



FLEXIBLE LEARNING FOOTPRINTS



Celebrating the Pacific, Shaping its Future
CENTRE FOR FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Flexible Learning Footprints



Celebrating the Pacific, Shaping its Future

The Center for Flexible Learning at The University of the South Pacific is a Center for excellence in flexible and technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

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Acknowledgements

Sheer hard work and dedication went into the development of this book which is primarily a salute to the University of the South Pacific (USP) turning 50 years young. As a labour of love/ passion project, the development team at CFL wishes to thank each and every author for their contribution.

This book is a collection of reflections which provide insight into the learning journeys of students, teachers and administrators at USP. While generally following an informal narrative style, the stories represent a cross section of personal experiences, challenges, desires, ambitions and most of all lessons in lifelong learning.

The inspiration for this book came from an earlier publication titled, *"Negotiating the distance: a collection of experiences in teaching extension courses at the University of the South Pacific"*, released by Extension Services (now CFL) on the 25th anniversary of USP. It was only fitting that a follow-up sibling publication be released 25 years later to mark the ongoing journey in flexible learning filled with resilience and progress characteristic of USP.

The development team acknowledges CFL staff members past and present that shaped the landscape of distance and flexible learning at USP. A special thank you to Deputy Vice Chancellor Learning, Teaching and Student Services, Professor Richard Coll and Pro Vice Chancellor Flexible Learning, Professor Som Naidu without whom the realisation of this book may not have been possible. *Cheers to the next 50 years of flexible learning!*

Foreword

The University of the South Pacific (USP) in 2018 celebrates the 50th anniversary of its founding and first course offerings. As can be seen in this important book, capturing some of this remarkable journey, distance and flexible learning has been part of USPs 'DNA' from inception.

The book presents a “collection of reflections which provide insight into the learning journeys of students, teachers and administrators at USP.” As such, it provides a fascinating insight into the challenges faced by all players in the implementation of flexible learning at the institution. The narrative style provides a unique insight into the lived experience of individuals, working in a complex learning environment. We are treated to insights from campuses and centres on small atoll states as well as the bigger campuses; but one thing comes through very clearly; the dedication and thirst for quality learning of all involved. The use of technology is seen to evolve from the basic to the more sophisticated, with the introduction of USPs learning management system (viz., Moodle), to its innovative use of satellite-based tutorials and video conferencing as ways to bridge the enormous distances separating learners and teachers. It is immediately evident that USPs learning environment, whilst posing numerous challenges, produces highly resilient teachers and learners. Equally it is evident that this brave experiment of providing distance and flexible learning across 33 million square kilometres of ocean, was achieved by a remarkable tripartite relationship between the learner, the teacher, and the support staff.

The USP and its Centre for Flexible Learning, rightly celebrates and captures an exciting collection of stories in this book, and the book serves to provide inspiration for all involved in distance and flexible learning.

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The Transition

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No one is really prepared for the transition until it knocks on the door. The year was 2003 and the student was hopeful as she was to begin her first year at the prestigious University of the South Pacific. All those career lessons and open-days at all the different tertiary providers would now be put to the test. Somehow the open-days made all these institutions appear more glamorous and exciting.

The day began with a tour of the University, free lunch and freebies. It would definitely get better than this, or so the student hoped. However, the courses for the first semester of the hope were divided into on-campus and distance and flexible learning (DFL). DFL¹ the student wondered. Oh well the student thought, this is university and one was expected to be bold. The DFL courses were for the Law units which one needed to pass to progress into the second year.

The Course Books were thick and mustard in colour and heavy to lug around. No more desks in the classrooms to store them like high school. It was either you paid for a locker or you lugged them as elegantly as you could around the campus. The student chose the latter and had to purchase a good quality bag to carefully keep the books in pristine condition for the duration of the semester.

¹ Distance and Flexible Learning provides a range of educational opportunities through a variety of modes and technologies. The term was later revised and is now known as 'Flexible Learning'.

The course coordinator who came to visit from Emalus² Campus told the students that there were Readers to accompany the Textbooks. Then there were reference guides and library tours to inspect the law books by which time the student was literally lost. These were not mentioned at the open-days. No one said that there was so much involved. From reference guides, to finding the correct section in the library which stored textbooks and using the PacLII³ search engine. These were supposed to be helpful tools yet they appeared to confuse the student even more having had only limited access to computers for English projects for an hour or two a week.

The first few weeks were challenging as no one told the student that the University in reality was jammed with hundreds of students each trying to find their rooms. The student had to find her way for the on-campus units which was tiresome as they were placed at the convenience of the schools and lecturers. The DFL courses were good except tutorials took place in the evenings usually from 6-8pm in the *dungeons*⁴ because often they were at the bottom of buildings which were secluded to say the least.

The tutorials with the legal practitioners were good and often they provided good feedback. The challenge was the satellite tutorials where it was like playing hide and go seek because

² Emalus Campus is located in Port Vila, the Capital of Vanuatu and it hosts USP's School of Law.

³ PacLII - the Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute. It is an initiative of the University of the South Pacific's School of Law with assistance from AustLII.

⁴ The term used by student to refer to dungeon like classrooms on the ground floor of FALE building (Laucala campus).

for one, the network kept dropping out and two, the student had to introduce themselves each time they wanted to contribute or else be marked present with no participation marks. Often the student was too shy to attend the satellite tutorial because if one's answers were wrong, the Course Coordinator would correct you right away that often one had to master one's strength and stand calmly while the rest of the class looked equally petrified. The student still had to attend the satellite tutorials and on-campus courses whilst trying to adapt to using the internet, using the EASOL⁵ system as it was back then. The student had to look for the relevant law textbooks and familiarise herself with the referencing books.

The student made a friend and two. The burden became lighter. The Course Coordinator was able to identify her voice during the satellite tutorials. The evening tutorials became more bearable with friends. The course materials became easier to use with many minds sharing their views on the dry history of how the different areas of law evolved.

The transition had arrived and the student became a student. The student was now able to find her way in the University. The assignments now made sense and they were submitted on time. The semester was drawing to a close and there were exams. The student gave it her all and passed. The transition had made it possible to advance to the next stage.

⁵ A learning management system used by the School of Law at USP prior to Moodle.

“It matters that you don’t just give up”

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In many ways, my experiences as a full-time student at USP is summed up in Stephen Hawking’s words. It has been challenging yet fulfilling as I progressed through the years.

I am very grateful for the assistance provided by the USP Disability Resource Centre (DRC). Before enrolling, I visited the DRC for advice and was assisted with my application for admission. I was also introduced to the services provided by the DRC and ensured that I requested for the assistance of a sign language interpreter. The Disability Resource Centre provided reasonable resources that allowed students with disabilities to learn with other students on a level playing field. It provided sign language interpreters to assist deaf students during lectures and tutorials, student buddies to assist with school work, a computer lab outfitted with the JAWS⁶ software to assist blind students as well as coordination meetings to introduce students to our course coordinators. There was also a common room for students to study in and rest in between our classes.

My first year was in Semester 1, 2014 and I enrolled in the Certificate in Early Childhood Education Level 3 coordinated by (Pacific TAFE). It was a totally big shift for me as I was in a new learning environment. I was also worried about how I

⁶ Job Access With Speech (JAWS), is a software developed for computer users whose vision loss prevents them from seeing screen content or navigating with a mouse. JAWS provides speech and Braille output for computer applications on your computer.

was going to cope and blend in as a student with hearing impairment. However, USP Pacific TAFE assisted me with the use of the Student Online Services and Moodle⁷. It was an extensive learning environment for USP's staff and students. Through Moodle I was able to access course information, class presentations, and activities. I was able to take administered tests and quizzes, and it facilitated class discussions. Having all of this in my head, I felt a bit nervous. However as time passed, I was able to adapt and adjust to the demands required by the USP.

I marveled during my first few weeks at USP as it was my first experience in a Higher Education system. For example, during my primary and secondary school years, we did not use technology. At this tertiary level, it was a different ball game altogether and I thank God for the knowledge and strength he provided. When I enrolled, my courses were on print mode and it was a great battle for me as I was not familiar with this kind of learning environment. It was so difficult to learn a new language. *Phew ...* English was very difficult for the deaf.

For a person like me, sign language was my first language and learning English was tough – but I managed to get through it. Imagine a partially deaf person like me who could hear sounds and phonics, trying to figure out the pronunciation of the words and the sound from the audio recording. I was nervous during my first 3 weeks interacting in class while trying to adapt to the new system. I remember when I started with my Moodle quiz in one of my courses, I was so nervous and terrified to answer this quiz and needed a lot of assistance from the DRC staff members and volunteer buddies. They

⁷ Moodle – an open source, password-protected learning management system used by USP.

assisted me in many ways such as accessing Moodle for tutorials, participating in forums as well as showing me how to submit assignments in the drop box.

I was selected by the DRC to represent students with disabilities during the 2016 Vice Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Forum among the many activities I was involved in during my studies. I am now confident and continue to enjoy studying at the University of the South Pacific. I have made a lot of friends. I even travelled to Japan through the USP JENESYS⁸ Programme! I would like to thank USP for the opportunities it provides students with disabilities through the USP Disability Resource Centre and other departments. I believe, that without the special assistance, students with disabilities would have a difficult time adjusting to their tertiary studies.

At this point I would like to encourage all students with disabilities to study at USP because of the support services available to them. I would also like to encourage you to believe in yourself. Nothing is impossible when you put your heart into it. It is said that the only disability in life is a bad attitude.

*"However difficult life may seem,
there is always something you can do, and succeed at.
It matters that you don't just give up."*

~Stephen Hawking

⁸ Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths.

USP Tuvalu Campus at the Turn of the Century

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“There is no truth only personality.” ~Gareth Morgan⁹

This reflective piece covers my three years as a Programme Assistant at the USP Campus in Tuvalu from 2003 to 2005. It is meant to be easy reading for the keen with perhaps a lesson or two for those who may find themselves in a similar situation.

I graduated from the University of the South Pacific (USP) at a difficult time for Fiji so work was scarce perhaps because of the political instability ushered by the 2000 coup d'état. I worked two part time jobs, teaching at the School of Tourism and Hospitality and as a student housing officer at the USP. By 2002 my teaching contract had ended and since my USP working hours were not convenient, I decided to resign and work for a private firm where I received \$100 a week. The hours were normal and I had a company car to keep my mind off the reality that I was heavily underpaid. The reward from this job was being able to develop and implement systems and monitor their impact daily. When something didn't work I had the freedom to make the required changes.

By December 2002 I received the offer from USP to work at the Tuvalu Campus which I quickly accepted. Although it paid AUD\$8221 annually without housing allowance, I looked forward to the opportunity to be relocated to another country

⁹ Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*.

and experience a different life. Not only was my wife from Tuvalu, I felt I owed the Tuvaluan government for sponsoring my son's two medical trips to New Zealand for definitive surgery.

Tuvalu provided a unique challenge as I did not know much about the work environment, culture and ethics. There was no induction and proper training by the University so it felt like I was set up to witness Murphy's Law at work - that if anything can go wrong it will! Despite the challenges stacked up against me I was determined to make a positive impact in Tuvalu and challenge Murphy's Law. Until then I thought my greatest motivation was derived from part employment opportunity and part activities that required some degree of control and contribution on my part.

I arrive on December 21st with my young family in Tuvalu, met by Ms. Fetagisi Titivalu at the Airport. (Ms. Titivalu still works at the Campus and recently graduated with a Post graduate degree). It was the two week Christmas break and no one would be at work till the third of January. The entire island was on holiday. In this time, I familiarised myself with the island. We spent the next few days swimming in the lagoon and cruising the island on rented mopeds. At nights we would join others on the airport runway¹⁰ with our *mekele*¹¹.

¹⁰ The International airport runway on Funafuti is well known for its multipurpose function. During the day it's a multipurpose court for various sports and at night families would take mats and spend time there under the dark star lit sky.

¹¹ Local mats about 6 ½ft by 3ft.

