

AUA'I I LE GALUEGA: A PASIFIKA RESEARCH DESIGN ENSURING OWNERSHIP AND AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Given the current performance of Pasifika students in tertiary education, existing research methods to investigate and improve Pasifika student achievement need to be reviewed in order to enable researchers and students to engage in research that is likely to produce more successful outcomes. "Aua'i i le galuega" (direct involvement) is a research design developed by a group of Pasifika university students, and is based on an approach taken by the students to determine ways to improve their academic performance and learning outcomes. The students use the concept of the "vaka" (canoe) to represent the experiences, influences and contributing factors in their educational journey and to explain the philosophy behind the development of the design. The methodology of the aua'i i le galuega involves conversations between the students and their lecturers, facilitated by the students. The aim of the research design is to have research participants directly involved in all aspects of the research process in order to permit greater authenticity and accuracy. The aim of this paper is to propose a research design which enables the direct involvement of "minority" groups in designing, directing and carrying out their own research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the concerns of Pasifika and other educators in Aotearoa/New Zealand is how to improve the educational outcomes of Pacific students. Statistics show that those who leave school with formal qualifications are more likely to be employed than those

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leaving without a formal qualification (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2003). In addition, the higher the qualification, the greater the opportunities for employment. The economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a decline in the number of jobs in the manufacturing sector, which traditionally employed a significant proportion of Pasifika peoples. During this period, the demand was for qualified individuals with a wide range of skills. Pasifika peoples, with their lack of formal qualifications, were unsuitable for these positions and unable to find employment. They were faced with adapting to these changing employment conditions by upskilling themselves or returning to the islands. Although the number of Pasifika people leaving school with formal qualifications or having a tertiary qualification during the period 1990–2001 increased from 3,300 to 12,400, and Pasifika people now make up 4.4% of all tertiary enrolments, participation rates are still lower than those of the total population (15% compared with 32% in the 18–24 years age group).

This paper has two focuses. First, it details a successful approach used by a group of Auckland University of Technology (AUT) final-year Pasifika students in the School of Social Sciences to enhance their teaching and learning to achieve better educational outcomes. Second, it describes the framing and developing of this approach into a research design – the *aua'i i le galuega* – that would allow less dominant groups in society to maintain autonomy over research in which they are involved. The political circumstances of the state and the university, and the literature on current research practices and guidelines relevant to Pasifika people, are outlined in order to contextualise the development of the students' initiative into a research design. Numerous studies have been done on reasons for, and ways to improve, the academic performance of Pasifika students. Given the continued dismal performance of Pasifika tertiary students, this paper argues that methods like the *aua'i i le galuega* have the potential to be more effective at determining ways to achieve more successful outcomes for Pasifika tertiary students.

AUT AND THE ITMOSS PROGRAMME

In 2000 the Government announced policies aimed at addressing the gap between Māori and Pasifika peoples and the total population. The Special Supplementary Grants (SSG) were introduced in tertiary education to improve the retention and achievement rates of Māori and Pasifika peoples. Tertiary institutions received SSG funding calculated on the basis of the number of Māori and Pasifika equivalent full-time students (EFTS) and on the basis of the presentation of an effective strategy to close this gap (Ministry of Education 2003). In 2003 AUT received \$257,000 of this funding to implement a programme, ITMOSS (Integrated Team Model of Student Success), designed to fulfil these aims, with the university contributing a further \$297,000. The ITMOSS programme focused on monitoring and tracking Pasifika and Māori students

in a number of areas, including attendance, assignment submission, achievement, staircasing, progression, withdrawal and retention. The programme was optional, and not all schools in all faculties chose to be involved, citing a number of reasons, including budgetary constraints and lack of staff commitment.

Māori and Pasifika students are not enrolled into the ITMOSS programme. If they have chosen to self-identify on their application for enrolment form, this information is recorded, and it is from these records that the various schools are able to identify the Māori and Pasifika students and to monitor their academic performance. The students are made aware, through advertising or class visits, of the role of the Domain Leader: 0.2 of this position was for working with programme leaders in the School of Social Sciences to assist with academic issues such as course content and factors affecting Māori and Pasifika students' academic performance, and to support school initiatives aimed at improving these students' academic performance. The students can discuss any academic issues that arise from their studies with this staff member, though they are always advised, where possible, to consult first with the lecturer or person concerned.

