

Navigating the digital va-vā: Centring *Moana*/Pacific values in online tertiary settings during COVID-19

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Abstract

Core *Moana*/Pacific cultural values and practices are usually considered as unimportant, irrelevant or ineffectual in academic practice or tertiary teaching and learning spaces. While *Moana*/Pacific ways of knowing and being have flourished for thousands of years, in recent times they have been constantly dismissed and devalued by mainstream or dominant cultures. Nonetheless, those educators who hold *Moana*/Pacific values as central to their lives, have long recognised the need to illuminate these *Moana*/Pacific values in their practice so as to counter the neoliberal values of most tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The complete and abrupt shift to working, teaching and learning online, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant many educators are scrambling to connect and engage their students. In addition to, and compounded by this sudden pedagogical shift, inequities in education have never been more overt. Before this forced change, it was possible for educators to assume, often without major repercussions, that within the neoliberal institutional setting their preferred mode of delivery was sufficient to engage students effectively without prompting or monitoring. Since COVID-19, that system has been forced to adapt quickly and oftentimes ineffectually. Fa'avae (2019) argued that “disrupting ingrained thinking is possible when using Tongan or *Moana* people concepts that allow for deconstructing, re-focusing, and rethinking that is centred on Indigenous views of the world” (p. 6).

In this article we provide personal accounts of how deconstructing, re-focusing, and rethinking teaching and learning to centre *Moana*/Pacific values helped us adjust to the impact of the pandemic on our personal lives and work, as well as enhance student connection and engagement.

Key words: *Moana*/Pacific values, *fakaalofa*, *'ofa fe'unga*, *ola*, *tautua*, education, tertiary education.

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Introduction

Although New Zealand's national educational policies (such as the Pasifika Education Plans and the Tertiary Education Strategy) direct institutions to be more inclusive of Pacific cultures, languages and communities, critiques indicate that “curricula, pedagogical approaches and organisational cultures continue to reflect predominantly ‘western’ values, knowledge and approaches” (Fonua, 2018, p. 95). While *Moana*/Pacific ways of knowing and being have flourished for thousands of years, core *Moana*/Pacific cultural values and practices are usually considered unimportant, irrelevant or ineffectual in academic practice or tertiary teaching and learning spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In 2000, prominent Pacific scholars developed the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative for and by Pacific People (RPEIPP) to “ensure that aspects of indigenous peoples cultures and related worldviews and life values and philosophies inform the work of educators” (Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 82). Since then, various Pacific academics have critiqued the suppression of *Moana*/Pacific values in formal education, such as Taufe'ulungaki (2003) who argued that differences between Western and Pacific values contribute to the ineffectiveness of education in the Pacific.

‘Pacific’ is a contentious term for a diverse group of peoples; while ‘Pacific Island peoples’ may share some widespread belief and values, they are not homogenous (Hau'ofa, 1998). Yet, there are countless references to Pacific values, such as reciprocity, love and respect (for example, Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001). Values are key to *Moana*/Pacific

cultures as they guide communal behaviours that benefit the collective. Each value discussed in this article is proffered in the personal stories of the authors' teaching and learning experiences in tertiary education.

As cultural contexts shift and change, so do ways in which we “nurture, care and cherish the *vā*” (Sauni 2011, p. 59). Albert Wendt (1996) defines *va* as “the space that relates, not the space that separates”. For Tongans, *vā* is the “...*relational space between two time-markers (tā)*. *It is a space that is fashioned through the relationship between time-markers – beats, things, or people*” (Māhina, 2004). When we use the term *va-vā* it is to acknowledge both Samoan and Tongan definitions of relational space.

Koya Vaka'uta (2017) highlighted the complexities of the digital *vā* as it challenges the real-time situating of place, space and time located in traditional understandings or practice of *vā*, and the paradox of nurturing e-relationships for Pacific people. In our article we share pragmatic examples of how we translated our practice of *Moana*/Pacific values into our new online teaching and learning spaces during COVID-19. We purposefully capitalise Indigenous and italicise all Pacific languages (for example, *lea faka-Tonga*, Tongan language) to distinguish them and give them mana. Furthermore, we use *Moana* together with Pacific to recognise the Indigenous term for the body of water that connects us and acknowledge Aotearoa as the Indigenous name alongside the more widely known New Zealand.