Geographically, Tuvalu is made up of eight low lying atolls with a total land area of only 26 square kilometres. The average height of the land is 2.6m high. At the narrowest part of the Island you can see the Pacific Ocean on both sides. Crops and vegetables cannot be grown on the land and drinking water is sourced from captured rain water. Drought is not an unusual occurrence. There are only two high schools and the main government school is a six hour ferry ride across the open sea from the capital to Vaitupu. Tuvalu is now listed as one of the first countries to disappear in the face of rising sea levels.

On my first day at work I meet the staff. I was impressed with Ms. Titivalu for holding several portfolios – as Accounts Officer, Office Manager, Pay Clerk, Acting Programme Assistant and Banner¹² Operator too. Ms. Amuia was the quiet librarian with a big smile. It took me a while to adjust to the office operational hours especially learning that Friday was half day. My office was so bare I could hear my thoughts bouncing off the walls. However, not all was gloomy. The exiting Director, Mr. Hauma possessed a very commanding demeanour about him. I remember he had the gaze of a professor that silently cheered me on to keep thinking beyond the conversation. I don't remember much of what we discussed but I was impressed with his wittiness and ability to lure me into a deeper conversation. Sadly he was retiring after a very colourful academic and teaching career but it was indeed an honour to meet him. I knew of him as the author of 'It's not that easy' which was part of a book of short stories

¹² Ellucian Banner is an enterprise application that the USP uses to manage administrative information ranging from student grades and schedules to human resources and budget information.

called 'Roots Waka', high school students in Fiji studied for English class.

To my surprise, when Mr. Hauma left, I was asked to oversee operations at the Campus as Acting Director. The staffing structure was quite shallow and the Acting Director's allowance for one month was equivalent to a Personal Assistant's (PA's) annual salary. There was no denying that at times I would pray the University would overlook the need to appoint a new Director. (I believe Mr. Hauma was appointed as Principal of the Church Secondary School based in the capital). Shortly after, a new director was appointed, Ms. Malona. She was a strong character and always got staff to attend a weekly devotion. She came across as a disciplinarian and took time to talk to all the staff members. Ms. Malona had great plans for the campus and should be credited for her vision to increase maritime enrolments and upgrade the dilapidated state of the buildings.

Unfortunately, Ms. Malona passed away after only a few months at work. Once again I was appointed Acting Director but this time with an actual appointment letter. I was getting better at acting "like" a Director. After deliberations with the maintenance office in Suva I was informed by Mr. Daurewa (Campus Maintenance Supervisor) that Tuvalu was in fact overdue for its ten-year cyclical maintenance. This was to be my first ever experience in coordinating a six digit renovation budget. In a couple of months, with USP funding and local labour, the Campus was stripped from the roof to the walls to the tiles with new paint and window frames.

After a few months Mr. Tubuna, a retired experienced education administrator was sent to Tuvalu as interim

director. Upon his arrival, the Campus was in the middle of brokering talks between Tuvalu's Ministry of Education and the USP College of Foundation Studies on introducing the 'special education project'. Mr. Tubuna's health did not favour his youthful spirit so he had to terminate his contract prematurely. At that time the project was ready to commence and I was appointed Interim Project Coordinator until the ministry was able to find a permanent replacement. The then Minister for Education, Honourable Mr. Seluka awarded my contribution with a thank you letter and an honorary allowance. At twenty seven I had managed an entire campus, supervised the refurbishment and coordinated the education project.

With the School based foundation students attending whole day classes, the Campus became a hive of activity. All of a sudden there were eighteen year old students roaming the capital. Normally, once the school year started the Islands were quiet as students had either travelled to Vaitupu for secondary schooling or overseas for further studies. The presence of these students on Funafuti may have impacted the normal island routine and motivated former school drop-outs and government employees to re-enrol in some form of study. Our first cohort of students were grade 16 which meant that on average they were scoring an average of 4¹³. Not only did these students eventually pass with flying colours, they now work in prominent positions in Government as diplomats, doctors, bank officers, teachers and one even became a pilot. Most of the In-service students¹⁴ enrolled in courses related to

¹³ Equivalent to 50-60% pass.

¹⁴ Mostly public servants who took courses on a part time basis.

law and policing in the Pacific. One working mother started off with a non-credit certificate course in law and just recently got admitted to the bar as a fully-fledged lawyer fifteen years later. Another young police officer did policing in the Pacific with law courses. Today he is the clerk to parliament.

The Campus vigorously expanded its outreach programmes with radio advertisement, jingles, pitching attractive packages to government departments and non-government organisations. I would sit with the person in charge and discuss the training needs of the office. The discussions led to the formulation of either a new up-skilling course or existing regional continuing education courses such as the Early Childhood Education Certificate (ECE) or care for the aged or disability studies. The range was wide and readily available. Using my past teaching experience at the School of Hospitality and Tourism I developed a local basic computer course. At the height of all these activities the Campus encouraged teaching staff to upgrade their qualifications in teaching courses at tertiary level. All teaching staff including myself (a part time substitute teacher) enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (GCTT) programme. The Campus slowly experienced a growth in enrolment and course numbers and I observed the surrounding communities grow in confidence. One of the personal goals I set for myself was to fulfil Ms. Malona's wish to increase maritime enrolments. There were public servants on other islands such as teachers and

*kaupule*¹⁵ staff who wanted to enrol for extension¹⁶/DFL courses. This was an impossible request because the boat schedules to and from were unpredictable and internet was not as good as we know it today. After thinking about the idea in my once-empty office, it dawned on me that there was a reason why the USP was the only regional University in the world that was also owned by, not two or three states or Governments, but twelve different governments. These heads of government in deciding to have regional campuses in the twelve countries knew very well the magnitude of challenges.

After closer assessment I narrowed down the real challenge to integrity. There were no real logistical problem as timelines could be adjusted and I could manage the long distance communications and appoint local tutors as long as the courses chosen were well within the local tutor's capacity. The University exam and assignment regime had stringent guidelines and we had to ensure these activities would be carried out in an environment acceptable to the University and well within the established guidelines. To address this issue, church pastors¹⁷ were approached to assist in executing the plan. In short they were the trusted eyes and ears for the University. There was no special remuneration within the University's budget to cater for such an arrangement but these colleagues, as I would later refer to them, had an equal

¹⁵ Kaupule is the island local government under the Ministry of Home Affairs.

¹⁶ The term was used to denote distance and flexible learning prior to DFL.

¹⁷ The Church and its pastors are treated as Gods and have the highest respect of the land many times even higher than Government representatives even cabinet ministers.

passion and a higher regard for their purpose that they offered to do it within their compensatory entitlements as exam invigilators. So in addition to invigilating exams, they would collect the exam papers, store them safely in their church offices, and send them to the main land for marking on the next available boat. Before exams, papers were faxed at least one hour before the scheduled exam time. The pastors would collate, staple and have the required number of papers ready. There would be several phone calls made within the hour to ensure the right number of pages were collated and at times during the exams when an error was highlighted, there were further phone calls to ensure the changes were also made in the islands. Remember, back in those days there were no mobile phones and so the idea of someone being on standby was as literal as it sounded. Someone physically had to be standing by the landline to run messages to the exam venue¹⁸.

There appeared to be an increase in the number of students from Tuvalu qualifying for tertiary level studies and every year after 2004 there was a huge influx of students qualifying for USP scholarships at Laucala campus. Some reasons for this possible increase as briefly discussed earlier were: the introduction of the school based/ augmented foundation programme; the availability of full time tutors on the island and the aggressive marketing of continuing education courses at the campus. It seemed like my soul searching trip to this remote island in the middle of the central Pacific became a learning plain I found myself sliding down. I was learning new skills. I was planning, leading and organizing. As a keen

¹⁸ Although there were only two Secondary schools, each island had a primary school and these were used as exam venues.

musician, improvisation was second nature and I found myself sourcing from that innate ability to positively influence outcomes in impossible situations. In 2004, Tuvalu hosted the USP bi-annual council meeting. After some email exchanges with Registrar Mr. Walter Fraser, the University endorsed to conduct a fully-fledged graduation ceremony as part of the council programme. That was coordinated successfully with twenty continuing education students also receiving their certificates in basic computing.

It had been many months since Mr. Sakiusa had returned to Fiji and so in 2005, the University finally formalized its appointment of Mr. David Manuella¹⁹. It was with Mr. Manuella that I relinquished my self-appointed status as roving director/ coordinator/ project advisor/ tutor and renovations consultant. Looking back at those three years, I never would have imagined being blessed to experience as much as I did. What started out as a soul searching adventure turned out to be a very intrinsically rewarding time. In retrospect I am thankful for an empty office because it allowed me to think clearly. There was no ‘writing on the wall’, no beginning and no truth written in stone. I understood what the University stood for and what my purpose and role was. There was character to be built both as a means and as a goal. Organisation behaviourist and writer Gareth Morgan aptly stated, “there is no truth only personality”.

¹⁹ Campus Director 2005 – 2015.

Oodles of Moodle: a distance education revolution

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From 2007 USP embarked upon the roll out of a new learning management system (LMS), the open source 'Moodle' system, but also used this occasion to improve distance learning practices generally throughout the institution. The School of Law had a particular interest in moving to a better LMS as well as revising the way that distance learning was being undertaken and so became an innovative early adopter and collaborative partner to the Centre for Educational Development and Technology (CEDT)²⁰ during the Moodle roll out.

Distance learning and in particular online learning has been an ongoing site of growth and innovation for many years now, but often, initially at least, develops in an ad hoc way as a function of changing technology and changing needs of students and educational institutions. The result can frequently be a cascade of innovations, adaptation of older delivery modes (such as face to face teaching or print delivery) to emerging technologies, and experimentation that can lack a coordinated educational design. Whilst much progress is achieved by innovators and committed educationalists even in periods of ad hoc experimentation, there always comes a time

²⁰ Now known as the Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL).

when a new beginning is required to rationalize and optimize the emerging practices.

This is what occurred at USP from 2007 onwards, with the introduction of the Moodle LMS, a technological change that also provided the occasion for a major reboot of the way that the pedagogy of distance learning was approached at USP. As a law academic situated at the Emalus campus in Port Vila at the time, I experienced the proposal to undertake a comprehensive rethink of our entire distance learning practice and technology as an exciting and welcome opportunity.

I had recently completed a Masters of Education in Australia that specialized in online learning, and had also recently moved to Vanuatu to teach in the Law School. My study of education had filled me with a passion for intentional design as the cornerstone of good pedagogy, especially where online and distance teaching was concerned.

As a relatively new academic at the time, it was apparent that online and distance learning was a rapidly emerging new form of engagement for tertiary educators. From a design perspective my approach was that online and distance learning was a separate enterprise in itself from face to face learning and not simply a new technology for transmitting content, nor doomed to be forever inferior to face to face tuition. Face to face teaching allows for much more contact, communication and ad hoc adaptation during a teaching semester, but the development of quality course design, content delivery and student engagement for online learning depends upon forward planning. It became quickly apparent that the sophistication of pedagogical design needed for online delivery could more easily be retro-fitted to face to face

teaching, than the other way around. For this reason the project of designing quality online and distance curriculum is of fundamental importance to the modern university. One of the often unseen advantages for example of well-designed distance education programmes is that they are much more robust at adapting to changes in academic staffing from time to time, than was traditionally the case with face to face teaching, where the departure of a staff member sometimes meant a loss of a lot of knowledge and experience and even content that may not be usefully available to an incoming staff member.

The roll out of Moodle at USP was much more than simply an institutional shift to a new learning management system, as Whelan notes “The LMS project was an axis around which University reform and the improvement of teaching and learning could revolve” (Whelan 2007).

The University had been using a variety of LMS systems, including Plone based Edison system, WebCT²¹ and Moodle. The School of Law being based on a regional campus away from the main Fiji hub of the University had developed an autonomy and aptitude around its distance teaching that made it an ideal place to start the *moodlisation* of the University. There were already some 40 law courses being delivered via an LMS system that was severely constrained technologically. Whilst the older platform allowed little more than the ‘dumping’ of content onto a shared site, the law staff had persevered to the extent that they had developed many innovative solutions to entrenched limitations of the

²¹ Web Course Tools

technology and had built a strong community of practice around online teaching (Whelan 2007).