PASIFIKA STUDENTS AND THE INITIATIVE TO ADDRESS THEIR ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

The School of Social Sciences was in its second year of the ITMOSS programme when a group of Pasifika students in the first semester of the University year discussed among themselves the difficulties they were encountering in their papers. The students self-identified as Tongan, Samoan, Fijian or Niuean. Five of the students were in their final year of a three-year undergraduate degree and two were in their second year. The two female and five male students, between the ages of 20 and 24 years, were all born in New Zealand and knew each other on a social level both at university and in their communities.

Earlier in the previous semester, the students had raised their concerns with the lecturers and the Domain Leader, and a number of approaches had been taken, such as extra tutorials and meetings with the relevant lecturers, to determine ways to address the students' concerns. The students believed, however, that these efforts were isolated and temporary and that Pasifika students in the future would encounter similar problems. They discussed the factors they believed had affected their academic performance and progress throughout the two or three years they had been enrolled at the university and decided to use the opportunities provided by the ITMOSS programme to address these factors. These included feeling uncomfortable and isolated in the classroom, the theories and examples used by lecturers that were irrelevant to Pasifika communities and world views, contexts unfamiliar to Pasifika experiences, the mainly expository style of teaching, content that did not consider Pasifika society, and assignments

that were difficult to understand. The students also noted factors that had benefited their progress, such as lecturer engagement with them as students and a classroom environment in which they felt able to express their ideas.

The students spoke with Pasifika students enrolled in the pre-degree programme to find out their views on the learning and teaching that took place for them, whether their learning needs were being met and, if not, what recommendations they had as to how they could be addressed. The students took notes of these discussions and added them to their own notes. They were also in contact with other students throughout the university and informally sought their opinions and views on the same topics.

Further discussions between the Pasifika students and the Domain Leader highlighted the link between lecturer relationship and student performance. Students commented that lecturers became defensive when approached about student comprehension of subject content. They also stated that they felt marginalised in class discussions, where the majority of examples and references used were palagi,² and when Pasifika peoples or Pacific Island nations were referred to they were discussed mainly in negative terms, such as low-skilled labour, political coups, civil unrest and inadequate resources. Students also remarked that if their initial approach to a lecturer was met with indifference or annoyance, it was unlikely that they would make another visit.

Following a series of visits by the Pasifika students, the Domain Leader agreed to hold a meeting with the students. Fourteen students from Years 2 and 3 attended the meeting to consider the most effective way to discuss with their lecturers the concerns they had regarding their academic performance.

Over the two years they had attended the university, the students said they had been reluctant to meet individually with their lecturers because they lacked the confidence to discuss their academic difficulties with them or ways to improve their academic performance. Now that they were in their final year and had developed a strong network of Pasifika peers who shared similar experiences and feelings about the teaching style of their lecturers, the content of their papers and the organisational arrangements of the university, they felt it was timely to hold discussions to express their concerns and ideas to those they believed directly affected their learning. They agreed that the most appropriate way this could take place was to enter into conversations with their lecturers and heads of schools. Although they were initially worried about the consequences of entering into these discussions, primarily with regard to compromising their grades or creating ill-feeling between themselves and the lecturers, they decided to go ahead with the conversations.

2 Palagi – Samoan for European person.

It might have been easier for the Domain Leader to approach the lecturers on behalf of the students, but the students thought it would be more beneficial to talk to their lecturers as a group and not on an individual basis, as more notice would be taken of their concerns and they would be able to support each other. They were also less likely to feel threatened by the lecturers attributing comments to a particular student. Finally, it would avoid lecturers feeling “picked on” or targeted, and reduce the possibility of them taking it personally or getting defensive.

Under the ITMOSS programme, each of the faculties employs an equity co-ordinator, who is employed 0.5 with responsibility for ensuring that the programme is implemented and understood in the schools in which it is operating, and for liaising with the university's Equity Office. As this meeting was seen as resulting from the ITMOSS initiative, the equity co-ordinator, following a suggestion from the Pasifika students, recommended to other equity co-ordinators to invite academic staff from their faculties. Although the students were from the School of Social Sciences, it was felt that lecturers and heads of schools might find similarities between the issues and concerns of the social sciences Pasifika students and those of Pasifika students from their own schools.

The students were friendly with a number of the Pasifika students throughout the university, and through their discussions with them had identified similar issues related to their learning. Although they acknowledged that it would have been useful to have these students present in the discussions and at the meeting, there was insufficient time to organise this and the students believed that there were enough of them to have a useful and productive meeting.

A date was set for the discussions and the lecturers were invited by email, personal contact and word of mouth. The students met to discuss how they would approach the meeting, which they had begun to refer to as a fono.³ They agreed to support each other's questions, and to provide encouragement and confirmation when necessary. They would insist on their questions being answered and not dismissed, remain firm in the face of defensiveness from their lecturers, and not simply accept the first response to their questions or accept an answer that they disagreed with, but instead respond with their own arguments. The students agreed among themselves that if acceptable solutions to their concerns could not be identified, plausible alternatives would be considered.

