Respecting, Embracing, and Honoring Cultural Practices through Collective Storytelling

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Abstract

This article discusses a final writing assignment for "Culturally Responsive Service Learning," a course taught during a four-week experiential education program in rural Fiji. This elective course was situated in an undergraduate teacher preparation program but included students from a wide variety of disciplines and majors. This article discusses the theoretical and cultural framework for the assignment, the pedagogical decisions that led to the final paper, the process of sharing the assignment with the community through a public event, the limitations of using a storytelling framework from another culture, and suggestions for future adaptations. In alignment with the topic, the author uses two different voices to interweave personal storytelling with academic research. The article opens and closes with vignettes that demonstrate how the class arrived at new levels of critical consciousness through engagement with the readings and learning from Indigenous community partners. The body of this article is written in a traditional academic format. Storied vignettes are italicized for clarity.

Vignette 1: Learning from Nabobo-Baba and the Students

The rooster crows, the insects hum, and the ocean waves lap gently against the shore. Hues of pink and orange make their way over the treetops to signal a new day. There is a gentle coolness in the air, one that will soon disappear in the heat of the day. It's almost 6:00 AM, and I walk quietly down the dirt road trying not to wake my students, colleagues, and local friends—or force the morning along any faster than it will go.

I grab a cup of coffee and walk towards the ocean. Near the shore, I bump into Ann—her big Bible in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Ann Cooper, my beloved mentor and friend, joined us on this trip as my co-leader. Ann had taken me to Fiji several times as a student teacher, classroom teacher, and graduate researcher. Ann has worked in Fiji for over fifteen years, and she has an honorable reputation across the nation. She is the founder of the Fiji Kinde Project, a non-profit organization that promotes and supports early childhood education throughout the country. Seeing her, I smile as I am reminded what a gift it is to share this month-long adventure with her.

"Yadra,[1] *Elizabeth," she calls to me with her gentle Texas drawl.*

"Good morning, Ann." She sets her coffee down on a small wooden table. I take a seat next to her, and we look out at the glassy sea as the water changes colors with the sunrise.

Ann smiles. "I have some exciting news. The headman from Vinikura, Paulo, invited you and me to go to the high chief's house tomorrow. He said he will arrange the transportation

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for us and accompany us on the journey. Paulo said that his Uncle Jon, the high chief, wants to show us the magic rocks. He said there are stories about the rocks that he wants us to write down for the children. He heard about the Fiji Kinde Project, and he heard you are a researcher. So, he invited us both to go to his home in Dakuniba tomorrow to see the rocks. He wants us to audio record the stories, and he wants you to write them down. We will do a Sevu Sevu upon our arrival, and then we will share a meal. Then he takes us up to see the rocks."

This is a surprising and wonderful invitation—being invited to a high chief's house is rare, and, furthermore, I have heard of these rocks before—they are sacred and special. To be invited to see them alongside the high chief is an invitation of a lifetime. I feel my spirit leaping with enthusiasm and gratitude for this special initiation, but I also feel a tug of deep hesitation. As I look out at the water, I think to myself: Record the stories? Write them down? Preserve the stories for the children? My researcher mind swirls. How can I do this without IRB approval?

#

Later in the day, the students and I gather together for our class session. We meet in our classroom which consists of straw mats for us to sit on and a small whiteboard. Before the students arrive, I smile at my good fortune. Today's lesson is based on chapter 2 of Nabobo-Baba's Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach. *The chapter is titled "Undertaking Research in the Fijian Village." I promise the students that class will end with a story of a researcher dilemma in which their input is needed. I do not disclose that the researcher is me.*

We spend a few hours together unpacking the ideas in chapter 2, which introduces the concepts of vanua (community) research. The chapter rejects traditional, Western ways of conducting research and instead outlines vanua research procedures, protocols, and insider/outsider positionalities. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the differences between university and vanua expectations. These include the balance between subjective and objective, the concept of time, authority and consent, entry to the research area, approaches to research, and the ownership of research and knowledge. The students and I spend our class session unpacking these ideas through the creation of group artwork, dialogical poetry between the two voices of the university and the vanua, and through a lively class discussion about anti-colonial research practices.

