delivery of such programs using ICT and/or DFL.

Definitions: In this paper we use the term Literacy & Livelihoods (L&L) to refer to educational programs that prepare youth for life and work in Oceania, with an emphasis on the development of literacy. Work is defined not only in terms of paid employment but of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and/or self-employment. It is assumed that L&L programs are offered by TVET providers in both the formal and non-formal sectors.

Introduction

In referring to our region we use the name Oceania quite deliberately. Those who occupy continents on the rim have tended to view the Pacific Ocean as a vast expanse of water dotted with tiny, isolated islands, their inhabitants disadvantaged by smallness and remoteness. Pacific Islanders are now rejecting this colonial assumption, arguing that they do not occupy "islands in a far sea", but "a sea of islands" (Hau'ofa, 1993:7). Their ancestors clearly did not view the sea as a barrier, but as their livelihood. They were seafarers who were equally at home on sea as on land. They lived and played and worked upon it. They developed great skills for navigating its waters, traversing it in their sailing canoes, and forming "… a large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly" (Hau'ofa, 1993:9). In this way the sea bound them together rather than separating them.

The name Oceania captures this holistic sense of people sharing a common environment and living together for their mutual benefit. Many of the inhabitants of Oceania are reactivating this ethos, seeking ways to help and support each other, rather than constantly turning to the nations on their rim for aid and advice. It is a slow and uneven process, however, much hindered by regional politics, by the insistent pressures of globalisation, and by the continuing impact of colonialism. The latter has divided Oceania linguistically, creating a significant gulf between groups of Anglophone and Francophone islands, and politically, with France and the USA still ruling their colonial empires in Oceania in ways that isolate their people from many regional fora and networks.

This paper focuses only on those countries in Oceania that are politically independent and therefore able to participate in the dominant political and economic policy organisation, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS): Cook Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Fiji; Kiribati; Nauru; Niue; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Republic of the Marshall Islands; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu and Vanuatu. To this list should be added Tokelau, which is in the process of achieving self-government in free association with New Zealand, a similar status to that enjoyed by Cook Islands and Niue. Australia and New Zealand also are full members.

At its meeting in 1999 the Forum directed its secretariat to bring together the Ministers for Education of the region. They have since met three times, deliberating initially on what they referred to as "basic education", which they defined as all educational provisions for children and youth, both formal and non-formal, except for higher education. The definition thus includes TVET, and thereby the delivery of Literacy and Livelihoods programs. The major outcome of their first meeting was the development of the *Forum Basic Education Action Plan (FBEAP)*, a short (9pp) but significant document setting out visions, goals and strategies for the future of basic education in Oceania. Its vision is clearly specified:

> Basic education as the fundamental building block for society should engender the broader life skills that lead to social cohesion and provide the foundations for vocational callings, higher education and lifelong learning. These when combined with enhanced employment opportunities create a higher level of personal and societal security and development.

> Forum members recognised that development of basic education takes place in the context of commitments to the world community and meeting the new demands of the global economy, which should be balanced with the enhancement of their own distinctive Pacific values, morals, social, political, economic and cultural heritages, and reflect the Pacific's unique geographical context (PIFS, 2001:1-2).

Subsequently the Ministers developed a proposal that was accepted by the EU for funding of €8 million over a five year period for a new project to be called 'Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education', abbreviated to: 'The PRIDE Project'. The University of the South Pacific (USP) agreed to manage the Project on behalf of PIFS, and the New Zealand Government, through NZAID, agreed to join as a funding partner with an initial grant of NZ$5 million over three years.

The PRIDE Project

Essentially the Project is designed to implement the Pacific vision for education encapsulated in *FBEAP* in the fourteen Pacific member states of PIFS, together with Tokelau. Its overall objective is:

> To expand opportunities for children and youth to acquire the values, knowledge and skills that will enable them to actively participate in the social, spiritual, economic and cultural development of their communities and to contribute positively to creating sustainable futures (www.usp.ac.fj/pride, 2004).

To achieve this objective the Project seeks to strengthen the capacity of each of the fifteen countries to deliver quality education through formal and non-formal means. The key outcome will be the development of strategic plans for education in each country. Ideally these plans will be developed following wide consultation with all stakeholders and beneficiaries, including parents, teachers, students, NGOs, private providers, employers and other civil society groups. The Project also will assist countries to implement their plans and to monitor and evaluate the outcomes. Capacity building activities will be provided for educators at national, sub-regional and regional levels. To

further support these activities the Project will develop an on-line resource centre to encourage the sharing of best practice and experience amongst countries.