Vignettes

The benefits of incorporating *Moana*/Pacific values, behaviours and concepts into formal classroom curriculum and pedagogy for engaging Pacific learners have been well researched (for example, Kalavite, 2010). Yet, *Moana*/Pacific values are dismissed and devalued by

mainstream cultures in higher education, despite mission statements and strategic documents stressing their importance. Recently, Enari and Matapo (2020) argued that for Pacific epistemology and ways of being to be effective, they require more than acknowledgement, they need to be implemented and embedded. In this section, we position each author and provide personal accounts of how our centring of *Moana*/Pacific values helped us adjust to the impact of COVID-19.

Aiono Manu

As a Samoan New Zealander, I live mostly in the Samoan world while caring for my elderly parents. As my first teachers, my parents instilled the value of *tautua* (service), a fundamental principle in my identity. I use the various forms of *tautua* to engage in *soalaupule* or what I call ‘decision making conversations’ when sense-making complex issues in vocational education. Engaging in *soalaupule* accurately means that I consult with all people who need to be consulted in conversations to help make decisions. I practice the *tautua* lifecycle with the intergenerational spheres of service (Fa’aea & Enari, 2021).

Growing up with a strong sense of *tautua*, my father often said to me, “*E tasi, ae afe*” (One, but a thousand), that one of me was worth a thousand girls even if I was the only one to serve. Living in lockdown with my elderly parents, I have reconsidered how I enact *tautua*. Working from home, I am on call to protect my parents’ health as much as possible; tending to their needs between online work meetings eased my mind. Even though regular updates in *Gagana Samoa* (Samoan language) were available, I was their main source of understanding, translating the impact to their daily routines.

For me, family and community are always interwoven, and COVID-19 has precipitated rethinking of traditional organisational practices. From my community's perspective, Zoom church board meetings have maintained opportunities for *tautua*, as decisions can still be made collectively, such as ceasing services before the Lockdown was announced. Having local board councillors and working professionals in our congregation kept us informed about government assistance for families and wage subsidy grants for our minister, which boosted overall morale. Digitally, we shifted to contactless forms of tithing and church operational expenses, offered online services through our church's Facebook page, and congregational families posted videos to stay connected; we were becoming adept in reimagining our *va* to digital *va*.

My parents' response to COVID-19's impact helped me in my vocational education work, allowing me to guide employers and apprenticeship organisations to improve their engagement with Pacific communities. Industry demand for free training for re-training staff increased as job losses became a new reality: the reform of vocational education is already disrupting tertiary providers; the global pandemic added further complications. At work, to enact *tautua*, we needed to have *soālaupule*. This resulted in us working more collaboratively in our digital *va*, making meetings more productive.

Sonia

In Aotearoa New Zealand I identify as *Pākehā* (*te reo Māori* for New Zealand European), and in *Moana*/Pacific contexts as *Pāpālangi* (*lea faka-Tonga* for European ancestry). I live with my Tongan husband and our children with our extended Tongan family. My lived experience, and ontological and epistemological thinking, such as understanding *vā*, has been shaped by

the contemporary expressions of Tongan culture demonstrated by my Tongan *famili* (family), who are based in Aotearoa New Zealand and closely tied to the Kingdom of Tonga.

For the last twenty years I have predominantly taught science in higher education but my arts background has created interesting ontological differences between me and my colleagues (i.e. whose knowledge is valued, which practices, approaches, beliefs are valuable and validated, and what is truth or real).

My research and practice critiques the valuing of relationships in western modern science education in particular, and formal educational institutions and mainstream culture in general. When I teach I present The ‘*Ulungaanga faka-Tonga Fonu*’ model (Fonua, 2019), a model of the values I embody in teaching and learning spaces that draws heavily on Vaioleti’s (2006) ‘*ulungaanga faka-Tonga*’ (Tongan behavioural characteristics) needed for effective talanoa. This model visualises Tongan ways of being and language, such as *vā*, into mainstream institutional spaces so that *Moana*/Pacific learners, particularly Tongans, can connect and see their knowledge prioritised by activating discussion around behaviour and expectations in teaching and learning spaces. I believe that we must transfer our humanness and value social connectedness, readily visible in Tongan, and other *Moana*/Pacific cultures, through *tauhi vā* (maintaining relational space) particularly in science education.