As we reach the end of class, I share the story of what Ann told me this morning. I explain my invitation to visit the high chief with Ann and Paulo. I explain the offer to meet Uncle Jon, see the magic rocks, and record some of the oral history for the tribe to pass down to the children. I explain the reverence of the rocks, and the grandness of this invitation. The students' faces light up with joy and delight at this unlikely opportunity.

But then, I tell them about IRB protocols, and how I do not have IRB approval to conduct this type of research, and so I might not be able to go. I explain to them that IRB approval is necessary when research involves human subjects and when seeking to write a publishable manuscript. Their faces shift from delight to disbelief, worry, and even disgust. A lively conversation follows.

"Why does the academy own you, Dr. Yo? Isn't an invitation from the vanua more important than what the academy says?"

While I believe this is true and know deep down I would only need IRB approval if I planned to publish this work, I play devil's advocate. "Well, I am employed by the university. Shouldn't I respect its procedures and protocols?"

Another student chimes in. "You are still respecting them by respecting the people. It's so frustrating that their expectations don't meet the needs of the people here or in other places. How are you supposed to be here if you can't really be here?"

The class nods in agreement. Hannah asks, "Are you afraid of breaking the rules?"

I ask them, "But what if I get in trouble? I feel compelled to honor the culture here and also follow the protocol for researchers."

Hannah challenges me again, in all the right ways. "Well, who is your highest priority? Is it the people here or the sterile walls of the academy? Wouldn't it be worth it to get in trouble in order to honor the wishes of this high chief? Who do you care about most?"

I smile because she knows the way to my heart—a deep love and reverent respect for the Fijians. "The people here," I reply.

"Well," she continues, "Then I think you have to accept the invitation to go see the magic rocks. I think you have to do all the things Nabobo-Baba is teaching us. I think you have to do it on behalf of all of us. This is your chance. This is our *chance."*

I look around to see the whole class nodding in agreement. Out of respect for our learning community, I tell the students I will go— or not go—based on their vote. I ask them to consider all of today's learning, all of the constraints, limitations, and possibilities of this invitation. I ask them to consider what is the most *ethical, the* most *respectful, and the* most *culturally responsive.*

When I ask them to vote, 20 of 20 students raise their hands in favor of honoring the vanua research framework by my visit to Uncle Jon's this Saturday. The students voted unanimously in favor of the vanua research framework. I take a deep breath and nod in agreement. I would accept the invitation.

Assignment Development and Context

At my institution, study abroad programs are quite popular and serve as an important component of the campus culture and university experience. Semester- or year-long programs are offered in six different countries, and there are a wide variety of month-long summer intensive programs offered in different locations based on faculty expertise and global connections. Because of my previous experiences in Fiji as a student teacher, classroom teacher, and researcher, I was invited by my institution to lead a month-long study abroad program in rural Fiji. The program runs annually, and courses usually emphasize medicine because the living accommodations are on the same property as a medical clinic. Because I am a teacher educator, I developed a course titled "EDUC 592: Culturally Responsive Service Learning," which focused on decolonizing education, learning from Indigenous perspectives, and reimagining how service learning can be done. In designing the course, I relied on experiential education (EE) theory (T. E. Smith et al., 2011) critical pedagogy (Breunig, 2005, 2011; Freire, 1972, 1994, 1997, 1998) and post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1984; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988) in designing the course.[2] The program was offered as an elective in the teacher preparation program, but students from a wide variety of majors were welcomed. Twenty students participated.

In Fiji, students assisted in local classrooms, observed in a medical clinic, performed manual labor on a farm, and participated in service projects in local villages. Students rotated through each activity regardless of major or future career aspirations, and we placed an emphasis on unity, collaboration, connectedness, and teamwork in alignment with iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) values. In addition to morning and afternoon fieldwork rotations, we had class two or three days per week for two-and-a-half or three-hour blocks. During this time, we used the text *Knowing and*

Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) to center the course on Indigenous voices, knowledge, and perspectives. In addition to the course text, Indigenous voices were included through guest lectures, field trips, and hands-on experiences.[3] The purpose of these course elements was to share power and embody allyship (Anthony-Stevens, 2017). Course learning objectives stated students would:

- apply Indigenous epistemologies to daily service-learning practices;
- interrogate their own personal identity, ways of knowing and belonging, and personal faith in connection to iTaukei culture;
- participate in cultural activities and host a co-constructed Talanoa event; and
- identify strategies for culturally responsive allyship to Indigenous people and/or people of marginalized groups.