Although the students were aware that this was not a research study, and that ethics approval was not required in order to have these conversations, they knew that it was important for them to act ethically in any interactions with their lecturers.

3 Fono – Samoan for meeting.

The students considered a number of questions they wished to ask, focusing on the following topics: curricula, teaching styles, lecturers' attitudes, teaching materials and resources, the absence of Pasifika lecturers, the role of the lecturer in the academic care of their students, and the extent and nature of this care. The questions were typed and allocated to, or selected by, a particular student. The Domain Leader was given the task of getting questions from the Pasifika students on the pre-degree programme. The students nominated a young man regarded as a leader by his peers to lead and facilitate the discussion and introduce the students before the discussions began. The meeting was held in a large study room in the School of Social Sciences.

The students did not wish to reproduce the classroom situation in the fono. It was decided that the physical locations, as well as the roles of the lecturers and students, would be reversed so that the students sat at the front of the room in a semi-circle while the lecturers sat in a semi-circle, as much as possible, in the chairs usually occupied by the students. There was also going to be more than one student in the role of the lecturer and the students would lead the discussions.

The lecturers had been advised before the fono about the format and content of the discussions with the Pasifika students and were not expecting to be in their customary roles but to participate in conversations with the students. Prior to the fono, lecturers from the faculties had been invited to three sessions on Māori and Pasifika "pedagogies" presented by a Māori and a Samoan woman, respectively. The lecturers that would be attending this session, however, were not necessarily the same ones that had been present at these sessions.

Also invited to the fono was a Samoan lecturer from the Auckland College of Education to facilitate discussions about Pasifika pedagogy midway through the session and again at the end. It was intended that the students would give the final summary and recommendations.

THE FONONO

The fono was attended by 10 lecturers and 11 students. The lecturers were from the Faculty of Business, School of Education, and the Faculty of Science and Engineering. One of the attendees was a head of school. The students began by welcoming everyone and thanking them for attending. They informed the participants of the purpose of the session, why they felt the need to have such a session, and the format the session would take. The students were to initiate and facilitate the discussions and to direct the way in which the discussions progressed. The facilitator began by introducing himself and asking the first question. As the questions were answered, the students took turns to ask their respective questions. At times, there were additional questions asked of the students or by the students, as well as comments made.

The atmosphere was interesting. Although very interactive, it was both positive and non-threatening. The students began hesitantly, but as the lecturers themselves responded defensively, their courage and passion towards what they regarded as serious issues affecting their academic performance increased. Their confidence grew as they challenged and questioned the lecturers' responses and their teaching styles, and responded to the lecturers' questions about their own learning behaviours and study habits. They insisted on practical suggestions which they believed would create tangible outcomes, rather than accepting vague and abstract responses.

The students voiced their concerns at the monocultural and non-Pacific nature of the university's structure and organisation and questioned the absence of Pasifika tutors and lecturers. They were told that very few Pasifika lecturers applied for academic positions but that if they wanted this brought to the university's attention they should bring it up with the student representative for their papers or comment on it in their student evaluation of papers, as the university had no strategies in place for increasing the recruitment of Pasifika academic staff. The students also suggested having more visual presentations, using humour, role playing and incorporating more of the students' ideas into the teaching, because the current teaching styles were dominated by talking and reading. The lack of academic support and assistance for Pasifika students was also an issue for the students, although the Business Faculty representatives said that there was a core group within their faculty that had responsibility for this.

The students thought it would be beneficial to students' progress if concerns were followed up by the schools, and they wanted the schools to better mentor and monitor Pasifika students' academic progress to ensure they were not falling behind. The lecturers' response to this was to ask the students if they wanted to be treated like adults or to be "spoon-fed". The students acknowledged this response but said that not all students came in with the ability to ask questions or be part of classroom discussions, and lecturers needed to work with students to build their confidence to participate in the classroom. The students also said that normally confident students became shy and intimidated in the classroom and wondered what the lecturers' responsibilities were for keeping the Pasifika students "on track" with the rest of the students. The students felt that if they made the effort to attend classes with the intention of learning, then the lecturers had a responsibility to ensure that their teaching and professional practices encouraged their participation and supported their progress and advancement. One of the lecturers commented that for some of their colleagues, the thinking was that "everyone should just blend in with the rest".