In many senses the Moodle revolution in the law school was a liberatory one, to the extent that major change projects can be within work environments in which staff are already close to capacity. The liberatory capacity of Moodle was that it held the promise of replacing an older content based system with a state of the art, interactive learning management system. Accordingly, the process for the law school involved not only becoming acquainted with new possibilities of a genuinely innovative LMS, but also to embark on a process of stripping dense written content out of the LMS and re-engaging with the design and development of quality print materials for static content delivery and re-imagining the use of the LMS for student engagement and interactivity.

So often these exciting potentials of technological revolutions fall on the barren ground of overworked staff or lack of genuine enthusiasm from support centres within the institution, but fortunately a close, productive and passionately innovative relationship quickly formed between some of the law staff and staff from CEDT. In particular this relationship was fostered by a 'champions' project in which staff from CEDT were assigned to the law school and selected law school academic staff were seconded to work half time for CEDT as project champions.

As an academic selected for this role the opportunity was exhilarating. Never at any Australian university had I had the daily one-on-one support of qualified educational designers and software developers. An anecdote perhaps best encapsulates the creative buzz of that experience. I was

passionate about designing online learning experiences that could engage students in interactivity with their peers in particular and bring online learning to life, but I was no computer whizz. I had the passion and the innovative teaching ideas, but had always felt constrained technologically. Nonetheless with the support of Robert Whelan (educational designer) and Dhiraj Bhartu (all round code writing problem solver) it seemed that almost anything was possible. I recall discussing with Robert how I wanted to replicate online a situation so familiar in campus-based tutorials where each week a small group of students would make a presentation to their peers, albeit asynchronously. Robert and I worked on the pedagogical design whilst Dhiraj helped us to adapt the existing Moodle capabilities towards this task. It was a simple aim that became quite complex once it was squeezed through the cheese grater of an LMS. But the beauty of Moodle was that it was open source, and the beauty of Dhiraj was that he could write new code to solve problems as we encountered them. Instead of just getting the familiar answer of ‘computer says no’ I was able to innovate, test drive, and to discover critical boundaries in the available technology.

I recall my collaborators joking that as an academic I was the perfect crash test pilot because whatever the LMS couldn’t do, I would be sure to try to do. Well this is exactly what happened one day, but after explaining what I needed from the LMS, Dhiraj worked many hours writing code to make it possible. The next day we trialled it, there were still some problems, but I vacated my office, took an extended lunch as Dhiraj pounded the keyboard and on my return the problem was solved. Ever since this, I have been a particularly demanding and dissatisfied educator in subsequent

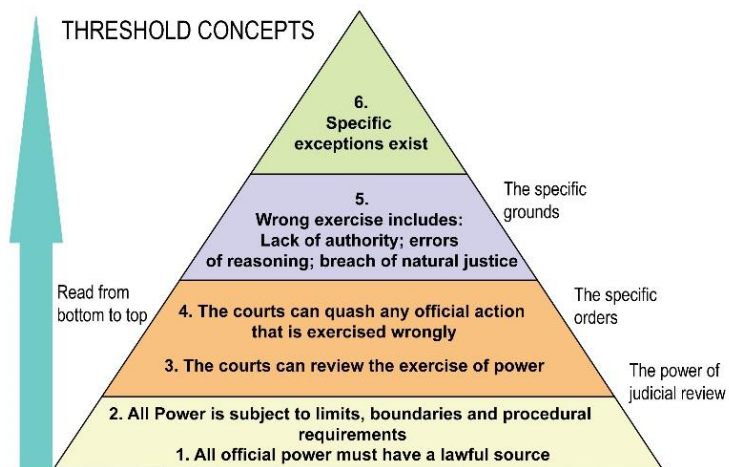
institutions when saddled with a proprietary LMS and lacking the support of a code-writing warrior over lunch.

As indicated earlier the roll out of the Moodle LMS was also a Trojan horse for a complete re-working of the pedagogical design of distance and flexible learning (DFL) materials. Consistent with my own professional approach that DFL education should be designed and purpose built, it was delightful to have the opportunity, resources and professional assistance to work up truly well-designed materials for conversion into print and other forms, and to be able to concentrate on using the interactive capabilities of Moodle for encouraging student engagement.

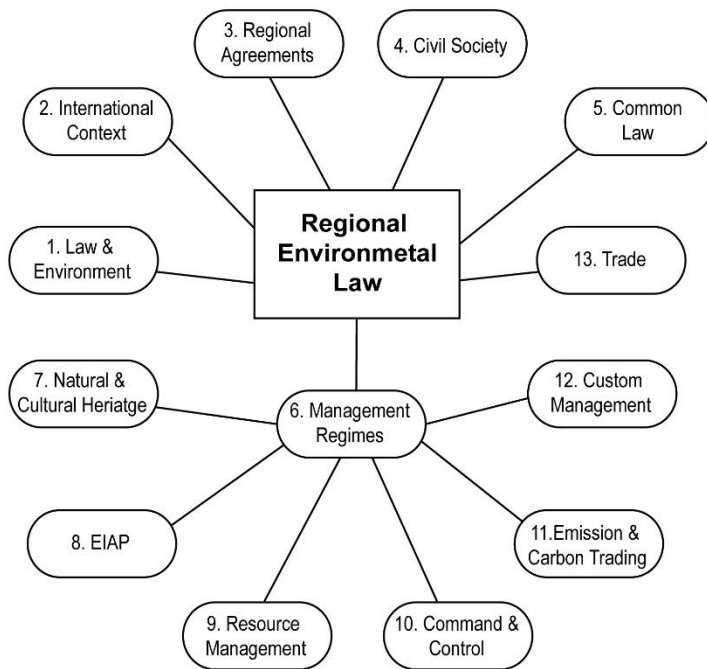
One of the major innovations that I worked on with the educational designer Robert Whelan, was producing concept mapping for the subjects I was developing. My enthusiasm for concept mapping was in part fuelled by my own research and passion in the area of threshold concepts (Ricketts 2010). Threshold concepts refer to troublesome conceptual aspects within a discipline area (such as law) and in the context of our work at USP, the troublesome nature of legal concepts was exacerbated by the fact that the post-colonial legal systems derived from a cultural context partly unfamiliar to most of my students.

In my teaching of Administrative Law, for example, I had come to realise that a great body of English law that involved the Courts placing limits upon the exercise of power by governmental officials and other formal power-holders was often very confusing for Pacific students who had grown up within Pacific customary law contexts, in which the origin of decision making power was not legislative, the limits were not

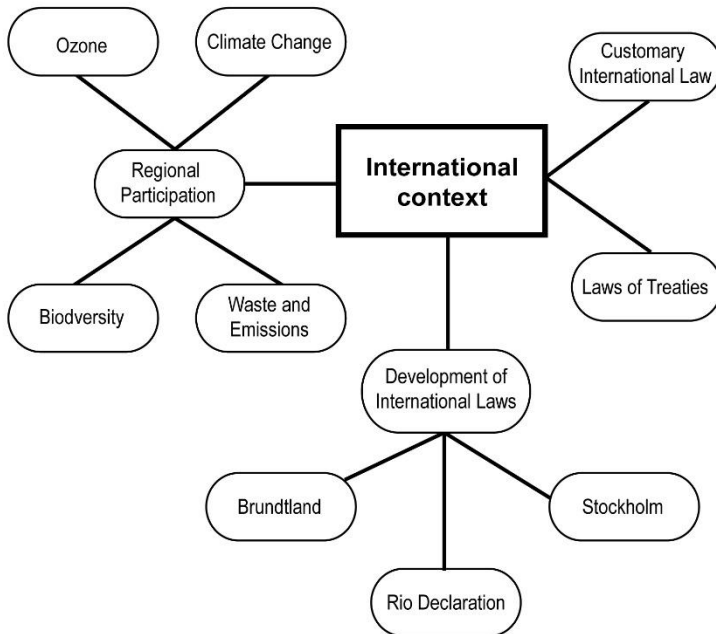
formally defined by legislation and the exercise of which was not always traditionally reviewable by courts. Eventually I had come to understand what it was about Administrative Law that was so troublesome and counterintuitive for my students, and developed a concept map in the form of a pyramid to elucidate the ideas that were foundational to the subject. This map became a key tool in helping students explore what lay at the foundation of post-colonial administrative law.



With deliberate design going into the content of the subject, it was possible to design each topic with its own topic based concept map as well as to provide concept maps that helped entire subjects to cohere the weekly topics. Below is a course wide concept map for the subject Regional Environmental Law.



The concept mapping into cognitive spatial diagrams was also continued into the individual topics. Above is an example of a topic based concept map also from the subject Regional Environmental Law.



The development of higher quality static material such as the text versions of the study guide topics, made it possible to concentrate more attention to the lay out of the Moodle shells for each subject and innovating with student engagement and assessment. In Regional Environmental Law for example a student wiki project was launched in 2008 that was optional but attracted a notional additional 5% mark for students who participated. The wiki project although exposing students to new and sometimes confusing form of collaboration nevertheless proved to be popular with students.

The ongoing *moodlisation*, which also meant the development of well-designed course materials generally along with experimentation in online delivery and interaction continued

on a timetable for the Law School from 2007 through to 2010 when I myself left to move back to Australia.

The enthusiasm for innovation, for design as the basis for the development of DFL and the collegiality I experienced in the *moodlisation* project were high points of my time at USP. Probably the biggest frustration during that time was the very slow broadband available at the campus in Vanuatu which did make our work very challenging. Nonetheless, in reflection it was an exciting time, and remains a useful anecdote to remind colleagues at Australian universities that teaching at USP in a developing country such as Vanuatu, was not only a stimulating and valuable cultural experience, it was sometimes surprisingly well supported and innovative.

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The value of determination and perseverance: my DFL years

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From where I am today and reflecting on my undergraduate studies journey, it has been an arduous one but on the same token it has been a learning experience. But of course, nothing is given to anyone *'on a silver platter'* without sacrifice, determination, perseverance, commitment and support from your family members and friends. The higher education arena has changed so much over the last one and half decades that everyone has been given the opportunity to pursue higher education if they chose to do so. In the early days we were only aware that to get a higher education one must enrol into a university and attend *'face to face'* classes in order to attain a qualification. This notion has changed with the introduction of print mode, online mode and blended mode of delivery.

After graduating with my teaching qualification, I was eager to upgrade my qualification from a Diploma to a Bachelor's degree. I then went to enquire if there was any other mode of study knowing that I was going to be posted to a rural school as part of my teaching requirement for new graduates. Upon enquiry at the USP Raiwaqa Centre, I was told that I could register for a programme and there were courses that were available through DFL mode. In those days the DFL mode of learning was quite a new concept and not many people knew about it like me. There was very little to no public awareness about this mode of learning.

What did I think might happen?

I never thought that I would be able to complete a degree without being a full time student at the USP Laucala Campus was ever possible. It is always good to dream! Dreaming is free and it allows you to anticipate greatness. I never dreamt that holding two Masters qualifications would ever come about. But this did not come easy; it required a lot of sacrifices, realigning priorities and commitments to be able to fulfil those dreams.

The thought of upgrading my qualification was not hindered and I got really excited to register and start with the programme. After graduating with my Diploma in Education from the Fiji College of Advanced Education in 1999, I registered for my first DFL course in Accounting in 2000. Being young and ambitious, I did not want to waste any time and got right into it. I first applied for the Bachelor of Arts programme majoring in Accounting and Economics. Knowing that I had been posted to a remote school set the benchmark that I obviously needed to study via DFL mode so I enrolled into AF201: Managerial Accounting. At first, I felt excited that I was beginning the journey to fulfilling my dream, but as I progressed into the semester, I started to feel very challenged and lost. Trying to keep up with the weekly readings and activities was not exciting anymore. In addition to the thick course book, I needed to have the textbook from which the weekly activities were based. As the semester progressed, the fear of completing the course became real. I had initially thought that I could study at my own pace and if I did not complete my assigned work for the week, there was always next week to catch up. I was in a lonely world where there

was no connectivity nor study buddies and this made my journey even more difficult. I completed the assignment and sat for the mid semester test but got discouraged when I received my results. I decided not to continue with the course without knowing that I needed to officially withdraw from a course as no such information or advice was provided. This first experience of DFL mode directed me to re-think and re-strategise my studies as to how I could progress in my programme of study.