The assignment presented here served as one of three components of the final exam.

- Part I: Oral Exam: Each student had an oral exam that lasted between 15-30 minutes. The students were given the questions ahead of time and were allowed to use notes during the exam. The questions asked them to reflect holistically on the experience and apply academic concepts in a variety of ways.
- Part II: Creative Talanoa Writing: Students were asked to write their stories (see prompt at the end of the paper). Students read their stories in both our classroom setting and at a community event.
- Part III: Academic Response: Students also provided an explanation for how their stories connected to course themes, concepts, learning objectives, and new ways of processing information.

Here, I focus on Part II of the assignment, the construction and sharing of the talanoa. The talanoa, a creative writing assignment, was a critical component of the final experience. Throughout the course, the concept of talanoa (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014) was embedded into each class session and in many informal ways throughout the experience. Talanoa is defined as:

> talking about nothing in particular, chat, or gossip and it is within the cultural milieu of talanoa that knowledge and emotions are shared… a holistic and embodied amalgamation of the emotions, knowledge, interests, and experiences. Values such as empathy, respect, love and humility are essential to the vanua [community] as indigenous worldview. Talanoa is an embodied expression of the *vanua* concept (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 1).

Talanoa is often used as a social science research methodology in Pacific contexts to reflect the lived experiences of the research participants (Fa'avae et al., 2016). While we did not employ talanoa as a research methodology, we relied on talanoa as a pedagogy. The text discusses the concept of talanoa, so we used this as a springboard to engage in storytelling as a tool of connection, sense making, and listening.

In our Western context, we are often asked to show new understandings in formulaic ways that remove the humanity from the process of learning. As a former K-12 classroom teacher and current teacher educator, I often feel pressured to have my students write in ways that are overly mechanical, detailed, and academic. When I first learned about talanoa, I was intrigued: could there be a legitimate way to make sense of the world that included me, as a whole being? While there are many cultural protocols, nuances, and specific details that are involved in the complex process of talanoa (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014), our attempt to apply this concept

to our learning was an invitation to link content and emotions, feelings, and lived experiences. After receiving permission from the residents of Fiji to use talanoa, we had a framework to reconnect our souls with the process of learning. The students and I were apprentices of talanoa; we would never hold the posture of experts because we were outsiders.

It is important to note that talanoa is not ours to take; in fact, permission to participate in talanoa must be continually pursued. It is only upon the granting of permission that we, as outsiders, can use talanoa as a framework to sense-make our experiences. I regularly asked local iTaukei friends for permission to use the concept of talanoa in our learning. I shared the process of asking permission with the students as a model for culturally responsive action (Berryman et al., 2013) and cultural humility (SooHoo, 2013). Furthermore, we had to be very intentional in order to resist cultural appropriation. As Oluo (2019) defined, cultural appropriation is "the adoption or exploitation of another culture by a more dominant culture" (p. 146). Oluo (2019) continued to explain the main issue of cultural appropriation. She stated:

> The problem of cultural appropriation is not the desire to participate in aspects of a different culture that you admire. The problem of cultural appropriation is primarily linked to the power imbalance between the culture doing the appropriating and the culture being appropriated. The power imbalance allows the culture being appropriated to be distorted and redefined by the dominant culture and siphons any material or financial benefit of that piece of culture away to the dominant culture, while marginalized cultures are still persecuted for living in that culture. (p. 147)

I resist cultural appropriation and model this resistance to students. In Fiji, we intentionally learned in a storytelling format that is connected to the Fijian culture. I wanted to show our local partners that we honor their culture and value the epistemologies that the stories reveal. Navigating these terrains is complicated, and I am certain I did it imperfectly. I attempted to resist cultural appropriation primarily through:

1. **Continual dialogue with the students about cultural appropriation in connection to talanoa**. I shared my thoughts about my desire to participate in cultural practices, although we were outsiders. We talked about what actions, thoughts, or ideas would "cross the line" and convert our attempts of honoring culture to appropriating culture. We discussed how we must be ready to make a pivot at any time, and that we must continually posture ourselves as learners of the Fijian culture rather than experts.
2. **Asking for permission from field partners, friends, and community leaders**. By continually asking for permission, attempting to understand talanoa as a component of Fijian culture, and maintaining cultural humanity (SooHoo, 2013), we aimed to resist cultural appropriation. If the status of our permission changed, the course format and structure would change immediately. Should our engagement in talanoa be seen as offensive or intrusive, we would stop, and I would admit the mistake, apologize for it, and make amends. I would also share this experience with students.
3. **Learning with an Indigenous course text.** *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Approach* (Nabobo-Baba, 2006) explained in great detail how talanoa functions as an Indigenous research methodology. Through Nabobo-Baba's detailed explanation of the procedures, protocols, and common practices, we were exposed to cultural knowledge about talanoa. This allowed for us to compare and contrast our own systems of knowledge, ways of sense making, and means of

> connecting. The students often marveled at the beauty of talanoa in Fiji, and they were disappointed by the lack of connection in the United States due to stressful busyness, individualistic values, and hegemonic knowledge. In holding the posture of a learner and viewing talanoa from a cultural wealth mindset (Yosso, 2005), we resisted cultural appropriation.

While talanoa is primarily oral, our class participated in oral and written storytelling. Each class session opened and closed with talanoa, and talanoa was used for assignments and then shared during class. Bryan (2012) noted that "we are our stories. Each of us has a personal narrative careening around in the head, a library of personal drama, waiting to be expressed…We cannot leave these stories behind when we enter a classroom or schoolhouse. They are an important part of who we are" (p. 161). Talanoa allowed us to explore personal histories, struggles, biases, and hope, and offered new understandings. Talanoa can also be used to explore funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and homegrown epistemologies (Bloomfield, 2013).

At the end of our time in Fiji, I wanted students to share a talanoa that was reflective of the experiential education program, pay honor and respect to the local culture, view Indigenous knowledge with reverent respect, and serve as a way of connecting the students and me with our local partners.

Our Talanoa Experience

To honor my work as a critical educator and to embody the spirit of Paulo Freire, I know that "I cannot be a teacher without exposing who I am" (Freire, 2000, p. 87). I must be vulnerable and share my own stories of struggle as I seek a lifetime of allyship in pursuit of "beloved community" (King & Washington, 1986, p. 55). I am inspired by Shor's commentary on Freire's work: "The empowering education Freire suggests is not a new data bank or doctrine delivered to students; it is, instead, a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teacher, teacher and learning, students and society" (Shor, 1993, p. 27). To embody these concepts, I opened or closed the class with a personal talanoa that connected to the themes of the learning experience for that day. I shared my own researcher insider/outsider perspectives and limitations (see creative vignettes), mistakes I made as a result of my own colonial thinking (L. T. Smith, 2012), and reflections on Indigenous knowledge and antiracist concepts. I also reflected on being culturally responsive in my life.

Sharing my stories of struggle and hope with course content built trust and connection between the students and me. Students were willing to share their own stories with great transparency and authenticity. Much to my delight, students met without me for talanoa during the evenings where they would talk and process emotions and experiences as a community. One contributing factor to the enthusiasm about talanoa and the strong connections between the students was a lack of digital technology in Fiji. Students left their laptops at home and did not have cell phone use. In a research study conducted as a part of this program, students commented that the lack of technology helped foster new and deep friendships.

On the day that our final talanoa took place, we engaged in a more formal talanoa called veivosaki (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). The students arrived with their composition notebooks, prepared to share their stories out loud with their classmates. We sat in our usual format in a circle on a straw mat and invited the other study abroad program chaperones to attend the session. The other chaperones included my husband, as well as Ann and David Cooper of the Fiji Kinde Project. The chaperones provided general comments to synthesize, summarize, and compliment the students on their collective work of mind and heart.