The lecturers asked the students what they needed to do to get them to be more responsive in class. The students suggested that they give examples they could relate to, and which were relevant to their experiences and communities, because some of

the examples given were abstract, removed from their world views and boring. The lecturers' expectations of the Pasifika students included greater participation from them in lectures and tutorials, doing the assigned readings before attending class, and for them to sit near the front of the classroom so that they would be more likely to contribute to class discussions. Students suggested that the presentation of lectures be designed to encourage greater interaction between lecturer and students and that more practical, positive and representative examples of Pacific communities be used. They also proposed that lecturers provide summary handouts.

The students expressed their disappointment at the small turnout of the lecturers to the fono and were told by the head of school that perhaps the lecturers had felt that they would be uncomfortable in such a situation and had chosen to stay away. One of the students responded, "Now you know how we feel in the classroom, but we still have to show up".

At the end of the session the lecturers commented that the fono provided an excellent way to present questions and recommendations to them and to hold discussions and create awareness of the Pasifika students' views on teaching and learning, and suggested that similar sessions should be held on a frequent basis throughout the semester and with different groups of students with particular concerns. The student facilitator closed the two-hour-long session by once again thanking those present for attending and for their honest contributions. They let the lecturers know that, although they were here at university representing their families and communities, they were representing the lecturers and the university as well, not only as current students but as future graduates, and that they would take their experiences and encounters with the lecturers and the university with them on their journeys.

OUTCOMES OF THE STUDENTS' INITIATIVE

The initiative taken by the students resulted in a number of outcomes. The concept of Pasifika pedagogies, distinct from the dominant monocultural teaching of New Zealand universities, were alluded to by the students and supported by the Auckland College of Education lecturer. The students and lecturers were able to analyse the conversations and make recommendations aimed at benefiting current and future Pasifika students. Some of the schools that attended the fono made efforts to model the format of the fono conversations.

One of the primary motivations for the students' initiative was to improve the way that the university is organised in relation to its Pasifika students. The students became part of other students' support networks, and took on roles as student advocates for other Pasifika groups. A buddy programme was set up to meet regularly with Pasifika

students enrolled on the pre-degree programme. These meetings, including the format, agenda and minutes, were organised by the students themselves. The idea was to encourage and increase the pre-degree students' confidence about approaching lecturers; develop their assertiveness when inquiring about their grades and course content; get them to be proactive in their study habits, and supportive and encouraging of each other; and, most importantly, get the students to think, not only of completing the pre-degree programme, but of staircasing on to the degree. These meetings carried on for as long as the students needed them. Towards the end of the semester the meetings stopped. Discussions with the students and the programme leader confirmed that the pre-degree students were managing academically and needed less of the students' support.

At the end of the year the students took the opportunity to present their initiative and its development into the *aua'i i le galuega* research design at the Ministry of Social Development Conference on Social Policy, Research and Evaluation 2004 and at the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (SAANZ) Conference 2004. Following these presentations, the Office of Pasifika Advancement at AUT awarded them a grant to assist in the writing of this paper. With five of the students having graduated at the end of 2004, the presentations and grant served as highlights in their curriculum vitae.

Whether or not the students' recommendations have been acted on by those present or throughout the university is difficult to determine, for a number of reasons. Most of the lecturers were from other schools and faculties, there was only one head of school present, and those lecturers who were present felt they had little influence or power to get these proposals moving, even though their schools and faculties knew that the university's key strategic goals included a commitment to meeting the needs of Pasifika communities. The university remained vague on how schools were meant to do this, or how the university itself was going to evaluate how, or the extent to which, this was being done.

At the School of Social Sciences, however, a number of changes could be seen to be taking place. A review of the content and teaching of some of the papers on the programmes was initiated by interested academic staff; the process for hiring new academic staff included directing some of its advertising in areas that would attract suitably qualified (Māori and) Pasifika staff; a core pre-degree paper with an emphasis on Aotearoa and Pasifika issues was developed, with a similar paper planned at degree level; the monitoring of the academic performance of Pasifika students was maintained by the programme leader and staff; and an email database of Pasifika students was set up to inform them of scholarships, job opportunities and events.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUA'I I LE GALUEGA RESEARCH DESIGN

The conversations that were held prompted further discussions by the students about the place of non-dominant groups in society and their efforts and capacity to direct their own agendas and influence those issues relevant to their groups or communities. The students believed that this initiative could be developed into a research design that would meet these aims while fulfilling three important objectives. One, it would provide the opportunity to present a philosophical framework relevant to research involving Pasifika peoples. Such a framework would hopefully give relevance and permanence to the design because it had the capacity for ownership and autonomy by less-dominant groups. Two, it would suggest a practical method for carrying out research that would follow the principles and protocols recommended by Pasifika researchers for research involving Pasifika peoples. Three, it would attempt to link Pacific research guidelines and practices to a philosophical base, a gap identified by Pasifika researchers such as Baba (2004).