I took a break for three semesters and mapped out my new plans to continue my studies. My transfer back to Suva enabled me to continue with my studies. I then re-enrolled into the programme and learning from my previous experience with DFL mode of study, I was very cautious and took time out to find out more about what support was available and what could help me progress well and I made sure that I did not miss any opportunity that was provided to help me. Apart from attending the weekly tutorials provided for DFL mode students, I connected with some of the full time students in the face to face mode as some of my courses were also offered on both modes in the same semester. From these friends, I was able to access lecture notes and other important details pertaining to assessments and tests explained in the lectures. I would meet these friends weekly, either after work or in the weekends to discuss the activities and this directed me to keep up with the courses' weekly schedule. This strategy really helped me progress well with my courses. This networking with other students in the course, in discussing assignments and solving problems was a core contributor to my progression in my studies. We would normally meet

outside the ANZ bank seats after work or at the *white tables*²² in the weekends. I can still recall sitting outside the bank with my study group after work until midnight discussing the assignment and preparing for our final exam for Accounting. This strategy really helped towards my final exam preparation, and in the midst of all the discussions and studying we were bitten by mosquitoes, but in the end it was worth the sacrifice and the end result couldn't have been any better than I expected. Once I got through and passed my first DFL course, I was a lot more confident and motivated to continue my studies in the DFL mode. I could only enrol in one course per semester due to my work commitments which helped towards my tuition fee payment and of course time needed to be devoted to my studies. I kept persevering and whenever a course was offered during summer school, I would enrol and this helped me complete my undergraduate degree a lot quicker than if I had waited for DFL offerings each semester.

What were the challenges?

The challenges that I faced studying through the DFL mode was much related to the lack of additional support provided, such as the use of Moodle. At that time, the learning platform used was *class share*²³. There was hardly any information given on *class share* for some of the courses. Doing a DFL course from a remote location was also an issue as I had no means of attending any tutorials, nor was I in contact with other students doing the course. Trying to commit time to my

²² A study area outside the USP dining hall on Laucala campus.

²³ Class share was a network facility used at USP prior to Moodle that enabled students to access teaching aids uploaded by teaching staff, it was accessible over the network locally or via the Internet.

studies with a full time job was a great challenge and still is today. Communication tools were also not available then, compared to what we have now. Internet was a luxury commodity that was only used in business and not at our disposal.

What I wish I had back then

When I was given the offer to pursue my studies with the University of the South Pacific, I remember being given the unit that I had to do first. I guess at that time, the unit offerings were limited to a few in my programme of study. There were no counselling/advising sessions nor any guide or handbook for students to refer to. Had there been counselling with the academic staff, I would have been better informed. Being a new student to the university without being advised could be overwhelming and at the same time imprudent.

With the rapid changes in education, accessibility to resources is no longer the issue. Students studying via DFL now have REACT²⁴ sessions and Moodle access and other communication means such as email. Had these resources been available then, I am sure my performance would have been better.

Did it work out as I expected?

I could literally say that my undergraduate degree was done via DFL. Apart from the three 300 level Accounting courses which were only offered via Face to face mode and the courses

²⁴ Remote Education and Conferencing Tool.

which I took during the summer schools, I studied all my other units through DFL.

When it comes to individual learning, it can be unmotivational and tedious but when you engage with other students, the learning then becomes more exciting and the burden gets lighter. Connecting with other students in the same course (especially those studying via Face to Face mode) was ideal especially with discussions and preparations for assignments and tests. This strategy really can help a student progress successfully. Engaging in group discussions always helped as this pushed me to be well prepared before the group meeting.

To be a successful DFL student, I knew that I needed to take one step at a time. This basically meant enrolling for one unit per semester if I was enrolled in an Accounting course and for Economics, I would enroll for two units in the semester – one Economics course and the second unit would be an elective. I knew I would be able to cope. I always seized the opportunity during the summer school offerings to speed up my programme completion. Learning from my initial experience with Accounting, I realised that one unit in DFL demanded more than I had thought so re-strategising my enrolment was necessary to ensuring that I could manage the study load as well as my full time teaching job. This all contributed to the successful completion of my programme.

Upon the successful completion of my B.Com which I changed from BA so many moons later, I then looked for further growth in upgrading my qualification. It seemed like continuous enrolling in a course had become a normal part of my life, just like going to work every day. I took a semester off from studies

but then felt the urge to continue thus I opted to register into the Masters programme.

The greatest challenge for me during those DFL years was managing my time as no one was there to direct me and I was in control of my studies. I learnt along the way to manage and try and keep to the weekly schedule. And of course determination and perseverance was key to my success. I could say that the money spent on my education was worth it!

Would I do anything differently?

Had I been given an opportunity to study full time, I would have opted to study via Face to face mode which would surely have meant better results. The positive takeaway for me during this long period of study had instilled in me the urge to keep going. There's no end to learning and it's become part of my life. Today, I still dream of continuing this challenging learning journey of teaching and studying and I firmly believe that through taking small steps I will eventually reach my destination.

Moodling History: making a Pacific History course more accessible to distance students

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In 2007 I came to USP to teach history. This was not my first time in Fiji. I had accompanied my husband when he was appointed lecturer in Physics in the late 1970s, and I had done some tutoring in History and Education during this first seven-year stint in Fiji. While I knew something about USP's history and expertise in distance education, neither my husband nor I had been closely involved with 'extension services'²⁵, as it was known then. In the late 1970s, distance students could access satellite tutorials and the assistance of USP Centre staff (assuming they were within reach of the capital of their island group), but they had to put up with slow and unreliable postal services to send in assignments and have them returned after marking. This was especially true for remote students; those nearer USP Centres had the more reliable USP inter-country mail bags. Course books were not always available at the beginning of semester and contact with course coordinators and tutors was limited.

By 2007, the emphasis throughout USP was on strengthening services for off-campus students and on making their experiences as similar as possible to the experience of face-to-face on campus students. This was seen as an equity issue. Technological advances, primarily the internet, increasingly made this possible. Students were able to send assignments directly to lecturers by email, and marked work could be returned the same way. If course coordinators were willing to

²⁵ Now known as the Centre for Flexible Learning.

use USP's online learning platform Moodle, students could access discussion groups, external sites relevant to the course, do online quizzes and generally feel part of the whole class, linking distance and face-to-face students. Still, these technologies were usually only available to students living within reach of a USP Centre, who could attend satellite tutorials and access USP computers and USPNET²⁶. More remote students were still in the same position they had been in the 1980s, so equity issues remained. In 2007 not all coordinators were confident enough to attempt to use the Moodle system.

When I arrived at USP, knowing little about Moodle and its attendant wonders, I decided to try it, guided by the friendly and helpful staff of CFL. The History department was at the time revising its Pacific history offerings, and my colleagues agreed that I could try out Moodle and other technologies while developing the course *HY205 Pacific History: contact and response*.

The challenges of History courses

My colleagues and I had become concerned that many students at USP were finding History particularly challenging, as it was seen as mainly concerned with the written word, demanding a particularly high standard of English competence – and most USP students have English as a 2nd, 3rd or 4th language. I believed therefore that there was a need to incorporate visual materials in the course, and specific guidance on the reading of historical texts which intimidated students. I was interested in helping and encouraging students to investigate local histories and write about their findings in assignments. I was also concerned to find ways to

²⁶ USP's satellite communications network

make learning, even for distance students, more of a two-way process, and enable closer contact with students who could not attend face to face classes. With the help of the CFL²⁷ staff, I attempted to develop a course on Moodle which would be accessible to all students with a reasonable internet connection – while recognising that this did not include all of them. However, we decided to develop the online Moodle components and then see how we could deliver at least some of the new content to those without much, or any, internet connectivity.

HY205 Pacific History: contact and response covered the period of the first European arrivals in the Pacific in the eighteenth century to the beginning of formal colonization in the mid to late nineteenth century. This was the period of explorers, traders, missionaries, and attempts at indigenous constitutional governments; a period of encounters between peoples who were very different from each other; a period of wonder, struggle, reassessment and loss.

There is much written and visual evidence of the encounters between Islanders and outsiders, but there is a problem: almost all of it was Eurocentric, written by the outsiders. Were there ways of looking at Western documents ‘against the grain’ to find the viewpoint of Islanders? ‘Contact’ was easier to document than ‘response’ – but could we find it? In early encounters, Islanders accepted some of what outsiders brought such as Christianity, and rejected other things. Much else was indigenized and then incorporated into community life, so why the differences in acceptance? Where was the power balance in these encounters, and how did it change with place and time? These were the main questions of the course. Amongst the skills we wanted to develop were

²⁷ Centre for Flexible Learning

improved comprehension of a variety of written sources, interpretations of visual texts, and critical thinking.

Using Moodle

Ala Lesuma-Fatiaki, course designer for HY205, and I investigated ways to incorporate the visual, enable discussions, and develop self-assessment tools using Moodle tools. There was a great deal of visual material on the early explorers' visits to the Pacific as naval expeditions from Western nations often included artists as well as naturalists, geographers and other scientists amongst their crews. They were intent on an enlightenment desire to expand knowledge of the world for its own sake, as well of course search for exploitable economic resources.

For example, from a case study used on the course, William Hodges was the artist on James Cook's second voyage (1773), so he drew and painted Tahitians in a much more professional way than the amateur artists (including the captain) in the much smaller crew of the *Dolphin*, Samuel Wallis' ship which visited Tahiti in 1767. Many of these paintings and drawings were freely available via Wikimedia Commons and other such sites, and could be posted directly in Moodle, along with maps and diagrams created by the lecturer or available from copyright free sources.

Where images were held by western museums and libraries, those institutions often had very good websites showing, explaining and discussing the collections, which included Pacific artefacts as well as images from these exhibitions. Moodle was able to link directly to such sites. We incorporated links to the Cook collections at the National Library of Australia, the Wilkes collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington USA (Charles Wilkes led a long and

comprehensive American naval expedition through most of the Pacific in the 1840s) and any temporary special exhibitions relevant to the course (for example the 'Vaka Moana' exhibition in Auckland and Canberra in 2011-12). Many of the images were shown in lectures and satellite tutorials, and compressed versions of the lecture PowerPoint were made available on Moodle. Presenting images in this way enabled students to study them in their own time, when they had computer access.

Though the aesthetic impact of such images can be important, visual material was included in the course primarily for educational reasons. We used images in the discussion forums in Moodle, asking questions about realistic and stylised representations (some have suggested Hodge met Tahitians who looked like ancient Greeks) and the notion of the 'noble savage'. Why were western artists so interested in painting and drawing Pacific canoes in great detail? What more could be conveyed in an image over a written description? Then there were questions around the politics of museum collecting: why were the collections from these early Pacific voyages held now in metropolitan countries and why did the 'Vaka Moana' exhibition not visit any Pacific islands?

Discussion forums

While discussion of such questions could take place in satellite tutorials – and two-way video links enabled images to be seen by students both in the Suva and regional studios, the use of Moodle's discussion tool enabled discussions to take place at a time of the student's choosing. Discussion questions could be based on the readings – especially drawing on differing interpretations and opinions in two or more readings, visual images and news items (linked through Moodle). The downside was that the responses had to be written, not oral,

and two-way communication with students in other Centres was often slow. A discussion forum had to be active for weeks, gradually developing, and this had the disadvantage of lack of spontaneity but the advantage of encouraging thoughtful responses. It gave further opportunity for students to write and express themselves in a non-assessable environment. Many of our distance students were practicing teachers in the process of upgrading their qualifications; they were often posted to rural high schools. An asynchronous tool such as the discussion forums meant that if such students could access a computer with internet even once a fortnight when they come into a larger town to do other business, then participation was possible, especially if they came well-prepared to such a session (i.e. had done all the reading and thought about questions and issues from the printed Course Book).