Each talanoa was powerful, well crafted, and highly personal. Following the talanoa experience and feedback from the chaperones, we discussed how we bring the ideas of talanoa, connection, and community back home. We also explored how our understandings could lead to allyship and beloved community.

Finally, the class selected five students to share their stories at our event to honor the community. Our selection criteria were stories that would transcend culture and be well received by our iTaukei friends. A few days later, the stories were the core of the community-honoring event. Students prepared small gift bags and cards for each member of the community. We also ordered flower crowns, prepared musical numbers, made arrangements for a snack, and organized a program. After receiving permission, we dressed in our traditional Fijian garb as a way of honoring the culture.

During the gathering, each student presented a community member with their gift, a card, and a story about something we learned from them. We adorned community members with flower crowns. After our musical numbers, we shared our stories. Many tears of happiness and love were shed by both the students and the iTaukei guests. We later learned that it is common for the iTaukei community to put on a program for the guests, which they had done for us a few nights before, but this was the first time that a group put on an event for them. We were proud of this and surprised when some of the guests asked for photocopies of our stories.

Limitations and Adaptations for New Contexts

As a narrative researcher and former middle school English teacher, the opportunity to share talanoa with my students and with the community was a lifetime highlight. It was fulfilling to see this prompt transform from an idea into a meaningful experience that facilitated rich learning and provided a space to honor all we had learned from our iTaukei partners and friends. However, one major limitation of this assignment is the assessment component.

While I did assess this assignment with a rubric out of obligation to the traditional grading scale used at my university, the rubric did not capture the full essence of this assessment and did not embody the totality of the experience. The rubric felt like a limiting factor rather than a beneficial tool. In the same way there were complexities in my role as a teacher/researcher using my skill set in a different context, I struggled to use a two-dimensional paper rubric for an experience that involved mind, body, spirit, and heart. In the future, I would prefer to use a credit/no credit grading scale or to implement labor-based grading contracts (Inoue, 2019) or specifications grading (Nilson, 2015). I am in the process of working with the university to reimagine the possibilities for assessment in future experiential education programs.

I am left with many questions about how traditional assessment could capture the essence of this experience. How does one measure this deeply personal and highly authentic experience in a rubric? How does one translate such a unique lived experience into a letter grade? As the instructor, I would like to allow their assessment and experiences to be liberated from numbers and grades. For other instructors who wish to construct a similar assignment in a different cultural context, I encourage a careful and critical analysis of the assessment component in order to encourage student creativity and provide the students with quality feedback in connection to the learning objectives. Assessment measures could be co-constructed alongside students and include criteria such as attitudes leading to intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, willingness to take risks, openness to new experiences, and reflexivity.

Another limitation of this assignment is that we are not Indigenous Fijians, and our access to this prompt and format of talanoa was granted by local partners and friends. Talanoa or other Indigenous concepts are not ours to take. Even with permission, we must tread lightly,

continue to ask for permission, and hold this way of sense-making with the utmost respect and reverence. As outsiders, we must be ready to pivot at any point should the insiders of the community believe that we should not call our storytelling process "talanoa" or should they find it cultural appropriation. While these are not our intentions, we must be receptive, open, and humble to the local community's perceptions and understanding.

For other faculty members who wish to replicate this assignment while teaching abroad, I recommend learning about the culture's storytelling history and process. How do the people of the land tell their stories? Who has a right to tell stories? What role does storytelling play in society? Whose stories count, and whose stories are excluded? Learning about the oral and written history of storytelling may lead instructors to design assessments in alignment with the cultural context. I recommend connecting with local partners to collaborate on a community sharing experience. The students were motivated to craft meaningful and honorable stories because they knew they would ultimately be shared with the community. Relational integrity mattered to the students.