Pasifika Research Guidelines and Practices

A review of some of the literature on Pacific research reveals two separate emphases – research guidelines and research practices.

The authors of the Pacific Education Research Guidelines (Anae et al. 2002) believe that assumptions of Western knowledge underpin traditional research approaches, and the goal of Pacific research is to “identify and promote a world view” while critiquing these assumptions and questioning their acceptance. They believe that one of the difficulties that non-Pacific researchers face is their lack of knowledge of Pacific networks and protocols (Anae et al. 2001). The Health Research Council of New Zealand *Guidelines on Pacific Health Research* (2004) see the role of Pacific research as generating knowledge and understanding of Pacific peoples and getting their active involvement. The guidelines distinguish between Pacific-relevant research and Pacific-governed research. Pacific-relevant research addresses priority health issues for Pacific peoples, and although it may involve Pacific researchers, it is usually led by non-Pacific researchers. Pacific-governed research is “owned, driven and directed by Pacific peoples” and addresses challenges to Pacific health at many levels, while at the same time contributing to Pacific research approaches.

A number of authors, both Pasifika and non-Pasifika, have contributed their ideas and theories in support and acknowledgement of Pacific research protocols and practices. Presenters at the Pacific Vision International Conference in 1999 (see Douthert et al. 1999) argued that it was important to recognise the potential in young people as researchers, and that efforts should be made to develop enthusiastic and focused Pacific researchers.

Lima, in a presentation at the Ministry of Social Development's Social Policy Research and Evaluation Conference in 2003, suggested that when doing research on Pacific peoples we must ask, "What methods and models may be more culturally appropriate for Pacific research?" and "Are there particular research methods more appropriate for Pacific people than others?"

Fairbairn-Dunlop's report (2004) on the impact of the performance-based research fund (PBRF) looked at Pasifika research in the context of the PBRF. The epistemology and aims of research that this strategy supports, says Fairbairn-Dunlop, may be incompatible with those of Pacific research and researchers. Although Fairbairn-Dunlop recognises that Pacific Island countries are the basis of indigenous Pacific research frameworks, communities of Pacific peoples outside the islands are influenced by the migrant and heterogeneous Pacific diaspora populations. Thus, their paradigms for research, though stemming from an indigenous knowledge, may be unique and different to those from the islands.

Although these guidelines suggest protocols and principles that should be followed in research involving Pacific peoples, it is the practices based on Pacific knowledge and cultures that offer the process through which this research can take place. The practices described below can be regarded as essentially data preparation, collection and dissemination methods within a Pacific cultural context.

According to Tamasese et al. (2005:301), the purpose of developing the fa'afaletui research methodology was to provide a rigorous research method that would be "relevant and acceptable in a Samoan cultural context". The fa'afaletui methodology "avoided the danger of Western interpretation and meaning construction and enabled an authentic Samoan-based approach" through an exploration of the experiences of Samoan people and "the meanings they construct around critical mental health issues and definitions" (2005:301). Like Maua-Hodges's (2000) use of the tivaevae pattern to illustrate the processes involved in research, Thaman (2003) proposes that the three key processes involved in the making of kakala – the toli, tui and luva – are similar to the processes in the conduct of a research project.

Wood (2006) claims that currently there are three competing approaches to doing research in Oceania:

- the dominant discipline-based approach, introduced by Westerners and relying on "discipline-based concepts, theories and methods" (2006:33)
- the interpretive approach, emphasising indigenous interpretations and encouraging "researchers to rely on place-specific values, pedagogies, philosophies, and epistemologies unique to Pacific Islanders" (2006:33)
- the practice-based approach, focused on activities and de-emphasising disciplinary and interpretative approaches.

A more urgent problem for Wood is that explanations derived from interpretation-based research do not have permanence. In contrast, says Wood, practice-based research escapes the problems of discipline-based and interpretation-based research because of its focus on repetitive actions (2006:42), although he acknowledges that interest in practices has been part of most discipline-based and interpretation-based research in formal research in Oceania.

Baba (2004) believes that Pasifika research guidelines offer protocols for conducting research with Pacific peoples but lack the "philosophical and theoretical bases for research" (2004:99). Sanga (2004) suggests that Pacific⁴ research approaches should have a philosophical framework. He believes that "indigenous Pacific research is based on a philosophy of human nature" and proposes that Pacific researchers develop "Pacific research within its own philosophical orientation", as he believes this to be the only way it can achieve confidence and credibility (2004:42). Sanga, like other proponents of Pacific research, argues that research on or by Pacific peoples must use "strategies that are Pacific in nature" (2004:48).