In another course on History of the Empire and Commonwealth I made participation in such forums a compulsory part of the assessment, for students both in Suva and elsewhere. This was made easier by including possible discussion questions in the Course Book, enabling students to come to internet sessions (wherever and whenever they managed to access them) prepared to post an answer to at least some of the questions. It was always important to leave space and opportunities for students to ask and post their own questions too. As a last resort, I was always prepared to accept written contributions which could come by post or fax (still available in many rural schools), and which I would include in the discussion thread myself ('Student X, who can't get to a computer, suggests that ... ') but this was rarely necessary by around 2012, as connectivity improved around the region.

One drawback that I found to the use of discussion forums was the amount of time it took to moderate them – to comment

approvingly on interesting ideas, clarify confusions and misconceptions, and occasionally moderate disagreements which threatened to become heated. Many discussions where students were building on each other's ideas productively could be left to develop naturally, but the lecturer had to keep an eye on what was being said. I also found it important to monitor who was taking part – and who wasn't, and prompt, encourage or enquire about problems. I also had an open invitation to any distance students who happened to find themselves in Suva to come onto campus, come and see me in my office, attend any lectures, tutorials or other events that they could manage, and meet with their fellow students.

Adding local content

USP has students from all over the Pacific, so I felt an obligation to use content in the course from as many island groups as possible. This involved judicious choices over reading assignments, but was fairly easy to accommodate. More than that, I wanted to include an opportunity for students to investigate their own local history, and decided to use the unit on Christian missions in the Pacific to achieve this. After a general survey of the arrival of the various denominations, I then developed an assignment which involved, or at least could involve, an investigation of missions specific to a student's own island and tradition. While I provided materials which could be examined by students who did not wish to take this route, the option of local studies proved popular, particularly amongst remote students who could often find local informants prepared to be interviewed, and sometimes unearthed fascinating written sources, even if their access to libraries and the internet was limited.

Self-testing and quizzes

Moodle's quiz function allowed students to self-test on multiple choice and other question formats. I found that students liked doing such quizzes, and that motivated them to keep up with reading assignments. The format allowed questions to be set which relied on a visual stimulus – a painting, map or chart. My policy was to set a quiz for each unit of work, but not make it compulsory, and also allow an unlimited number of attempts. There were drawbacks to such quizzes: questions were time-consuming to set (especially composing plausible incorrect answers, and also writing the explanations for why certain answers were incorrect); and they tended to be factual tests rather than promoting critical thinking (it is possible to set questions that demand higher level thinking - but it is not easy). On the other hand, they could help students check that they understood what they were reading – probably their most valuable function. While the quizzes were non-assessable, the lecturer could track which students attempted them, and how successfully. I found that students who attempted the quizzes (even if with many errors) performed better overall in the course than those that did not attempt them. Engagement was valuable in itself.

But what about those with poor internet connectivity?

While we designed the Moodle components of the course to allow for less than continuous internet connections, the students still needed some online time and reasonable bandwidth to complete all the activities. But we also knew that not everyone had that level of connectivity. How could we ensure that all students had sufficient material and support to complete the course successfully? Part of the answer lay in ensuring that the old tried-and-tested methods

persisted, that printed Course books with not only the assigned readings, but also with some guidance about those readings, some discussion and reflection questions, some of the maps, drawings and other visuals (even if only in black and white) were in the hands of students in a timely manner at the beginning of the semester, even those on outer islands. USP had well-developed systems in place, but even then it was a challenge to get materials to students on time.

The assignment on missions gave remote students a chance to use their local resources. For the course *HY205 Pacific History: contact and response* we added another component – a DVD of mini-lectures which I recorded in the USP studio and which included PowerPoint with most of the images used in the course. This was distributed with the Course Book and so available to all students. We chose the DVD format because a DVD and television is the commonest form of media available in Pacific Island villages, and indeed we never received feedback that they could not be used, while downloading. Even compressed PowerPoint off Moodle was a problem in many places. Every so often I would hear back comments to the effect that auntie had greatly enjoyed my lecture on missionaries, or that grandfather would like to hear more about Captain Cook – so it seems that we were fulfilling an (unplanned) community education function too by using DVDs!

In one semester I had a student take the course HY205 from an island in Melanesia which was a considerable distance from the USP Centre and had no internet the student could access. I heard from the student twice, when I received their assignments (long after the rest, but the student had posted them by the due date). I found it hard to believe that my comments, posted back, could have assisted much, given the time delays, but I was impressed by the local research the

student had undertaken. The exam paper eventually reached me, and this student's marks placed them in the top third of the class.

Conclusion

I devised my history courses at USP aiming to give all students, whether attending face-to-face classes on campus or working on a remote island with little access to modern technology, a reasonable chance to complete the course successfully. I also wanted to give as many students as possible the opportunities for using new visual sources and better two-way communication, to enhance their learning. Moodle was a tool which offered this. However the balance between a more technological approach and the need to maintain basic provision for those who had little internet connectivity remained in tension in the years I taught at USP, and I believe does so still.

Examples of quiz questions:

A.

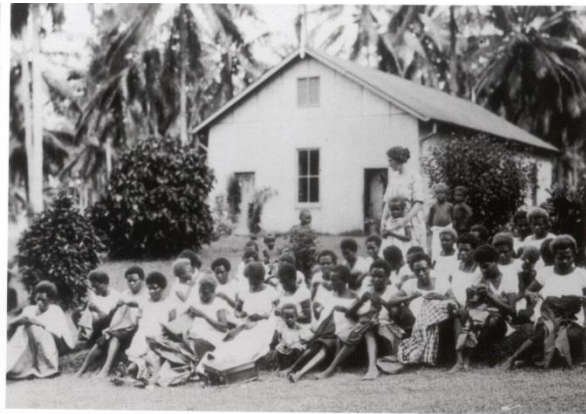


(William Hodges, *View of part of the Island of Ulietea, 1773*)

Choose 1 option out of the italicised alternatives.

This picture by Hodges, the artist on Cook's *first/second/third* voyage shows the artist experimenting with *painting the strong light of the Pacific/ painting skies just the way he had in England*, as he had in other paintings. He emphasised *detailed representation/the general impression* to create the effect he wanted. This painting also demonstrates the interest most of Cook's crew had in indigenous *canoes /houses /plants*.

B. The picture below shows a sewing class conducted by a missionary wife in Papua in 1926 (*Missionary Review*, April 1926, p 3.) What conclusion can we NOT draw from this photo?



- a) Separate gender roles for men and women continued after the missionaries arrived.
- b) Women stopped working in the gardens after they became Christians.

- c) The requirement to wear clothes after conversion meant clothes had to be made by Islanders.
- d) Missionary wives taught Pacific women needlework skills.

We don't work hard, we work smart

Akanisi Rawaico

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I enrolled at The University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus in 2017 to pursue a Degree in Commerce. Let me begin with a quote from a close friend who once said, "Aki I tell you, we don't work hard, we work smart". I didn't know the true meaning of his words until I took up a few of my courses in the DFL mode.

In comparison to the normal high school learning techniques of going to school early every morning, writing notes and completing exercises throughout the day until 4pm in the afternoon and staying up late at night to try and get things done, studying in the DFL mode allowed me to comfortably learn at my own pace while striving to achieve the objectives of the course to fully grasp all the knowledge that was offered. From course materials to satellite tutorials and peer mentoring services, almost everything had been provided for. The only other item that was standing in the way of achieving an A+ grade was the dedication and effort made by me as a student.

Accessing learning materials online was as easy and convenient as downloading pictures of your favourite celebrities. The USP Moodle website was created in such a way that students, especially first year students are able to easily manoeuvre through the options providing you access to the various learning tools. Learning online requires you to have a good and stable internet connection and the USP Student Wi-Fi offers just that. For most of us with the preference of studying from home, it may be quite costly

taking into account the Wi-Fi/ data charges as a lot of it will be used up watching YouTube links and tutorials, amongst other things. Nevertheless, this is an investment worth undertaking and if you have diligently worked on your studies, expenses as such will be next to nothing in the future when you are able to secure employment or your own business and earn tenfold over the cost that you are bearing now.

As shy as I was, I would try to avoid socialising with people and came to school only when necessary. In DFL mode, most of the activities were done online, so to my benefit I had every reason to study from home. I was able to look through study materials and online tutorials from the comfort of my own study space at home. On those days when I did go to school to attend tutorials and submit assignments, I found out that meeting new people wasn't so bad after all. Some of those new friends actually helped me in my studies and where possible, I tried my best to help those who were still struggling to get through their first few courses at University.

One of the best things that I learned whilst studying in DFL mode was how important it was to be able to prioritise goals. Unlike secondary school, no one was breathing down your neck to make you get your work updated. Tutors and facilitators did the best they could in providing all the learning resources we needed and it was up to us how well we used it. I have learnt to put education as my first priority and tried my best to avoid getting caught in the web of distraction. Distractions come in many forms, whether it be social such as family functions, sports or other Uni-life activities or even your very own group of friends. You must be able to put first what you consider the most important at this time in life, and that is completing your tertiary education with flying colours.

All in all, it was a great and enjoyable experience being able to study via DFL, whereby you are able to progress at your own pace, online with all the resources at your disposal. In this new era, we must learn to study smartly, raking in all the resources needed efficiently while working your heart out.

Distance Learning: my motivation, my plan

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It was in the 1980's when I first heard of distance learning or extension studies as we knew it then. I was teaching in a primary school on an island about three hours from Suva City. Our District Education Officers came to visit our school accompanied by a representative from the University of the South Pacific, Mr. Sakiusa Tubuna. He shared with us the need to further our education to be able to acquire a Diploma or Degree in any field we chose to study in. I could not recall all that was conveyed to us that day but I'm sure it must have been convincing because some of us decided to pursue further studies through extension.

In my first year at a teachers college, I received a letter from an educator who was a relative, studying at the University of Hawaii, urging me to go to University when I finished Secondary School. He wanted me to be the first student from our village to study in the University. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I was already at a teachers college though university studies was always at the back of my mind. This was one of the reasons that motivated me to enrol for Extension studies, to study Education and Language. It was affordable and flexible. The other reason was the excitement of going back to studying after more than ten years of teaching. I knew at the time that I was going to enjoy studying and doing it well. However, I had not considered my other responsibilities.

After enrolment, it dawned on me that I had to look at my other responsibilities. I was teaching a composite class of grades one and two with a roll of thirty plus students. I was also a mother of four young children aged twelve, eleven,

eight and four. As I thought about all these responsibilities, I was not deterred as I was ready for the challenge. I just had to work hard and plan my time well. It was easier said than done. My first priority was the teaching of those thirty plus six and seven years olds. The time given to my class would be from half-past seven in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon; it was also the time for extracurricular school activities.

After my day of teaching, my other roles as mother of four children and house wife followed. I decided to appeal to my husbands' good sense to share the household chores with the two older children. He agreed albeit reluctantly. There were some minor responsibilities as well such as church functions, parents and teachers meetings, village meetings and women's handcrafting. I had to limit my attendance to these functions because of the workload. One disadvantage of distance learning was that it didn't allow me as much quality time with my children. Most of the time I was too tired to help my children with their homework. In distance learning, there was no one to remind you that your assignment was soon due. If you didn't work hard to do your readings, it was your fault.

I had to plan my work well and sometimes work any plan! Upon receiving my course materials, I read through the instructions and marked the important events on my calendar, especially the assignment due dates. I found the readings easy when I started. Usually I did my course work after the children had gone to bed. I did my reading until midnight which was my plan. Unfortunately I was not able to use the time well because I couldn't keep my eyes open after a few hours of reading. When I stayed up late, the result was that I woke up late. The first plan I laid out didn't work well at all.

I decided to change my reading time, so I opted to do my reading from half past three in the afternoon to five o'clock after which I had to prepare dinner for my family. This plan was most agreeable with me with much complaints from my husband and children who had to help with the chores. Eventually they accepted the arrangement gracefully. What I learnt from this was to be more consistent and determined to accomplish whatever task I decided to tackle. I also learned that I had to involve the people around me so that they had a sense of belonging and satisfaction for contributing to our family welfare.