Furthermore, for faculty members who wish to create a similar assignment, a great deal of anti-racist, anti-colonial self-work is an essential precursor to this type of social justice teaching and learning. I cannot recommend a prescribed path for this endeavor, as it is highly personalized. For my story of becoming a social justice educator, see Yomantas (2020c). To see my story in a creative format, see Yomantas (2020b). In summary, the journey took intensive reading, critical self-reflection, frequent writing, and a continual interrogation of the self. For me, this is an ongoing journey; I attempt to walk further each and every day. I believe the transformation of my mind has led to the transformation of my actions and ways of being in the world. The continued cyclical pursuit of learning, unlearning, and consequently doing better is what I find valuable in both my professional and personal life.

For courses that are taught all around the globe, I recommend that instructors add more storytelling into their courses to illuminate content. This can take place in many forms. As Freire (1972) stated, "only through communication can human life hold meaning" (p. 77). Stories have the power to connect us. Through story creating, storytelling, and receiving stories we are able to better understand each other and make changes in our world. As instructors, our stories hold meaning, too. In order to connect with students, illuminate content, and restore humanity, we must bring ourselves into the classroom. It is both a springboard for transformative learning and a way to open the limitless possibilities for justice that only begin when we work together.

Vignette 2: Learning from the Paulos

> *While the stories about his magic rocks are too reverent to pen here, there is one aspect of our trip to Uncle Jon's house that I must share—one that my students love, too. Our plan was to drive across a mountain to Uncle Jon's village, where we would participate in a cultural consent ceremony called a "sevu sevu" that would grant us permission to enter, share a meal, and then go together to the rocks. It was going to be an exciting day. My questions about consent still lingered, but I tried to push them out of my mind.*
>
> *Before our trip with Paulo, I learned that he is an avid critical pedagogue who has great experience leading workshops in* Theatre of the Oppressed*. As a critical educator myself, I laughed in sheer delight at the randomness of finding a Freirean educator in a rural village of the South Pacific. Paulo and I developed a rich friendship discussing Freire's ideas and how they played out in his* Theatre of the Oppressed *workshops. When I learned that he did not own a copy of* Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I told him I would give him mine. It was marked up, tattered, and well-loved from graduate school. On the day of our visit to*

Dakuniba, I gifted Paulo the copy of the text. On the ride to Uncle Jon's house, Paulo kept Pedagogy of the Oppressed *on his lap.*

As we drove, my researcher consent questions still looped around and around in my mind. They nagged at me so much that I decided to bring it up. I told Paulo about my concerns about data collection without IRB permission. I was so concerned with the ethics of permissions that I started rambling about this to Paulo, and he waved Pedagogy of the Oppressed *at me and shook his head. It was as if the two Paulos were giving me an important message.*

"Elizabeth," he said. Paulo is a gentle man, but in this moment, he spoke to me firmly.

"Stop what you are saying. Just stop. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is everything. Stop with this other nonsense. Nothing else matters. The sevu sevu is the consent."

I sat back against the seat and relaxed my shoulders. I laughed to myself. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is the consent. The sevu sevu is the consent. *These words echoed around my head. While I knew this to be true, I didn't believe it to be true until the Paulos graciously taught me this lesson. The vanua owns the consent, and consent is obtained with a sevu sevu ceremony. It is not obtained in the ways that I think it should be. I must yield to their ways.*

With Paulo Freire in hand and Paulo in person to help me along the way, I inched closer to learning and unlearning what it means to be a teacher/researcher in Fiji, and honor and respect the Fijian people above all else. As we bumped along the rugged road, I smiled to myself and allowed Paulo's words to wash over me—"the sevu sevu is *the consent…"*

ASSIGNMENT

Culminating Storytelling Experience

Prompt

What aspects of iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) knowledge and/or customs are you longing for in your life back home? Construct a written story that responds to this prompt. Your story will be shared during a community talanoa (storytelling) event.

Reflection Questions

1. What experience here made you realize you were longing for this?
2. What iTaukei knowledge is embodied in your longing? Cite specific examples from the text.
3. In what tangible ways will you embody these new understandings in your life back home?

Notes

[1]Fijian "good morning" greeting

[2]For more information on the theoretical foundations of the course, see Yomantas (2020a).

[3]For more information on the design of the experience, see Yomantas (2020c).

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