One behavioural characteristic, ‘*ofa fe’unga*’, is the focus here. ‘*Ofa*’ means love while *fe’unga* indicates limitations or boundaries; ‘*ofa fe’unga*’ means compassion that is appropriate to the context (Vaioleti, 2006). ‘*Ofa fe’unga*’ became especially pertinent when COVID-19 drove us to remote teaching in Week 3 of Semester One. We employed The ‘*Ulungaanga faka-Tonga Fonu*’ model in the first week’s tutorials to build *vā*, connecting teammates by sharing their

important values with each other. In the online delivery format, the behavioural characteristics of the model became central to the digital *vā*, to my communication with students, tutors and staff; it became a reference point to remind ourselves to consider things with '*ofa fe'unga* in mind.

As the semester continued, '*ofa fe'unga* became increasingly important in supporting students through COVID-19. As course coordinator, I offered solutions or amended practice as their homes, families, personal and work situations became more complex. Reminding academic staff to practice '*ofa fe'unga* when awarding grades, late penalties and providing access to support became a mantra; I saw tremendous shifts in how staff spoke about equity and access as their expression of '*ofa fe'unga* grew and became more normalised. I am particularly proud of how students worked together and believe that my insistence on demonstrating and requiring '*ofa fe'unga* meant they were enabled to care for each other.

Cherie

The word *Ola* signifies my positionality as an educator as the COVID-19 pandemic erupted into the world. Teaching and learning at the university was thrown into discord with the system failing to respond to the needs of students, particularly Pacific students. In many Pacific languages, *Ola* is 'life' or 'to live'. During the lockdown period in Aotearoa New Zealand, I wanted *Ola* to signify the life of phenomenal practice that was able to transcend the boundaries of technology. That is, my phenomenal practice was to be a living process that enabled Pacific learners' lives to protect and safeguard their connections with formal learning.

My students were at the pinnacle of their degree as learners, ready to complete their undergraduate degrees. As a university class, we had had three weeks of face-to-face teaching

before we were abruptly thrust into the technological space. A space so foreign, disturbing, white-defined, combined with the challenging issues of access and participation. Suddenly we had to come up with a plan, regardless of the university directive. The plan required a solid base of love and clarity so students were able to learn in our course about an education system and society that presented challenges. We were living the teachings of our course: 'Multiethnic education'.

Not all students had the luxuries of Wi-Fi nor even access to a laptop. Facebook became a comforting space to engage and to communicate key messages; fortunately, a student had already created a class Facebook page. COVID-19 turned the university into a cold environment unhelpful to learners' needs. All communications were confusing and riddled with mixed messages: Stay home, come to campus, online learning in the second trimester, move away, come back and so on. Our first Zoom lecture felt so emotionally charged: I could see some students were confused and still adjusting to isolated learning in their own homes; coming to grips with the onset of the pandemic.

It was important that our class was cared for. Practice what you preach. Why? My course is about facilitating the teaching of transcending cultural boundaries and ignorant tensions in Aotearoa New Zealand society to discover the middle ground, mana/power and peace. How could I achieve this message online, through a clinical method such as Zoom? As an educator, I wear my heart on my sleeve, something not usually synonymous with university teaching. I cut through the s&*t and educate on the ground; it is about lived realities, not just preaching from theory and outdated journal articles. I am honest about the perspective I take and the ground that I stand on. I aim to speak for those who have had their voice taken away from them within the New Zealand education system. My emotive narratives helped to keep my

students close to me, even through physical separation; in the first Zoom class, I shed tears. These tears represented frustration and hurt, that my university had not shown the *aroha*/love that my students should expect. Therefore, I had to ensure that my students were gifted with a course that was part of their breath, not part of their daily to-do-list. Communications were founded on love from me and my tutor Sean. Our use of Facebook created an online educative relationship for us. As we shifted through lockdown levels, it was evident that students craved support to stay connected; and showed us through their deepest reflections and insights that the way we were living our learning was making a difference.

Janice

I write this as a daughter of Niue Island, not within the constraints of White Academia. When COVID-19 drove New Zealand authorities to enforce the Lockdown, my initial thought was “shit”. A colleague requested we debrief as she was anxious about the directive from managers to “pack-up” and “work from home”. I declined and asked, “What for?” My *Fakaalofa* (love) did not sit with her, but with my students.