I had to attend satellite tutorials which meant I had to travel to Suva for the one hour session after school hours. The satellite tutorial was quite new to me. Most of the time I just sat there quietly listening to the people talking. I thought I did not gain anything from these sessions but I became a very good listener, a skill I lacked before. The good that came out of this experience was that I was much more committed to working my study plan. During my entire experience in distance learning, I realised that my work as a teacher was always improving because of what I learnt from my studies. I had to withdraw from some of my units at times because of the workload at school. I knew that if I concentrated on my studies alone the children under my care would suffer and so would my family. I realised that I had to equally share my time, efforts and strength between my students, family and studies. If I had to go through distance learning again I would still not change my priorities.

Many friendships were formed between tutors and fellow students alike during the times we met for tutorials. I was empowered to be the person I am today through distance learning. All the experiences I went through made me more

understanding, focused, determined, strong and selfless. I thank God for everyone at the University of the South Pacific especially those who toiled for Distance Education. Thank you for your contributions, patience, tolerance and love.

My online journey ... a voyage from fear to confidence

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*The question isn't "How do I teach this?" but
"How can they learn it?" ~Jane Bozarth*

This was a pivotal question that I drew from when developing and teaching online. How could we know with confidence that what we were developing and delivering online would be embraced by our students throughout the campuses? Were we, academics ready to go online? Were our students ready to meet us virtually? These questions kept knocking on our doors, terrifying us, yet we knew one day we would have to take this voyage into the unknown. Just like our ancestors who had travelled miles and miles searching for land with limited resources, we had to learn to fearlessly let go of where we came from and how we were taught, to reach the land of E-Learning. We needed to bring USP to our people instead of our people to USP. This is my E-Learning journey, my experience of developing and delivering an online course.

Diving into the online development environment

In 2013, I was tasked to develop the first online course for the School of Accounting and Finance at USP. With no knowledge of electronic technologies and being a product of traditional classroom learning, to say I was nervous was an understatement, I was petrified! I had seven years of teaching face-to-face and print mode courses under my belt and was confident with the curriculum. However, what petrified me was not the content but how I was going to develop an online

course for students who already viewed Accounting as a challenging subject. Then Bozarth's question resonated with me. With online design and delivery a new concept to my School and Faculty, there was limited knowledge of what constituted online learning and a dearth of knowledge on the types of technologies used to engage students. I had to figure out some of these skills on my own as an autodidact.

With assistance from the Head of School Professor Arvind Patel and the CFL team, we got right into the thick of things considering what the different learning styles of students were and how best we could address these different learning styles on this online platform. After some trial and error and sleepless nights the following tools were identified as satisfying the minimum standards for addressing the, "How can we transfer knowledge online?" question: E-books, podcasts, lecture and demonstration videos created using certain software, interactive quizzes and activities were certain tools we maximised on. In our opinion, these tools would be laid out in a student friendly interface. In the midst of this I was endlessly trying to make sure that the fear of technology taking over was subsided by the personalised student engagement tools succinctly aligning the learning outcomes and assessments.

After developing the online course, I came to realise my fear was based on the technicalities of the situation and nothing to do with the teaching itself. Once I learnt about the basic online tools and began using them, my confidence grew and my fear of going online subsided. Now was the exciting part, the course having passed the Quality Matters (QM) evaluation was ready for delivery to the students throughout the region.

Diving into the online teaching environment

Anything new and different is uncomfortable at first and an online course is no exception. Students as expected did not react well at first to the online course. There were feelings of uneasiness and frustration. Another question dawned on me ... how could Pacific Island students whose first language was not English and who have never been exposed to online learning or self-directed learning grow in such an environment?

At the beginning of the semester, the first order of business was to have a face-to-face student orientation session at the Laucala campus and have the same session via satellite tutorial for the other campuses. This was to establish a learning community and to ensure that all students became comfortable with the technology requirements of which navigating through Moodle was an important feature. More importantly was the reassurance for students that they were not alone and at the end of the day, regardless of the mode, I was still there to guide them through the course. Once that contact was established and the Moodle platform was introduced the anxiety slowly declined among students. There was never a doubt about the students' abilities to understand technology as these were students well versed with social networking tools. For the older students it was a chance to get their technology skills up to par.

It wasn't all plain sailing as there were other hurdles as well. Back then, there was a lack of workable computers in the USP computer labs and internet connectivity was relatively slow. It took a while to download or view lecture/demonstration videos or even to carry out online assessments such as quizzes. Students also had to learn to be more proactive, engaging with

the materials and mastering their study timetable and themselves. As an online educator, I was not physically present to gawk at them at the tutorials for lack of effort as I would in a face to face classroom. In the online environment I did my best in the discussion forums to voice my concerns about the lack of online engagement if there were any. Students were told time and time again that they were in charge; if they had any questions, post them in the forums or chat with me online, anything apart from being silent. Students were also told that it was up to them to get the information they needed, test their knowledge and find new ways to apply it. This was a student centred learning environment and an exciting one too.

The main benefit of teaching online in my view was the asynchronous learning that took place. Students, in the comfort of their own space and pace could view their learning materials any number of times, no longer needing to be physically present at the campus. Students were also able to use technologies that were absent via face-to-face and print mode. Assignments no longer had to be printed, taking the long journey to arrive in Suva, Fiji from the USP region. Assignments were now submitted online, saving on money and logistical issues with fewer CO2 emissions! Students also didn't have to come to the university to submit their assignments. All they had to do now was submit via the drop box in Moodle and as if by magic, my screen views their assignment and I can provide electronic feedback to them within a week. Ah! the beauty of going online. I must admit that online marking was tiring at first, being stuck in my office chair staring at the computer screen for hours on end. It could be tiresome on the aging eyes and back!

Despite it all, our first cohort of online students successfully completed the course with bright eyes and a lighter heart. I am sure when they approach their second online course they will be better equipped, more receptive and with hopefully a less aggressive course coordinator. I learnt a lot from developing and teaching the online course. The experience gaining new technology skills and to some extent counselling skills for some students have left me more enriched as an individual. I am glad that I got to be the first to develop and deliver this first online accounting course. I am confident that I am now fully equipped for the next phase of course delivery. Whatever the change maybe, I am sure that just like our ancestors, I will master the next voyage with confidence and the knowledge that we are going to be okay.

From Lautoka to Laucala: driven by determination

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I came to know about Distance Flexible Learning (DFL) when I was still in form 6 in the year 2006 in Lautoka²⁸. It was during the USP Open Day at Shirley Park, conducted by USP Lautoka Centre (now Lautoka Campus). Students from schools in the Nadi to Ba corridor were present for this occasion and it was during the Campus Director's (Mr. Joseph Veramu) speech that he mentioned DFL. Courses from Preliminary, Foundation, Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels were offered and available for students who wished to study at USP but couldn't travel all the way to Suva (Laucala Campus). My friends and I did not hesitate to pick up the enrollment forms and attended a briefing about DFL. Some of the catch phrases that drew me in were, "you don't have to go to Suva", "save money" and "classes would be conducted through satellite tutorials with your tutor and classmates from all other USP Campuses in Fiji and the region".

So in 2007, I was enrolled in four Preliminary Foundation courses together with a few friends from high school. One of the first experiences I had after all the excitement during enrollment and orientation was that only some students would receive their course materials and the others would have to wait and in the meantime share materials with friends who were kind enough to share. Three of my courses were delivered through video conferencing with the lecturer and

²⁸ A city located on the Western side of the main Island of Fiji.

one face to face tutorial with a local tutor every Saturday held at Jasper Williams High School. My fourth unit would require me to read the course book and the introduction and assignment booklet. Correspondence for this course was through class share (web based folder for accessing course notes), email and two visits from the Course Coordinator based at Laucala.

The progression from high school learning to tertiary learning was a vastly different experience and determination was the key for survival. The teachers aren't there regularly to check our homework and monitor our studies. The new experience of sitting in a comfortable air-conditioned conference room, actually seeing your tutor live from Laucala and classmates from other campuses was a very pleasant and memorable one. I used to spend long hours in the library with my friends doing assignments and helping each other out so that no one was left out. It was fun because we learnt from one another as we were all from different backgrounds. Not all of us were fresh out of high school. Some were already working and doing part time studies and others were resuming studies after staying home for a few years.

Assignments were mostly individual work but for some courses there were group assignments. Group assignments were challenging when doing DFL courses for various reasons. Let me share this one story (challenge!) about group work that I experienced. It was a History course so it was a requirement that one or two of the assignments would include group research work accompanied by a group presentation. There were five of us in my group and our research was on a historical site in our community or any that we knew of in the Pacific that related to World War 2. Out of the five, only two of us were doing three other courses together, so our

timetables were similar. The other three students were living in different towns and we only met during History classes. During the times that we went to the library for research, the other students in the group were having their tutorials for their other courses and vice versa. It was my friend and I that ended up doing 90% of the research and compiling it while 10% input from the others was the presentation part. At the end of the day, no matter how much input each individual contributed, all had the same points awarded after the presentation. This was not only common to History, but in other units too where group research and presentations were required. I mostly got the full brunt of doing the group assignment on my own or with help from one other member. There were moments when I pitied myself but after receiving good grades for the group assignments and presentations, I never regretted it.

Another challenge I faced during my DFL days in Lautoka was that you had to find your own time and way to catch up when there was a power failure at the campus as classes continued as normal in Laucala and the other campuses. In addition to this, the visit from the course coordinator would only be once and if we were lucky, twice in a semester. During a tutorial visit we had to excuse ourselves from other tutorials and video conference sessions to make the most of the coordinator's visits, to answer all our queries that were not answered during the satellite tutorials. Afterwards, we would find time to make amends in our other courses ... as I mentioned earlier, determination was the driving factor!

At the end of the semester I passed some of my units and failed some, but it was a learning process. I then decided to join the workforce. I worked in various companies. Fast forward to the year 2014 when I decided to go back and

complete my Foundation studies through DFL at Laucala. By now technology had upgraded. There was a bit more flexibility in my studies and with my renewed persistence, I was able to complete my Foundation studies. This time, there was no more dropping off hardcopy assignments in the assignment box unless specifically instructed. All assignments were to be typed and submitted to the Moodle assignment drop box. Communication and availability of the tutors and coordinators improved as they were now physically approachable. To conclude my reflection with three word descriptions, my DFL experience back in Lautoka was slow, hard and heavy. Now, my experience at Laucala is fast, easy and light.

The culture shock: coming back to study via DFL

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I was teaching at Ratu Kadavulevu School, a rural boarding school in Tailevu²⁹, the year was 2010. A couple of my colleagues were studying via DFL at USP and they were an inspiration to the rest of us. I decided to return to USP and do further studies and upgrade my qualifications. This was partially inspired by personal ambition but more so a result of internal politics within the school that denied me an opening for promotion. I began to ponder: How would I attend my lectures and tutorials? How would I make time to go to the library and do research? When will I do my assignments? How will I make time to do all this and at the same time attend to the demands of my role as a teacher?

The USP Laucala campus was a one and half hour drive from where I resided. I lived in the school compound and this was a privilege that we (those who were daring enough to go and serve in an all-boys boarding school in rural Tailevu) were entitled to. I wondered, would I be travelling daily to USP and how would I foot the bill for transport? This was exacerbated by rostered duties outside of normal school hours and the weekend which demanded a lot of my time. Duties such as farm work supervision for students, night duty supervision, rugby and athletics coaching, the list was endless. I then enquired with a fellow colleague in school who was studying

²⁹ A province on the Eastern Side of Viti Levu, Fiji.

at USP at that time (let's call him Saki) and he introduced me to the concept of DFL³⁰. This acronym was new to me, I asked him what DFL was? He began explaining and finally he said, "Do you know extension? It's a similar concept". "Ahh!" I exclaimed, as the concept became familiar to me. For those of us who graduated from USP in the late 90s and early 2000s, extension or extension services was a more familiar term than DFL. My hopes were raised. I saw a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel as I told myself, "I can do this, and this is possible". Thoughts began flooding my head of what I would do, how I would schedule my time and how I would make up for the time. I reflected on squandered time while doing my undergraduate studies to better plan how I would allocate time and resources to pursue this dream.