The development and proposal of the students' initiative into the aua'i i le galuega research design aims to provide a philosophical as well as a practice-based framework for Pacific research that would also have the potential to be relevant as a research approach for other "minority" non-Pacific groups.

THE AUA'I I LE GALUEGA AS A RESEARCH DESIGN

The aua'i i le galuega is proposed as a research design for investigating issues affecting the academic performance of Pasifika students. Its wider purpose is for it to be employed by "minority" communities in devising, planning, directing and carrying out their own research. It has been termed aua'i i le galuega or "direct involvement" by the students because it reflects the extent and degree to which participants are involved in the research. The students' initial discussions of their academic status, their assessment of the issues and the strategies they employed to address them indicate the level of ownership and autonomy held by the students. The aua'i i le galuega as a research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data. Its assumptions and objectives can be argued to contain elements of a postmodernist approach to research because it attempts to reveal the dichotomies of power; for example, less dominant Pasifika participants as opposed to the dominant non-Pasifika researchers, and in its struggle to erase inequalities and create systems of social justice. However, it endeavours to go beyond the postmodernist approach through its emphasis on

4 Sanga's use of the term "Pacific" refers to those peoples from the Pacific Islands and includes Aotearoa-based Pacific peoples.

members of the research study articulating the research that needs to be done, guiding and executing the research method, and analysing the subsequent data.

The idea behind its design is based on the mediated dialogue methodology designed by Nakhid (2003a), which was used to facilitate conversations between Pasifika students and teachers through a mediator. In Nakhid's study, the students and teachers were from secondary schools, and it was thought that the students would be less confident in speaking directly with their teachers. Within the university setting, there were similar issues to those of the mediated dialogue, such as the power that the lecturers held, the willingness of the students to participate, and the cultural differences that existed between the lecturers and the students. However, the Pasifika students, in developing the *aua'i i le galuega*, believed themselves confident enough to enter into conversations with their lecturers although they did wonder about the lecturers' willingness to engage in these discussions.

The following section describes the students' use of the *vaka*⁵ to illustrate their philosophy of the *aua'i i le galuega*. It is written in the first person to emphasise the voices of the students.

THE VAKA AS A RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY⁶

In developing our initiative into a research design, the *vaka* was regarded as an appropriate concept upon which to build a philosophical framework to describe this design. The *vaka* and its surroundings represent the experiences, influences and contributing factors in the different aspects of our lives as Pasifika people and as part of our Pasifika communities. For us, our educational experience began when our ancestors left their homes of origin to travel the Pacific in search of a more prosperous life for themselves and their families. Adapting to a new environment and lifestyle was not easy, and many Pasifika families struggled to attain a "better" way of life. Acknowledging their efforts and achievements helps us to understand that what we bring to our studies at university has been influenced by the cultures, beliefs and values taught to us by our families and friends. It also explains the differences, and in some cases difficulties, that we as Pasifika students experience in adapting to a non-Pacific learning environment in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

We have used the *vaka*, and the stars that are instrumental to its journey, to explain the different components of the *aua'i i le galuega* research design and how they relate to our initiative to hold conversations between ourselves and our lecturers.

5 *Vaka* – Tongan for canoe.

6 From a session on Pasifika pedagogies taken by Tanya Samu on Monday 10 May 2004 at 2pm, Auckland University of Technology.

Stars

The stars represent the various methods of teaching and learning that have informed our years of study. Some stars are brighter than others and the brightness symbolises the effectiveness of these methods to our learning. We have chosen the brightest star to represent our motivation to search for an effective way to address the issues related to our achievement in tertiary institutions, which subsequently led to our development of the aua'i i le galuega research design. Other stars provided guidance, and represent the lecturers, fono, discussions and assistance offered by administrative staff and student support services that assisted in our academic aspirations.

Paddles

Paddles are used on a canoe to move forward. They symbolise our participation in seeking to improve our learning and our efforts to develop this initiative into a research design. The interaction and conversations that took place between the students and lecturers have informed and enhanced knowledge of Pasifika students' learning issues that we hope will assist current and future Pasifika students' progress in tertiary institutions.

Left Hull/Right Hull

The dual hulls play an important part in stabilising and balancing the movements of the vaka in the sea. They represent the various supportive techniques that this particular research design offers to both students and lecturers. Various opinions and ideas were presented in the fono. This design will help to identify and balance the sometimes conflicting expectations that both lecturers and students have of each other. It will enable students and lecturers to hear each other's perspectives and to work towards creating an environment where the needs and expectations of the students and lecturers are likely to be realised.

