



i-Talitali Framework: Developing a Model for Engaged Learning and Teaching in the Pacific

Narsamma Lingam¹, Lalita Sharma¹, Jiokapeci Qaloqiolevu¹, Waisale Ramoce¹, Sangita Lal¹ and Rosarine Rafai¹

¹Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture & Pacific Studies, The University of the South Pacific

Corresponding author email address: lingam_n@usp.ac.fj

A peer reviewed short paper for a presentation at the International conference on Models of Engaged Learning and Teaching (I-MELT) in Adelaide, 11-13 December 2017. Available from www.imelt.edu.au

Abstract

Weaving is not only an art that is significant, but it is a figurative term that might have different connotations for Pacific People. In the search to enhance research skills and knowledge relating to Higher Education, academics and students alike are at the juncture of searching for a framework that best represents Pacific Research Skills. The UU204 Pacific Worlds Teaching Team has embarked on a project that illustrates Research Skills Development using a weaving metaphor. This paper proposes the metaphor of weaving a mat to describe the research process from a Pacific world-view that is underpinned by Pacific knowledge, skills and research values. It outlines the various methods and analysis of how a Pacific Research Framework that is appropriate to the pacific context should be constructed and developed. The Pacific students are taken through the basic essence of Pacific Research Framework through the i-Talitali Framework that the Pacific Worlds, i-Talitali Team of the University of the South Pacific has embarked on.

Drawing on the weaving metaphor, we aim to use a common item in many Pacific cultures which is the mat. To sit on a mat represents preparation for learning. Thus, while our students are seated on a mat, we then take them on a journey from harvesting the raw materials to the finished product. This is the approach that we are proposing towards the Pacific Research Skills Development.

i-Talitali - an itaukei term for weaving. This is also the name that is given to this UU204 Teaching Staff who will be “team-presenting” this framework.



Introduction

The current challenge in higher education is that the education systems in the small island developing states of the Pacific are facing a crisis in terms of quality (Shah, 2017). This crisis is a result of the preoccupation in higher education institutions including the University of the South Pacific (USP) with the need to include research components in undergraduate courses (Willison & O'Regan, 2006; 2015). One such undergraduate course is 'Pacific Worlds' (UU204), a generic interdisciplinary course offered to all undergraduate students in their second year of study. Upon completion, graduates of UU204 are expected to develop deeper learning skills through research to critically demonstrate 'Pacific Consciousness'. Strategies are implemented at USP to nurture research skills in UU204 curriculum and assessments through the use of a conceptual model known as Research Skills Development (RSD) (Willison & O'Regan, 2006; 2015).

However, a closer examination of the quality learning crisis indicates that the RSD model in its current form does not seem to motivate students to develop research skills in generating relevant knowledge about the diversity of Pacific societies. The crisis of quality learning is not simply the result of a lack of attention to learning, but of insufficient attention to the complex and 'context-dependent nature of learning' (Veikune & Spratt, 2011). Research studies on learning and teaching in developing contexts overwhelmingly support the view that "context matters" (Crossley, 2010) and that "insufficient understanding of the local nature of pedagogy and professional learning is behind the failure of many international interventions to impact positively on student learning" (Veikune & Spratt, 2011, p. 1). In response to a Pacific approach in learning and teaching, the UU204 Teaching Team embarked on re-developing the RSD model by using a weaving framework, *i-Talitali*, as a metaphor. This paper argues that a recognition of the need for a 'Pacific Research Framework' for more contextualised understanding of learning and teaching within the discourse of Pacific Worlds education is warranted to deliver the desired learning outcomes. The *i-Talitali* model that embeds the RSD framework is of particular interest to the UU204 Teaching Team because weaving is considered to be an integral aspect of the Pacific culture.

Theory Gap

Since the 1980s, Pacific scholars have developed research models that represent the diversity of Pacific Island indigenous epistemologies (Gegeo, 2008). Some Pacific scholars (David, 2008; Thaman, 1992) have identified gaps in research skills developments processes in higher education and have suggested various metaphors as a tool to understanding society and to facilitate research work. For example, Tongan Kakala Framework (Thaman, 1992) uses the image of a garland as a metaphor for research. The process of gathering the flowers and



stringing them together to make a garland is used to symbolise the broader domain of the learning and teaching process (Smith, 2014) The Vanua Framework (Nabobo-Baba, 2008) and Kaupapa Maori Framework (Smith, 1999) have been used to guide ethical considerations in Pacific research.