The word *Fakaalofa* in *Vagahau Niue* (Niue language) means Love in English. In Niue, *Faka* always precedes words of importance: *Fakalilifu* (Respect); *Fakaaue Lahi* (Thank you); and *Fakaalofa Lahi atu* (Greetings). Growing up, the demonstration of love for someone was to feed them. My late father always said, “it’s better to have more food than just enough food”. At Niue functions, it is common practice for people to dish up food to take away, meaning people have either eaten or that there is more than “just enough food”; *Fakaalofa* has been demonstrated to all guests. This practice of *Fakaalofa* informs my teaching; as I always have food in my class so that my students have the necessary energy levels to learn. My *Fakaalofa* is also demonstrated by alleviating any barriers I can for my students when learning.

With lockdown imminent I wondered how my students would feel my *Fakaalofa* for them? I knew students would struggle: struggle to feed their children, struggle with employment, struggle with unsafe living situations, and struggle with access to technology for their learning. Lockdown would expose the good, the bad and the ugly.

The Good: My colleagues and I were ready to resume learning as normal - however, while we had prior experience with online learning; our students had not. When our students turned up to our Zoom classes, as staff we celebrated. Unsurprisingly, many did not attend or not stay the whole time. I demonstrated *Fakaalofa* by supporting them regardless of whether they could come to a timetabled Zoom class.

The Bad: Directives to teach as ‘normal’ (i.e. transfer 3-hour block classes directly to Zoom), downplayed our ability to connect with students physically, emotionally, and behaviourally when not in ‘normal’ classroom settings. Remote learning also affected concentration levels. I decided to shorten classes and offer flexible one-to-one opportunities for students to connect with me, morning, noon or night. I did not wait for this to be approved, I just went ahead.

The Ugly: In addition to teaching, I spent time on the following:

- Contacting welfare agencies for food packages for my students and their families.
- Disseminating information about accessing extra food and resources for their families.
- Connecting students to low-cost broadband.

The situation got so bad for some that I explored options to pay for online shopping myself for students when welfare agencies ran out of food.

Conclusion

The complete and abrupt shift to working, teaching and learning online, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant many educators are scrambling to connect and engage their students. In addition to, and compounded by this sudden pedagogical shift, inequities in education have never been more overt. Before this forced change, it was possible for many educators to assume, often without major repercussions, that within the neoliberal institutional setting their preferred mode of delivery was sufficient to engage students effectively without prompting or monitoring. Yet, the authors have never made that assumption, as indicated in Cherie's story of how she acts for those students who do not have a voice in the education system.

Since COVID-19, the neoliberal tertiary institutional system has been forced to adapt quickly and oftentimes ineffectually. Janice's story highlighted the need to respond quickly to student needs rather than waiting for institutional declarations and policies. She believes that actively demonstrating *Fakaalofa* will help our students keep the faith and carry on even if the institution is still determining how to respond. Sonia 2's story outlined how her practice of countering mainstream institutional spaces by embedding *Moana*/Pacific values at the outset meant the rapid shift to online, and a digital *vā*, was eased by the prior discussions of values such as '*ofa fe'unga*' with course staff and students. Aiono Manu's example demonstrated a rapid shift in communication practice so that digital *va* discussions were purposeful, more productive and outcomes oriented in her work, home and church community.

Fa'avae (2019) argued that "disrupting ingrained thinking is possible when using Tongan or *Moana* people concepts that allow for deconstructing, re-focusing, and rethinking that is centred on Indigenous views of the world" (p. 6). For Janice, she usually demonstrated her *Fakaalofa* (Love) through the provision of food in teaching spaces; since COVID-19, she has

re-focused her *Fakaalofa* by connecting her students to community and welfare agencies. For Cherie, she lives, breathes and feels her phenomenal practice; COVID-19 has encouraged her to continue to deconstruct the barriers of mainstream institutional learning, so that she can share her emotions and find ways to “nurture, care and cherish” (Sauni, 2011). For Sonia, it is essential that we rethink why the culture of higher education, particularly in science, favours objectivity and neutrality; we must encourage emotional responses such as *‘ofa fe’unga* (compassion relevant to a context) to be able to *tauhi vā*, whether real-time or digitally. For Aiono Manu, *tautua* was refocused across her work, family and church community, allowing for greater productivity in performing service for the welfare of others in reimagined ways.

Those educators who hold *Moana/Pacific* values as central to their lives, have long recognised the need to illuminate these *Moana/Pacific* values in their practice so as to counter the neoliberal values of most tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. To ensure that good relationships and humanness are prioritised in our teaching and learning, whether face to face (*va-vā*) or online (digital *va-vā*), we must make *Moana/Pacific* values more visible and privileged. Using *Moana/Pacific* values emboldens us to continue navigating digital *va-vā* for future generations.

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