Deck

The deck is one of the largest and strongest parts of the vaka. It represents the strongest part of our initiative and the thinking behind the proposal of this research design – the group of Pasifika students. As students we have given voice to concerns as a unified body instead of attempting to express our opinions as individuals. The support that we provided for each other enabled us to overcome feelings of intimidation, nervousness, and a lack of confidence. Instead of ignoring the situation as individuals, we held discussions with fellow students and our lecturers to develop solutions and formulate recommendations. The support groups identified in our

vaka, such as family and the church, have had significant roles in our achievement. Although we may have possessed our own individual willingness to succeed and determination to achieve, the desired outcome and positive result have largely been a consequence of our group effort.

What we have attempted to do is to present a research design based upon the words of Confucius (551–479 BC): “tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand”.

ANALYSIS OF THE AUA'I I LE GALUEGA RESEARCH DESIGN

One of the most significant aspects of the aua'i i le galuega research design is that the researchers are the participants and the process requires their direct involvement. This enables a more accurate understanding of the issues facing the participants and thus the development of more effective procedures for addressing them. The design of this research focuses on being directly involved in the process, while the method relies on the direct conversations between the groups concerned. This level of engagement encourages and supports how one defines and understands the problem and determines a solution, and is the essence of the aua'i i le galuega approach. In the initiative taken by the students, this is important because attempts to address academic performance among Pasifika students are assisted by the university and the lecturers valuing the students' “identifying process” (Nakhid 2003b). Valuing this process protects “against the debilitating educational effects that result from ethnic minority students not being able to construct how they see themselves and how they wish to be seen” (Nakhid 2003b:315).

Pacific communities view themselves as being over-researched, and this is a sign that they have not been fully involved in the research process (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2004). Fairbairn-Dunlop supports the drive to create Pacific researchers who set their own agendas, carry out research and analyse their own results. The aua'i i le galuega research design suggests that they should also be encouraged and supported to create their own ways of doing research. The analysis of the conversations and the recommendations put forward by both the lecturers and the students are expected to be more effective in addressing Pasifika students' academic performance as both groups have been involved in proposing what the solutions might be.

Although there are important contributions to the literature on the experiences of Pasifika students in tertiary education, there is little research carried out by Pasifika students themselves (Anae et al. 2002, Pasikale 1996, Tofi et al. 1996). It is hoped that the nature of this research design will encourage Pasifika staff and students in tertiary institutions to carry out research in areas relevant to them.

Fono Conversations as a Research Method

The fono involved an open dialogue between the students and the lecturers in which the students voiced the various problems, difficulties and experiences they had encountered in their lectures and tutorials, and in their dealings with the academic staff. It also provided the opportunity for the lecturers to discuss some of the issues and expectations they had of teaching Pasifika students. One of the main objectives of the fono was to have the students conversing directly with their lecturers in order to obtain a better insight into the lecturers' views and to minimise any communication errors between lecturer and student. The fono conversations differ from other qualitative research methods such as focus groups or face-to-face interviews in that the conversations take place without the need for or presence of a researcher or facilitator to introduce topics, asks questions or prompt discussions. The researchers are the participants for whose purposes and outcomes the research is being conducted.

From the students' perspective, the focus was on the issues they faced as Pasifika students and so they believed they were the ones ideally suited to present them to their academic lecturers. Their educational experiences gave them the opportunity to share their opinions on why they believed Pasifika students were not succeeding, and committed them to take responsibility, not only for offering solutions but for being part of the solution.

CONCLUSION – REFLECTING ON THE AUA'I I LE GALUEGA AS A RESEARCH DESIGN

The opportunity to reflect on this proposed research design enabled us to look at ways of maximising the strengths of the approach and to ascertain how the design could be further improved to achieve better and more effective outcomes.

Having participants involved throughout all aspects of the research gives them greater voice and involvement in the process and outcomes. Although this allows for autonomy and ownership of the study by the participants, it can also introduce bias and a narrower perspective on the issues. Their direct involvement may prevent them from seeing the negative aspects of the research or cause them to overstate the positive. This could lead to claims of a lack of objectivity about the quality of the research and its outcomes.