Through the facilitation and use of the RSD rubric for marking of projects for the UU204 course, it became evident that “while informative, the RSD is not concrete enough for students and leaves too much room for interpretation for supervisors” (Venning & Buisman-Pijlman, 2011, p. 38). The RSD model consists of six key elements: Embark and Clarify; Find and Generate; Evaluate and Reflect; Organise and Manage; Analyse & Synthesise and Communicate and Apply. These concepts may present difficulties to Pacific students, many for whom English is a second language. An important challenge in engaging students in research and learning in higher education has to do with accessing, evaluating, analysing and synthesising and gaining new knowledge from credible sources. Therefore, there is scope for a conceptual model that embeds the RSD framework within a Pacific approach of doing research in Pacific Studies.

***i-Talitali* Approach: A Pacific Model**

‘Weaving a mat’ is a metaphor that can be applied in writing through research and imagining the weft and warp as “words of narrative threads”. Weaving as a metaphor is based on a belief that one can understand research skills from abstract to complex ideas through reference to familiar cultural processes of mat weaving. The facets of *the i-Talitali* research framework illustrated in Figure 1 are interrelated.



Figure 1: The *i-Talitali* Framework

STEP 1: Embark and Clarify (Digitaka)

WEAVING: mind map of resources.

This step is about how well a student demonstrates their understanding of the topic question. Similar to the Kakala framework (Thaman, 1997), the mat is ranked according to the design and materials, with a focus on weaving a mat for a particular purpose, occasion or person in mind. The raw material used for weaving is called the *kuta* (in the Fijian and Maori language) and *Nairai* (in the Indo-Fijian language). *Kuta*, known by its scientific terms as *Eleocharis sphacelata* or *Cyperaceae*, 'is a tall spikerush found on the margins of shallow lakes and other very wet places, generally with acid soils' (Moore & Edgar, 1970, p.188). This material is used for weaving of mats and other similar handicrafts by freshwater communities located inland as compared to the pandanus leaves that are commonly used by other communities in the Pacific.

As illustrated in Figure 1, *digitaka* is comparable to the harvesting process whereby the strongest and most durable raw materials are identified and harvested for weaving (Veikune & Spratt, 2016). Skilled weavers



describe the harvesting of raw materials as a ‘tough task’ which involves long hours of walking from the village to the lake where *kuta* grows and back with the load of harvested *kuta* (Bola-Bari, 2015).

In order for students to clearly embark on their research, they need to have a realistic understanding of the tough process involved in gathering information from online databases, libraries and other credible sources. Just as a *kuta* harvester has to walk long hours to harvest raw materials, so a student will need to ‘walk the extra mile’ in order to obtain the relevant information needed to write a good assignment. Furthermore, just as weavers have mind maps of their resources, students also need to be aware of the relevant literature and research in their discipline.

2. Find and Generate (Vakasaqaraqara)

WEAVING: preparation and selection of suitable materials

Women weavers from Macuata, Fiji described the selection process where only the ‘green kuta stalk’ with ‘no red spots, no flowers’ are selected. Buck noted that “the kuta was often left (i.e. under the mats) for three days” (Buck, cited in Wehi, 2016, p. 20). This process of selecting suitable materials for weaving (as shown in Figure 1) best represents the work required in finding and selecting the information needed to write a good paper. Once relevant sources of information have been identified from credible sources, the student then needs to select from those credible sources what is relevant for the assignment question and start taking notes with the aim of analysing, synthesising and critiquing the information well. Just as *kuta* needs to spend three nights covered with mats to turn into the same shade, so information needs time to be absorbed into the minds of students.

3. Evaluate and Generate (Vakasokumuna Vakamatau)

WEAVING: gather and select.

Once raw materials have been harvested, weavers need to *Vakasokumuna Vakamatau* (sort and verify) materials they have collected are strong enough to last long. This is supported by Veikune & Pratt (2016, p. 91) who state, “Skilled weavers picked the strongest and most durable [*kuta*] to start the weaving because it ensures that the rest of the mat will be strong”. Selecting the strongest materials from the *Vakasaqaraqaram stage* builds the foundation of the mat and gives confidence to the weavers to focus on their weaving.

Similarly, in the *i-Talitali* framework, students have to evaluate the credibility and reliability of the information they have gathered from various data sources for the purpose of trustworthiness.



4. Organise and Manage (Tuvana)

WEAVING: layering and constructing of raw materials.