Later that same year I was assigned to accompany my students to the USP Open Day. This afforded me the opportunity to make further enquiries at USP. What better day to do it than the Open Day! I met the Head of School of Education. I had to meet him to plead my case for admission into the postgraduate programme because my GPA from my undergraduate days did not meet the minimum requirement for admission. Fast forward a few months and I was admitted into the programme. I jumped with joy when I received my confirmation letter from the University stating that I had been accepted into the *Post Graduate Diploma in Education* programme. I thought to myself, this is it, finally I'm going back to USP after a period of 9 years. My letter contained information about how to register for my courses online "Wait a minute" I wondered, "no long queues with enrolment

³⁰ DFL – Distance and Flexible learning.

papers, seeking approvals to enrol in courses, that's great!" It also had my password along with information about how to log into my student email and Moodle. When I saw the word Moodle, I thought it was a typing error. I did not know what it was, I thought that USP was going to give me access to some noodles stock because that was the staple diet while I was a student. I thought that they had misspelled Noodle to Moodle and somehow, my meals would be taken care of when I returned to study.

Again, I enquired with Saki, my colleague who was now wearing multiple hats as my counsellor, academic advisor, SAS³¹ rep, SLS³² staff, Library services and Moodle support! He showed me the ropes, how to register for my course on SOLS³³, how to view my timetable, and how to login to Moodle and access my learning materials. I then realised that the course which I registered for was offered in the blended mode and it had only five lectures for the whole semester. Great, at least my woes about travelling to and from USP was now laid to rest. I took note of the date of the first lecture and prepped myself for this return to USP. Over the following weeks, I received instructions by email from my lecturer, Dr. Akhila Nand Sharma, giving me reminders and pointing out the resources that I needed to access to help me with my first assessment. I thought to myself, "This is so convenient". Here I was in the comfort of my home in rural Tailevu, accessing Moodle and learning at my own pace and in my own space.

³¹ SAS – Student Administrative Services.

³² SLS – Student Learning Services.

³³ SOLS – Student Online Services: an online administrative portal for USP students.

Again, I turned to Saki for advice on how to navigate Moodle, how to read and respond to postings in the discussion forum and how to download resources. It was at this point that I realised that I had to submit all my assignments electronically via Moodle. I thought to myself, “wow, that’s great, I don’t have to drive all the way to USP to drop my printed assignment at my lecturer’s office or to even drive to the nearest Post Office (which was at Korovou³⁴) to send it by mail”. When I finally submitted my first assignment on Moodle, I felt elated and there was also a feeling of great satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment as this was the first time I submitted an assignment online and to be doing that after a nine-year lapse made it even more special.

A few weeks later, I received an email with the subject titled, ‘Dr. Sharma has provided feedback on your submission for Assignment 1’. I cannot describe the sheer excitement and joy to be receiving this notification. It was the first time I received feedback on an assignment in a very long time and to be receiving electronic feedback was the icing on the cake. This excitement was short lived when I saw the comments and the grade for my assignment. You could say, I was very rusty and needed to sharpen my writing skills, my analytical skills, referencing skills and the list goes on. I realised that the readings provided in Moodle were not there to populate the page but were actually meant to be read and absorbed. With these valuable lessons learnt, I moved on.

³⁴ A small town on North East Viti Levu, Fiji.

The day for my first lecture came and I prepared myself for this. I was looking forward to putting a face to the names in the discussion forum. I noted the room number and realised that it was on the 2nd floor of the Communications Building, the three story building behind the USP Book Centre on Laucala campus. The 90-minute drive to Laucala was short as my mind kept pacing to and fro thinking, “How will we be seated? Will we be required to do group work? What will I say if I’m asked to contribute to the discussion? Am I prepared? Will I say stupid things?” I was so excited about attending my first lecture and looking forward to meeting my lecturer and classmates.

I walked into the room and realised that there were cameras and speakers on the wall. The lecture began with the usual greeting to those of us in attendance. The lecturer then turned to the cameras and greeted other students tuned in from Labasa and Lautoka campuses. Wow! I exclaimed, I did not realise that the class was being broadcast live to other campuses. I was still in awe and in shock when the lecturer switched the feed on the screen and introduced us to the students tuning in from the other two locations. We could actually see and hear them as well. I was stunned and amazed because I did not take any extension courses in my undergraduate days and to me the University had indeed come a long way. Moodle, live lecture broadcasts to other campuses, submitting assignments and receiving feedback online, fast internet, separate computer labs (with 24 hours access) for Postgraduate students – wow, a lot had happened since I was last here! This was the beginning of greater things to come.

Fast forward a few years, I graduated with a Masters degree and am now employed at the University of the South Pacific in the same building where it all began for me, the Communications building. My fascination with Moodle and its provisions has not gone to waste. It has earned me a job at the Centre for Flexible Learning. In my line of work, I design and develop courses that would be offered via DFL. So I try to build in an online orientation package within these courses to mitigate issues for people such as I, a digital immigrant whose been out of the game for a very long time and who had to rely on Saki every step of the way.

I am so ever grateful to the University and the great minds who have mentored me and the networks that we've built over the years. When I look back, I realise that USP has indeed made leaps and bounds and has come a long way in its 50 year history. I will be forever grateful to the values, principles and lessons learnt from this institution. Some of my fondest memories were forged in the Halls of Residences at 4th and 6th Hall, the classrooms, the computer labs and the playgrounds at USP. As the University celebrates its 50th anniversary, I along with other alumni of this prestigious institution can stand tall and be proud that we are the products of a regional institution whose founders saw it fit to come together, collaborate and build a University for our region.

To the founding fathers and mothers of this great institution, to the great minds behind this initiative, my deepest and sincere appreciation for such an undertaking and the thoughts and wisdom behind it, what an impact you've created in our region and the world over. Now our alumni are all over the world, in seats of power, in corporate bodies, in regional

organizations, multinational corporations, in governments, classrooms, schools, city councils, villages, the list is endless. I salute you all and happy 50th birthday to my USP.

Going online: fears, pains and thrills of online course transformation

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The beginning

I consider myself a teacher who loves interaction with students more than any other aspect of her job. Of course, my work as a university academic is not limited to teaching. I am passionate about the research I do in Fiji and the Pacific and also have extensive administrative duties. However, it is my students that get me out of bed every morning with a sense of purpose and happiness. I have been teaching sociological theory since the 1990s and have always loved getting to know my students individually, prompting them to explore new ways of making sense of their world and seeing their faces light up when they “get” a theory. It is a privilege to observe them developing as people and as young scholars and to learn from their fresh perspectives and insight into their society.

My theory courses are compulsory for sociology students at USP and I have relished the challenge of making theories fun to study. Although I am a typical introvert in all other social situations, I surprise myself by turning into an enthusiastic and outgoing teacher each time I walk into a classroom. In short, teaching is more than a job. It is a way in which I connect with and learn from the young persons I work with and an opportunity to contribute to the region that I consider my home by doing what (I think) I do best.

So imagine my shock and dismay when I was told in 2014, “We are going to move our courses online.” It was a new University initiative to “convert” our courses to blended or online delivery modes. My sociology colleagues and I were told that we were among the first programmes to undergo this shift at USP. My first thought was, as it must have been for many other academic staff: “Online teaching? There will be no more interaction with students. There goes the fun of teaching!” I also thought, “Will students study *theories* online, on their own? Really?” The image I had of online learning was of faceless students scattered across cyberspace, with nothing to link them but some impersonal and mysterious digital network.

As the process of “online conversion” was initiated across the campus and targeted selected programmes, some staff members seemed to accept it with no problem; others did so with a sense of resignation; and yet others resisted or complained about it. Once the initial bewilderment abated, I thought about it for a while. I gathered that our University was doing this to spread the benefit of university education equally to the regional countries; I could relate to that. Although originally from Japan, I have lived in the Pacific since I first arrived as an MA student and have always taken pride in being part of a university that served this expansive, diverse and vibrant region. I believe in USP’s role in the region and could see how online course delivery would fit into it. Additionally and importantly, I was aware that “online conversion” was a University policy that was here to stay: it was not something I could wish away. The change was coming and I needed to engage with it. So I came to the conclusion I always do when I am in a situation like this: “If you understand the logic behind

a change, and if the change is going to happen anyway – embrace it and make it work for you!”

Thus started my online conversion journey. What an interesting and transformative – although also challenging – journey it turned out to be! I joined numerous other USP staff in the unprecedented process of moving the majority of our courses to blended and online delivery modes. But I did so with a very specific goal in mind: “Let’s find out if interaction, what I love most about teaching, can be recreated online.” Since interaction with students was so important to me personally and for making the teaching and learning of theory an exciting and engaging experience, I was not about to give it up. In fact, once I decided to engage with this initiative, the prospect of exploring new technologies to encourage student-lecturer and student-student interaction in an innovative, cutting-edge way intrigued me. Furthermore, tackling the initiative enthusiastically was in keeping with my conception of the academic vocation as a lifelong commitment to broaden my horizons and take on new challenges.

Gradually, I began to see online conversion as an opportunity to re-examine my practice and innovate, instead of keeping on doing what I had been doing for years, which I realised was actually a bit boring. So, in retrospect, I must thank the University for pushing me to challenge myself to leave my old-school, analogue teaching repertoire and try to better myself as a teacher to benefit all my students, wherever they are.

Two of my undergraduate courses, *SO200: Modern Social Theory* and *SO303: Advanced Social Theory*, were converted in 2014. What follows is my experience of converting SO200, the first to undergo the process.

Partnering with experts to recreate interaction online

Since I had no experience or expertise in the area, my approach to online conversion was to do it as a collaboration with my Centre for Flexible Learning partners, Ms. Alanieta Lesuma-Fatiaki and Ms. Viola Lesi. CFL staff are among the most efficient and dynamic people at USP and I have always trusted their expertise. As expected, Ala and Viola took me and other sociologists under their tutelage, so that each of us could negotiate this project, not just successfully, but also meaningfully. The first thing I did was to sit down with them and tell them about my specific goal. They listened as I explained how much I wanted to recreate interaction with and among students in the online mode and then responded with a whole range of ideas and suggestions. As they talked about the many possibilities of online learning tools and technologies, I became more and more curious about what they could do for me and my students, and online conversion began to look like a rather exciting adventure.

Ala and Viola told me that it was quite possible to recreate interaction online and that, in fact, the nature of online technologies might even *enhance* interaction. What we decided to do together was to recreate an entire tutorial classroom on Moodle. Students were assigned to *virtual tutorial groups*, with each group given their own *virtual tutorial room* where they did group work and discussion, just as they would in a face-to-face class. I would visit each tutorial room to throw in comments and encouragement, just as I would in a face-to-face tutorial session. This way, Moodle was to be transformed into a classroom, rather than just a

repository of documents and information: it would become a virtual space for interaction.

Fears, pains and thrills of online course conversion

Does this sound all too easy? Well, it actually didn't happen so smoothly or painlessly. For one thing, I initially had no idea what an online course looked like. My courses had been an old-fashioned package of classroom lectures, tutorials, and essays as major assessments. I recognised that I needed to make substantial changes to this design if most of the learning was to happen online, but I did not know what or how. So, there was an initial process of tutoring and brainstorming, where Ala and Viola patiently taught me how online conversion was more than moving reading materials to an online platform and entailed re-thinking and re-imagining of our teaching practices. They tutored me until we agreed on the virtual tutorial idea and other online activities such as online glossaries and quizzes. This was followed by a long back-and-forth process of me developing learning and teaching resources and Ala and Viola advising me along the way and implementing the initiatives through using various Moodle features. My blended (and later online) courses emerged out of this laborious and intense teamwork over many months.

There were also challenges when my new blended course was ready for delivery in 2015. For instance, I was aware that the idea of studying online did not appeal to every student. We heard that some students were worrying about it and asking for traditional face-to-face classes: clearly some students were as apprehensive as the lecturers about the change. As I prepared to offer my newly-converted course, I wondered

anxiously: “Will it really work? What if students refuse to engage?” The strategy I decided to take was the one I always take whenever I am faced with uncertainties: to be honest with my students. I also saw this moment as an opportunity to set up the environment of dialogue and interaction that I hoped to build and sustain throughout the course. In my first face-to-face and satellite session³⁵, I shared with them what I thought was the spirit and logic behind the online move. I told them that online learning was equally new to all of us and that we needed to make it work together. I asked them to join me as partners in this uncharted journey. In the end, both the students and I were anxious, but at least we knew that we were “in it” together.