In discussing the PRIDE Project with educators throughout the Pacific and beyond, a frequently asked question is: "How is it different? We have seen many donor-driven education projects and initiatives come and go: why is this one unique?" Their cynicism is justified. The history of educational aid in the Pacific, as elsewhere, is an ambiguous one with at least as many negatives as positives (see, for example, Luteru & Teasdale, 1993). The present project, however, does have a number of unique features, and there is considerable optimism that it can achieve its goals in ways that others have not. These features include:

(i) The fact that the Project was designed and approved by the Ministers of Education: the process started with them, not with the donors. It was very clear at their third PIFS-sponsored meeting in Apia in January 2004 that Ministers saw this as their project, and were determined to guide and direct it according to their priorities. Subsequent meetings with individual Ministers have reinforced this view. The donors, in turn, have shown quite remarkable preparedness to allow this to happen.

(ii) The significance of the acronym: its choice clearly was deliberate. Each country is being encouraged to build its education plans on a stronger foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies, thus enabling students to develop deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms, and a clear sense of their own local cultural identity.

(iii) The strong emphasis on mutual collaboration and support: the aim of the Project is to help countries to help each other. Earlier projects brought consultants from outside the region, and therefore became donor-driven as they responded to donors' priorities and preferences. The PRIDE Project will source most of its consultants from within the region, and already has built up an impressive data-base of qualified people from Oceania. Furthermore, it will fund local educators to go on study and training visits to each other's countries, not to those on the rim and beyond.

(iv) The encouragement of consultative and participatory approaches to educational planning within each country: there is a clear wish to avoid top-down models of planning and policy-making, and a strong commitment to bottom-up processes involving parents, teachers, students, private providers, NGOs, employers and other civil society groups.

(v) The fact that Ministers want the Project to promote a more holistic and lifelong approach to education, with effective articulation between sectors, and between school, TVET and the world of work.

(vi) The commitment of the PRIDE team to building a strong conceptual foundation for the Project. Earlier projects brought outsiders to Oceania with western 'recipes' for the reform of education. The PRIDE team is committed to helping countries

develop their own theoretical foundations, doing so via the creative syncretism of their own epistemologies, values and wisdoms with the most useful educational ideas and approaches of the global world beyond their shores.

Conceptualising the reform of education in Oceania

In seeking to develop a conceptual foundation for the PRIDE Project, the PRIDE team turned to the Report to UNESCO of its International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors, 1996). From our own experiences in countries as diverse as Thailand, Japan and Indonesia, as well as the fifteen Pacific countries that are the focus of our work in the PRIDE Project, it remains the most useful blueprint for reform, regardless of the economic, demographic and social indicators of each nation. In the eight years since it was published the Delors Report has stood the tests of time, critical analysis and practical application. It has been widely debated in both educational and political circles, and its ideas used as a springboard for education reform in a wide variety of settings. It continues to offer the most coherent, inspiring and relevant conceptual foundation for education of any international document published in recent years.

From teaching to learning

Ever since the invention of mass compulsory schooling in the early years of the industrial revolution in Europe, the focus of education has been on the delivery of knowledge to children and youth by adults with the necessary training and/or community recognition. The architecture and routines of the school, and the content and processes of the curriculum, were primarily designed to prepare the young to be compliant and productive workers in the burgeoning factories of Europe.

This new form of mass schooling was almost entirely teacher-centred: the podium and blackboard at the front of each classroom facilitated control of students and the delivery of knowledge. A system of examinations and reporting regulated progression through the school, providing incentives to acquire knowledge and the formal credentials for having done so. These credentials also were linked to subsequent employment. The higher the credentials the more prestigious and better paid the job at the end. It was this system of education that was exported to Oceania, as elsewhere in the world, during the colonial era, often by well-intentioned Christian missionaries, and that has proven so deeply resistant to change in many countries.

While the above is an oversimplified account of a much more complex reality, it does highlight the view that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, educationally speaking, can be described as the 'centuries of the teacher'. The teacher was central to educational discourse and process. This has been especially the case in Oceania, and still is in many if not most settings.