Here the weaver needs to organise the selected materials in a logical manner.

In the *Tuvana* step, the treatment and storage of *kuta* needs to be taken into consideration, such as stripping, layering and constructing of *kuta* (Figure 1). Other possibilities also have to be investigated before the weaving begins such as colour of the wool that matches with the pattern design. Patel (2006) described a similar *process* of mat weaving in Swaziland, where careful decision has to be made about the choice of pattern design with its decoration with different colours.

The knowledge and skills required in the assembling of the *kuta* is consistent with the selection of relevant information from various data sources that can build the literature and support learners arguments related to the research question in the *i-Talitali* framework.

5. Analysis and Synthesis (Talitali)

WEAVING: weaving the mat

Once the raw materials are ready to be woven, the weaver is clear on the concept design, and begins the weaving process as reflected in Figure 1. The *i-Talitali* process places emphasis on the materials selected from *talitali* stage which are woven together according to the concept design. This process can be quite complex and challenging for the weavers as it requires deep understanding of the concept design and appropriate use of the materials to match the design. This process is elaborated by DeLoughrey (2007, p. iv) as she states, "...I know the design clearly and the sun's journeys pass uncounted while I work – but I need a finer skill to discipline the thread". This description reflects on the weaving as a detailed and intricate process which requires special skills.

In the *i-Taltali framework*, the *taltali* step is very important in research-driven projects as it refers to where students have to use their critical thinking ability to analyse the information gathered to support or discredit their arguments.

6. Communicate and Apply (Sevutaki Na ibe)

WEAVING: quality of the final product; present the mat.



The final stage of weaving very much depends on how the earlier stages have been dealt with. A skilled weaver knows what and how to weave. The completed mat is tidied up for its intended purpose. Fine touches like size, borders, and colours are woven in to ensure that it is appropriate for its intended purpose. According to Ball (2005, p. 159), this final piece “brings together a whole different set of [expressions], not just of weaving . . . All these qualities of fabric [mat] have application in the interpretation of [stories]” (Ball, 2005, p. 159).

The weaving metaphor is used to help students who struggle to carry out research in writing about the Pacific. Students using the *i-Talitali* framework have to plan well and write a draft first, and if the information gathered is too complex then they have to further synthesise their writing. This requires them to edit, innovate, improve and refine their writing, and, if necessary, gather more information from the literature, which means they have to go back to Facet 1 (Embark and Clarify). Students should be able to effectively communicate their ideas, thoughts, insights and research findings to the readers through their writing.

Approach to its Implementation to the Students

Students of the ‘Pacific Worlds’ (UU204) course at USP complete a number of online tests and projects as part of their formal assessment. The projects form the research component of the UU204 course. In view of the diversity of the students and the teaching team, the *i-Talitali* framework is developed and designed to teach research skills as a process and assess students’ understanding and development of research skills using RSD. This framework will be implemented through the development of an assessment matrix to enhance student feedback when integrated into a feedback loop in their research projects (Venning & Buisman-Pijlman, 2011). It is expected that the inclusion of the *i-Talitali* framework in the UU204 course outline this semester explicitly meets the requirements and expectations of both the teaching team and students. Additionally, this framework attempts to infuse Pacific context into the RSD model that will be trialled this semester to determine its relevance and efficacy.

Approach Enabling UU204 Teachers to Engage with the Model

Integral to the UU204 course is the incorporation of the RSD framework into its curriculum and assessments. The UU204 Team was asked to map expectations of student work to the RSD framework integrated as an assessment rubric. However, the initial RSD framework does not have an inbuilt measurement tool for determining student performance, so the project team devised a qualitative approach that attempted to locate students’ submitted work on the *i-Talitali* rubric. Such rubrics can help students to understand project requirements and the criteria assigned to particular levels of performance (Reddy & Andrade 2009). This will



also provide clear guidance for students on the extent to which they are expected to be independent researchers when planning their assessment tasks.

Discussion

In teaching research skills to students in the Pacific, we have asserted that students would better understand the concepts when alluding to something familiar; hence the *i-Talitali* or 'weaving the mat' approach which translates to the Pacific Research Skills Development. Weaving as a metaphor is based on the belief that Pacific students can understand research skills from abstract to complex ideas through reference to familiar cultural processes of mat weaving. The language and images used by researchers are potent in that they help create new storylines. Hence the use of a metaphor and imagery in the *i-Talitali* framework.