There is also the potential for the background of the participants to adversely affect the research method. The face-to-face communication that took place between the students and those in academic authority conflicts with what is commonly regarded as a "Pasifika way". In Pacific Island culture it is considered disrespectful to question the authority of the elders, and children are taught not to ask questions (Latu and

Young 2004:4). Macpherson (2001) believes that the New Zealand education system is set up to reward students for individual brilliance and favours those that challenge and question their teachers, but that these values are contrary to the belief system of most Pacific Island communities. Within these communities, the teacher is seen as a person in a position of authority and to be greatly respected. This perception of the teacher can affect the learning of Pasifika students if the students feel that asking questions of the teachers undermines the teachers' authority. "Asking questions" is symbolic of the difference between the cultural capital of palagi and Pasifika students. Palagi students seem comfortable with asking questions and appear to benefit from it (Macpherson 2001:74). In contrast, Pasifika students are perceived as failing to participate within the classroom setting because they do not ask questions or are reluctant to respond to questions. The fono conversations suggest that Pasifika students will be more likely to participate in the classroom if the elements of power and authority are reduced and an atmosphere that recognises the different though equitable strengths is encouraged. For example, academic staff have a greater knowledge of the academic system as well as of the content of the course. Students have a better insight into the reasons for their academic performance and the solutions they believe would be most effective.

An influencing factor in this initiative is the fact that the students were all New Zealand-born Pasifika students. Their experience at all levels of the Aotearoa/New Zealand education system may have contributed to their confidence in devising this particular strategy and in facilitating the conversations with the lecturers. However, Pasifika students for whom face-to-face discussions with those in authority are not the norm can use this approach by entering into such discussions with the support of older Pasifika students and staff. It can be argued that because they are devised by New Zealand-born Pasifika students, the recommendations cannot be generalised to include island-born Pasifika students. An important aim was not to obtain results that can be generalised to both groups of students, but instead to get universities and tertiary education institutions to acknowledge and include the realities of Pasifika cultures through the presence of their students.

One of the greatest limitations in carrying out this initiative and in the development of the design was time. It proved to be very difficult to get interested parties together. After the informal discussions among themselves about Pasifika achievement and their desire to look at ways of addressing this, the students knew they needed to meet as a group to discuss how to carry out this investigation. It required more than informal debates and discussions, and a more organised arrangement would need to be made if the schedules of the lecturers and other academic staff as well as the timetables of members of the group were to be accommodated.

It is a key aspect of this design that those believed to be in direct relationship with the participants must be available, present and engaged if the process is to be valid. Solutions and recommendations are more likely to be accepted if they are understood and agreed to by those concerned and directly involved in the research. This direct involvement allows for recognition of the values of each of the participants and makes each participant aware of the viewpoints of the other.

We believe that the most important feature of this research design is its relevance and appropriateness for those groups considered to hold "minority" status in society; for example, migrants, young people, students, and low-income communities. Although the approach emanates from a community of Pasifika students, the experiences they have encountered in their academic lives have been the stimuli for developing a research approach that would take into account the structures of domination and prejudice that are seen as obstacles to their academic achievement, as well as the expectations held of them by their communities, the wider society and themselves. It has led to an awareness of the position and feelings of other groups in similar circumstances, and consequently a determination to develop a research design and methodology that would address these issues.

The philosophy of the aua'i i le galuega research design is for those being researched to be directly involved in all aspects of the research. Although this may potentially lead to bias, this consequence is minimised if the outcomes reveal themselves to be effective. The methodology of having students facilitate and participate in conversations with academic staff negates having to obtain the information from a secondary source, allowed observation of the body language of those present, and the opportunity to clarify comments. In addition, the students were able to contribute to their own learning outcomes and to use their capabilities to identify and find solutions to their concerns. It is important and timely to ask who are the most appropriate researchers of minority groups. Research shows that despite numerous studies and programmes designed to improve Pasifika students' educational achievements, this group still lags behind the total population in educational attainment and retention. Therefore, it is not only important, but fitting to analyse and deconstruct the systems currently in place to achieve these goals, and to consider new approaches and methodologies.

The rapid increase of Pasifika populations is likely to impact adversely on Pasifika communities and New Zealand society if the educational needs of Pasifika people are not appropriately met. Educational policies and initiatives that involve Pasifika culture will be more effective in improving Pasifika students' educational performance. Unfortunately, most marginalised communities are regarded as lacking the "resources" to carry out their own research. Government organisations seem to prefer a reinterpretation of these communities' expressions and opinions through traditional

and established types of research and researchers. This paper, in proposing the aua'i i le galuega research design and methodology, is suggesting an alternative. We believe each community, in their own manner, is capable of advocating for itself. The problem lies, not in the collection, presentation and articulation of their research and information, but in the way this research is accepted by those communities in power and the resources allocated to enable them to carry out its recommendations.

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