The current change in focus from teacher to learner, as exemplified in the Delors Report, is highly significant. Even though many might argue that teaching and learning are simply opposite sides of the same coin, and essentially one and the same, the reality is

that education is undergoing a profound transformation. The shift in power from teacher to learner is just one element of this. Another significant shift is from education as the acquisition of knowledge, to education as learning how to learn. And a third is from a view of education as preparation for the world of work to education as a holistic process of lifelong learning. From these perspectives the twenty-first century might well be described as the 'century of the learner'. The implications for L&L programs are significant:

(i) The ICT revolution has ensured that teachers and lecturers are no longer dispensers of knowledge. Their students now have access to an exponentially expanding array of information that they can access quite independently. Teachers have responsibility to help students make effective and appropriate use of this knowledge, which requires a capacity to critically appraise all of the material available to them, and to make value judgments of it, often from moral and ethical perspectives. L&L programs therefore should focus on developing the critical capacities of students, enabling them to know themselves, to think for themselves, and thus become active and confident learners.

(ii) Knowledge is power. As teachers lose their authority as holders and dispensers of knowledge, their relationships with students are transformed. They need to become facilitators of learning, providing students with the skills and motivation to become lifelong learners. The delivery of L&L programs therefore requires a much stronger focus on curriculum process. *How* to teach becomes equally important as *what* to teach. And for these new relationships to be effective teachers need a new kind of moral and even spiritual authority. They must become respected as exemplars of right living within their colleges and communities. This requires a profound shift in the mindset of teachers and lecturers, and even more importantly of their trainers, as they reconceptualise their roles and functions.

(iii) Most TVET curricula in Oceania have been driven by the demands of the work-place and the need for specific, job-related credentials. Many TVET teaching staff have been recruited from the workplace, with limited if any teacher training, and have an instrumental view of their responsibilities; i.e., they view their role as the development of specific technical capacities in their students. Once again a profound shift in the mindset of teachers and lecturers is necessary if they are to contribute effectively to a holistic process of lifelong learning. Every TVET teacher needs to be confident in helping students learn how to learn. And every TVET teacher needs to promote L&L as an integral part of each student's preparation for life and work.

(iv) In adopting a more holistic approach to learning the old boundaries between the various sectors of education (pre-school, elementary, secondary, TVET) need to be reviewed, and the question of effective articulation between them addressed. There is a particular need to explore how secondary and TVET curricula might be planned together in a more holistic and interconnected way. In Oceania, TVET programs, including L&L, need to be brought down into the secondary school, and even to upper primary settings. In some countries the seventh and eighth years of schooling

are the last for many students, and it is vital that relevant and meaningful TVET and L&L be available to them, and that such programs articulate with subsequent learning opportunities, especially in the non-formal sector.

Tensions and change

Jacques Delors, in his preface to *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1996), identifies and discusses seven tensions that he believes characterise most education policy, planning and learning environments in a rapidly changing world. He revisits these and adds further insights in a later paper (Delors, 2002). Among the tensions he identifies are several that have deep resonance with communities in Oceania, including the tensions between tradition and modernity, cooperation and competition, the spiritual and the temporal, the universal and the individual, and the local and the global.

In neither of the above documents does Delors elaborate on the idea of tension itself. One assumes he is not using the concept of tension in the sense of conflict between opposing factions or ideologies, the kind of tension that can lead to rivalry and war, but is referring instead to a functional or positive tension. We like to explain this kind of tension using the analogy of guitar strings that need to be kept in a constant state of tightness if they are to produce pleasing music. One of the tasks of the guitarist is to maintain a functional tension by regularly adjusting and readjusting the strings to ensure harmony. Likewise educators have the constant challenge of achieving a functional or creative balance between the tensions confronting them as they plan and deliver education.

The concepts of tension and balance are highly relevant to curriculum development and reform. As we travel within Oceania almost every educator we speak with believes that the balance is wrong in school and TVET curricula: that the global, the competitive and the temporal have a disproportionate influence in most learning environments. Once again, we find analogy a useful explanatory device. In the realm of visual arts, music, drama and dance there are currently some remarkably creative initiatives in the region. Individuals and groups within local communities are creating new forms of expression from the fusion of the traditional and the modern.