The 'mat' of the Pacific and the weaving processes have particular resonance with the RSD framework. This repositioning approach to learning and research is not new. It was found that students from Pacific societies find it easier to relate to pedagogies that come from their cultural experiences when compared to those terms from Western concepts.

From a social constructivist perspective, educational institutes should embrace cultural knowledge to complement teaching and learning and research at higher education. Similar sentiments are reiterated in education and research to be 'with' the people and not just about the people (Thaman, 2005). This paper proposes a research strategy that is based on Pacific epistemologies to help understand and employ western ways of researching more effectively. In support of this claim, some Pacific scholars have argued that less of a Eurocentric vision is needed to understand and conduct research in the Pacific. The *i-Talitali* framework anchors itself in the notion of working with the people of the Pacific taking the words of wisdom of Epeli Hau'ofa (2003) that if one has the interest of the Pacific at heart then one will always find a way forward and the forward impetus is 'weaving research waves the *i-Talitali* way'. This is a work in progress as it is an attempt to provide a 'Pac-centric' as opposed to a Euro-centric approach to the research process.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the *i-Talitali* framework has the potential to provide insights on research-based learning in the Pacific context. We anticipate that this adapted framework will inform an environment for planning research that encourages deeper understanding of Pacific knowledge, and greater synthesis of Pacific literature. Such knowledge can be better applied to the Pacific context, more thoroughly analysed, and better evaluated than may be possible by the current RSD framework. The nature of *i-Talitali* framework will be



worked out through preliminary research on its application in the curricular and assessments of the 'Pacific Worlds' course and in particular, the development of students' research skills.





References

- Ball, M. (2005). Weaving the threads of nationhood. *Cultural Studies Review* 11(1).
- Bola-Bari, V. (2015). Exception to the Rule. *Fiji Times*, October 16, 2015. Retrieved on 11 August, 2016 from <http://www.fijitimes.com/story.aspx?id=326016>
- Crossley, M. (2010) Context matters in educational research and international development: Learning from the small states experience. *Prospects*, 40, 421–29.
- DeLoughrey, E. M. (2007). *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures*. Hawai: University of Hawai Press.
- Gegeo, D. W. (2008). *Shifting paradigms in Pacific scholarship: Towards island-based methodologies, epistemologies and pedagogies*. Paper presented at *Building Pacific Research Capacity and Scholarship Fono 2008*, Fale Pasfika, University of Auckland.
- Hauofa, E. (1994). Our Sea of Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific* 6(1), 148-16.
- Moore, L. B., & Edgar, E. (1970). *Flora of New Zealand: Indigenous tracheophyta - monocotyledons except gramineae*. Botany Division, DSIR, Christchurch.
- Nabobo-Baba, U. (2006). Knowing and learning: an indigenous Fijian approach. Suva: IPS/USP.
- Reddy, Y. M., & Andrade, H. G. (2009). A review of rubric use in higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(4), 435-448.
- Shah, M. (2017). Credibility of medical schools in Fiji. *Fiji Sun*, July 12. Retrieved on 12 July, 2017 from <http://fijisun.com.fj>
- Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Thaman, K. H. (1997). Kakala: A Pacific concept of teaching and learning. Keynote address, Australian Colleges of Education Annual Conference, Cairns.
- Smith L.T. (2014) Social Justice, Transformation and Indigenous Methodologies. In: Rinehart R., Barbour K., Pope C. (eds) *Ethnographic Worldviews*. Springer, Dordrecht
- Thaman, K. K. (2005). Indigenous education and indigenous knowledge systems: a personal reflection. *International Indigenous Journal*, 1(1), 23-24.
- Willison, J. (2012). When Academics integrate research skill development in the curriculum, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31(1), 905-919.
- Willison, J., & O'Regan, K. (2006/2015), Research skill development framework, Retrieved on 17 July, 2017 from www.adelaide.edu.au/rsd .
- Veikune, H. & Spratt, R. (2016). Weaving a new approach to improving literacy outcomes: The Pacific literacy and school leadership programme. *Development Bulletin*, 77, 90-94.



Venning, J., & Buisman-Pijlman, F. (2011). The development of an assessment matrix to promote student learning in postgraduate multidisciplinary research. *Ergo*, 2 (2), 37-44.

Wehi, P. M. (2006). Kuta: A locally important and highly valued weaving plant. *Journal of Maori and Pacific Development*, 7(2), 42.