The group that comes most readily to mind is *Yothu Yindi*, an internationally renowned Indigenous Australian band based in Yirrkala, in north-east Arnhem Land. Its leader, Mandawuy Yunupingu, established the group during his tenure as principal of the local school. Its music is vibrant and contemporary, yet is deeply grounded in traditional Aboriginal culture. As one listens to the rhythms and lyrics one senses a dynamic syncretism between the local and the global. In watching the audience during a *Yothu Yindi* concert in northern Australia, the music was enjoyed equally by older Indigenous people and young non-Indigenous people. The former found a deep resonance with traditional Aboriginal music, the latter appreciated the modern western rock rhythms.

In the realm of TVET education, whether in curriculum reform, values education or in the classroom itself, we should strive for the same dynamic syncretism between tradition and modernity, the spiritual and the temporal, and the local and the global. Young people

need to grow up with the skills and confidence to live successfully in a globalising world. They need to survive economically in a global marketplace, and take their place in the modern, global workforce. Yet it is becoming increasingly recognised in Oceania that they also need to grow up with a clear sense of their own local cultural identity, built on a strong foundation of their own cultures, languages and spiritualities, and with a deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms. This can best be achieved if the content and the processes of the TVET curricula reflect this same creative fusion of the local and global.

As mentioned earlier, one of the core principles of our own Project is the need to build the planning and implementation of education on a strong foundation of local cultures, languages and epistemologies, thus enabling students to develop deep pride in their own values, traditions and wisdoms. Many educators in Oceania share this view, suggesting that the primary goal of education "…is to ensure that all Pacific students are successful and that they all become fully participating members of their groups, societies and the global community" (Pene, Taufe'ulungaki & Benson, 2002: 3). L&L programs likewise need to be firmly grounded in the local while at the same time achieving an effective syncretism with the global world beyond. How might this be done? Let us suggest a few principles:

(i) In many settings it may be appropriate to adopt a bilingual approach, with English and the local language(s) used equally but separately in the learning environment. This implies that English literacy and vernacular literacy are equally promoted. A significant challenge here is the development of vernacular literacy materials of a suitable standard and interest level for youth and young adults.

(ii) A culture of literacy has not yet developed in most settings in Oceania. People do not read for pleasure and relaxation. Nor is written material a primary source of information gathering: most local knowledge is not stored and transmitted in writing, but continues to rely on oral traditions, with story telling playing a significant role. L&L programs need to recognise, value and build on these oral traditions, yet blend them with modern ways of communicating. For example, L&L students could undertake research in their villages on oral traditions and local ways of knowing and document their findings in written form. They could then learn to share their research findings and stories and carry on conversations with each other using ICT, with chat rooms and one-to-one emails supplementing face-to-face communications, especially when distance hinders the latter.

(iii) Networks of human relationships are profoundly significant in Oceania, especially within the extended family and local language groups. Mutuality, not competition, is all important. This needs to be recognised in L&L learning environments, most particularly in the context of DFL programs where students are often working in isolation. The challenge here is for teachers to promote strong linkages between students using ICT, developing learning networks where students can support and learn from each other. Group activity and group assignments often can replace individual learning programs.

'Learning to be' and 'Learning to live together'

One of the most widely recognised and discussed features of the Delors Report is its notion of four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. While it has been criticised by some in Oceania, Konai Helu Thaman, for example, arguing that it leads to the very conceptual fragmentation that the Report itself so strongly criticises, the idea that all learning is built on these four foundations seems readily accepted in most cultures. For example, the design and construction of many traditional homes and meeting places in Oceania are based on four large timber uprights, usually tree- or palm-trunks, one in each corner, these supporting the remaining structure. The idea that each upright needs to be of similar size or scale in order to ensure structural strength and stability is readily transferred to education, and to the view that all pillars should receive equal emphasis in an individual's learning. In reality, however, the representation of each pillar in most education systems in Oceania, as elsewhere, is far from balanced, with 'learning to know' and 'learning to do' occupying disproportionately large parts of the curriculum, especially at secondary school and TVET levels. As Jacques Delors (2002) himself acknowledges, these two pillars have long been self-evident, and are the dominant focus of most education systems.

The 'learning to be' pillar has posed particular challenges for educators. It is the least understood, and the least represented in most curricula. Even though the idea achieved considerable recognition following publication of the 1972 UNESCO report of the same name (*Learning to be*, or the Faure Report), it had not become prominent in education discourse prior to release of the Delors Report. Basically, it has to do with the formation of identity, both individual and collective, and with the achievement of self-knowledge, self-under-standing and self-fulfilment, and ultimately with the development of wisdom. Jacques Delors (2002, p 151) stated that the full recognition and implementation of 'learning to be' will require "… nothing less than a revolution in education that will be expensive in terms of time". Nevertheless, he makes clear that we cannot afford to overlook this aspect of learning, for through it people are empowered to learn about themselves, and to become more fully human.

Likewise the 'learning to live together' pillar challenges those engaged in secondary school and TVET curriculum reform. The tendency is to relegate it to the Social Sciences, and to the teaching of international relations. Yet one of our primary goals surely is to learn to live together within a nation state. Again, Jacques Delors (2002, p 151) expresses this aptly:

> This newer pillar has a special resonance in the twenty-first century as countries grapple with the difficulties of co-existence among different religious communities, different ethnic groups and others. Education bears a tremendous responsibility to bring to blossom all the seeds within every individual, and to make communication between people easier. Communication does not simply mean repeating what we have

learned: it means also articulating what is in us and has been combined into a rounded whole through education, and understanding others.

In a deeper way these two pillars also have to do with the nurture and development of spirituality, not just in a religious sense, but also through the broader quest for meaning in life and for explanations of reality, both individual and communal. It is interesting that secular education discourse – that of UNESCO and other international agencies, for example – is starting to emphasise the spiritual, and to advocate a role for education in the spiritual development of children and youth (see, for example, Zhou & Teasdale, 2004). But how do we introduce the development of the spiritual into the secondary school and TVET curricula, especially in the context of L&L programs? Certainly not by creating an extra 'box' somewhere, and slotting it in alongside other content areas.

It is our own view, that the teaching of spirituality, and more broadly the teaching of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together', cannot be superimposed on existing curricula and taught purely as content. We therefore suggest the following principles:

(i) The teaching of these elements is the responsibility of each and every teacher and lecturer. They should be woven into the very fabric of the curriculum in all subject areas in a fully integrated way.

(ii) They cannot be taught just from a content perspective. Curriculum process is equally important (see, for example, Teasdale & Teasdale, 2004).

(iii) Teachers themselves should be exemplars of good living in these areas. Their own behaviour and relationships should inspire and guide students.

(iv) School and college administrators also have significant responsibilities here, in particular for ensuring that the organisation of the institution, and all relationships within it, are exemplary of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together'.

(v) Teacher training institutions will need to rethink their curricula, pedagogies, structures and organisational culture to bring about the expected transformation at the learner level. The aim here is to ensure that the pre- and in-service training of TVET teachers effectively incorporate these elements.

From a traditional perspective, these two pillars, until the colonial era, were a fundamental part of a holistic process of lifelong learning throughout Oceania. If we could return by time capsule to the villages of our ancestors, say three hundred years ago, most of us would find that 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' indeed accounted for at least fifty percent of the learning experiences of the children and youth as they prepared to take their place in the adult life of the community.

Hopefully global thinking about education may be coming full circle, returning to the subjective and the spiritual, and to a more holistic and lifelong approach. Certainly if we are to capture the essence of the Delors Report in the development of curricula, and

especially L&L programs, ensuring that 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' occupy at least half of the energies of teachers and students, then we need to radically transform the way we conceptualise curriculum content and process, and the roles and responsibilities of teachers.

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to reconceptualise the strategic planning and implementation of education in Oceania and to develop principles to guide curriculum reform, paying particular attention to L&L programs in the TVET sector, and to the delivery of such programs using ICT and/or DFL. The latter is a particular challenge in Oceania, as many ICT and DFL approaches tend to isolate students from each other in cultural contexts where mutuality and shared learning are valued. Another challenge in this context is that the ICT revolution has only been of benefit those in Oceania who are privileged enough to have access to electric power, a computer and an internet connection. Even now, only a small proportion of TVET students has this access, especially in rural areas. Many DFL programs therefore need to continue using print media as the primary means of instruction.

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