In addition to the general apprehension about online learning, the idea of recreating interaction via a virtual tutorial presented risks as well. Not all students are keen to speak in group settings, face-to-face or online. While in face-to-face situations tutors can directly encourage them to participate, that could not happen in an online environment. Some students, being part of the “Facebook/Twitter generation”, might favour speaking online at a time and place that suits them, but there are also those who are not active online communicators for various reasons. Even SNS-savvy students, if physically apart from each other, might find it easier to just not bother. Talking about theories is after all not the same as chatting about movies, sports or other more glamorous topics.

Here again, expert assistance made a big difference. Ala and Viola designed a system that turned out to be really helpful in

³⁵ Blended/online courses at USP include some face-to-face content.

reaching out to “Moodle-shy” students: to have rotating leaders in the virtual tutorial groups. Each group had a Team Leader (who facilitated group work/discussion) and a Collator/Poster (who summarised the discussion and posted it on Moodle to share with the rest of the class) in each unit.

These roles were rotated through the semester so everyone played a leadership role at least once. This became an effective mechanism for having at least three people – the Team Leader, the Collator/Post, and me – in every tutorial group to give moral support and guidance to everyone. It changed the dynamic of the tutorial and the class itself from a one-way, lecturer versus student situation, to a student-lecturer partnership. Team Leaders and Collator/Posters would post friendly, supportive messages to quiet or absent members instead of a lecturer reprimanding them or demanding that they participate. What was great about this was that it was not the same two persons – a chosen few – who joined me in facilitating the tutorials, which would have created a “lecturer and select students versus other students” scenario, but that every student played this role at some point in the course.

The dynamic developed to a point where the students who were no longer Team Leaders or Collator/Posters continued to provide support to the others later in the semester. Often, I watched and marvelled as a process of shared leadership and reciprocal learning unfolded. If a student asked where to find a reading on Moodle or how to make sense of a theoretical concept, before I could even respond, another student would step in and offer help. They were often more attentive and efficient than I was!

“Online togetherness”: key to successful online learning experience for everyone

In this way, the course gradually turned into what might be described as a collective project between students and me. Many students interacted informally or *talanoa* on Moodle, often daily, a little like they would on Facebook. I looked forward to checking into Moodle and finding out what was going on. I really enjoyed this new energy in my class and the sense of community that was emerging. At the end of the semester, I actually did not want the course to end. The students seemed to feel similarly. One of the students in this class, Mr. Alphonse Botu, and I later delivered a joint presentation on our experience at the 2016 Vice Chancellor’s Learning and Teaching Forum. In the presentation, Alphonse came up with a term for the special sense of connection we developed over the semester: “*online togetherness*”.

Far removed from the initial image I had of students studying at their own computer, in isolation and faceless in vast cyberspace, we felt that we were learning, communicating, and growing together in our virtual classroom. It was this online togetherness, cultivated through partnership between the CFL experts and me, between students and me, and among students, that made this course interactive – and I dare say – fun. I would not say that the course was perfect or that every single student felt the same, but I can say that we – the students, Ala, Viola and I – tried our best to make it work and that it worked for the majority of the students.

And if student performance and feedback is anything to go by, the course did work for a great majority of the students. In the first year of blended-mode delivery, the course pass rate

jumped from 70% in the previous year to 85%, A+ and A grades from 16% to 20%, and B+ and B grades from 18% to 33%. What equally pleased me were student comments, both at mid-semester³⁶ and at the end of the semester:

Mid-semester

“At first I found it difficult to do the [online] activities... But then after some weeks later I came to realise that these activities are beneficial because they encourage me to do my readings, research and sharing my opinion to the other students. Also [the virtual tutorial] encourages students to interact with each other, express their ideas that help each other.”

“Taking SO200 has been an enjoyable journey filled with learning new things and interacting with classmates. Although I found it difficult at first to grasp the blended mode of learning, I am now confident to continue taking courses offered in this mode and also in the online mode (something I would never have thought of doing). The online activities, I found very helpful because they contributed immensely to my understanding of the various units of “Modern Social Theories”.

End of the semester

“The things I enjoyed most in the course were the on-line activities. By constantly interacting with fellow

³⁶ I usually seek student feedback on my course delivery at mid-semester.

course mates on-line, I was able to know others better and to develop a sense of appreciation and respect for each and everyone in the course.”

“I really enjoyed studying modern social theories (something I thought would never be possible). I really enjoyed the online activities. And I agree with [another student] on the part where everyone was willing to help each other out.”

The course has since evolved further and is now offered in the online (as against blended) mode, with even greater online content. I have also made adjustments and improvements after each offering based on student response and feedback. In its latest (2017) offering, the course maintained similarly positive student learning outcomes. In my other online course, *SO303: Advanced Social Theory*, measurable outcomes were even more encouraging in 2017: every student who completed the course passed, which had never happened in the course’s history.

Of course, things have not been perfect. Internet connectivity remains a challenge for many students in the region. The shift from blended to online delivery entailed its own challenges not discussed here due to limited space. Reaching out to every student and effectively meeting their needs is and will always be an unfinished task. Yet, none of these challenges will remain in the same state. Our university, students, lecturers, regional countries and online environments and technologies are evolving and changing, which will present not only new challenges but also new opportunities. Moreover, while things will never be perfect, what matters, I think, is that we are making the most of what we’ve got, here and now, to be

the best we can. In this sense, online conversion certainly served as a catalyst for key improvement in my practices as a teacher.

In summary...

So what was my online conversion experience like after all? I would say that it was a journey of *transforming* – not just modifying or upgrading – my courses with collective hard work, reflection and commitment. It involved *everybody* – students, CFL experts and me. It only worked because we were a team, determined to make it work, and developed a sense of “online togetherness” in the process.

For me as a teacher, the journey motivated me to take stock of my previous teaching practices, especially their strengths and weaknesses. It showed me how I could be a more effective and perhaps more interesting teacher by exploring what online technologies offered. It also showed me that online course conversion is an ongoing process as we continually seek and develop our own, Pacific style of online learning. Finally, more than anything, it showed me that teaching, in whatever format, will always bring not only the pain of hard work but also immense joy and fun of interacting, learning and growing with students, which will no doubt keep me in the classroom, virtual or otherwise.

Acknowledgement

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Sailing into new horizons – a UU204 journey

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I started my journey as an online teacher in 2013. It was an interesting challenge. Having never experienced online learning as a student before, I was in awe of the whole idea of teaching solely online. In fact, after having taught for more than a decade at secondary school level, I was quite excited about the idea. I marvelled at how the advancement in technology has enabled university students to learn online. Although our course, *UU204: Pacific Worlds* offered some optional face to face tutorials in the first half of the semester, most of our communication with students was conducted online.

Utilising technology in communication

I learned from my conversations with students during our face to face consultations that sending them a text message straight after sending a group or individual email was very effective as it was a reminder to them to read (and not delete) my email to them. At that time, Moodle still had the SMS feature which unfortunately is no longer available. Sometimes students would ask me questions over email or during face to face consultations regarding information that I had already emailed to them earlier. When I asked them whether they had read my email, they would sheepishly say “No”. The reason, they explained is that there is so much mail in their inbox that they just click on “select” and “delete” without realising that they were deleting important information from us; their online teachers. Thus, the SMS feature served a very useful function in that it reminded the students to check their inbox for email information from us.

With the removal of the SMS feature from Moodle, I have adapted my method of communication with my students. Whenever I send a message through Quickmail on Moodle, I copy the same message and using the “Participants” page on Moodle, I then identify my students and send them the same message on Moodle message. This way, even if they mistakenly delete their message from their email or they do not read their email, they will still get the same message when they log onto Moodle. Having the messages on each student’s Moodle message page also serves as a record for us in our communications with our students.

Utilising face to face interaction in online learning

One way in which to better engage students in an online learning environment is to get them to connect face to face in the same campus. This can be done by asking students interested in forming study/discussion groups to email you and you can then connect them and they can go from there. This group can be used to share summaries of their readings, prepare for quizzes, discuss reflective writing assignment questions and for group formation for the course’s main *Matai* assessment which is worth 30%.

One of the biggest challenges from my experience in teaching online is dealing with non-responsive students. In seeking solutions to this challenge, I have banked on the students’ familiarity with each other in the same campuses and used this to reach out to non-responsive students. I have noticed this to be the case in Alafua³⁷ and Emalus Campuses where most of the students are Agriculture and Law majors respectively and most students know each other rather well. Thus, when I

³⁷ Alafua Campus is located on the Island of Upolu in Samoa. The USP’s School of Agriculture is based on this campus.

have emailed a particular student continuously and still receive no response, I usually ask the others from the same campus if they know this particular student and if they do to ask them to please email me. I have found this to be an effective way of reaching inactive students most times.

Sometimes, however, there are factors that negatively affect our students' performance that are just beyond our reach. I remember a particular student of mine at a regional campus where I conducted a week-long tutorial last year. His assignments were late and his response to my emails were sporadic and slow. When I finally met him in person during that week, he shared with me that he was working part-time and was struggling to keep up in all his courses. He seemed distracted and discouraged and I tried to encourage him to seek further assistance from campus staff such as counsellors and his other lecturers. Talking with him, I got the impression that he was an intelligent student as he was well-spoken and was able to clearly articulate his struggles. I sat down with him to create a "catch-up" plan but sadly this did not work out. At times like this, you realise that you can only do so much and the onus is also on the student to do his/her bit for their educational success.

The classroom as a metaphorical canoe

Adopting Dr. Teresia's Teaiwa's (2005) metaphor of a canoe as a classroom and then adapting it to our UU204 context where the canoe served as an 'online' classroom was quite an innovative idea. Over the years, in reading our students' posts and replies revolving around this metaphor, it seems that they have caught onto the idea pretty quickly. This is because the canoe is a familiar Pacific artefact and based on their knowledge of it many of our students have over the years successfully integrated their knowledge and understanding of

the canoe and sailing into their own online learning journey. This demonstrates the importance of contextualising the content of our courses to our Pacific environment to ensure that the learning and teaching process is effective.

Teaching online requires innovative approaches as well as sensitivity towards handling students' issues. One of the greatest challenges is that since you do not see your students face to face, it becomes very difficult trying to ascertain how genuine students are in the reasons they give for late/non submission of assessment. One way to deal with this is to require that medical certificates/death notifications/parental notes are scanned and sent to you as evidence of the students' claims. Checking individual students' logs is also a good way to verify students' reasons. Furthermore, you always need to make allowance for connectivity issues particularly for students from regional campuses and those that live in remote areas.

A funny moment

A few years ago, I received an email from a regional student based at Laucala who complained that he could not read the week's reading because the pdf document was "upside down". While I was still composing my reply to instruct him on how to adjust the pdf document so that he could read it "right side up", he sent another email telling me that it was okay and that he had figured out how to read it. He revealed that he simply turned his laptop upside down so that he could read the document. When I asked him where he was studying, he said that he was in the library. In trying to imagine the scene of this student reading in the library on an upside down laptop, I could not help but laugh at my student's ingenuity in dealing with this learning challenge. I truly appreciated his perseverance in finding a creative solution to his situation.

The way forward

Learning to teach online effectively is a continuous journey. After having completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCTT), I have learnt some innovative teaching strategies particularly in collaborative learning such as the use of Google Docs and Google Slides for group work, reflective writing through blogging, and cultivating a community of learning through Twitter and Facebook to state a few. I think that taking note of common student complaints is another way of gauging the effectiveness of our online teaching as well as the feedback from the semester end survey reports. However, the bottom line I think is for both the online teacher to have the students' best interests at heart and for the student to be fully dedicated to their education journey. This combination, ideal though as it sounds, is in my opinion the best formula for a successful learning journey in any educational institution.

Full circle

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I vividly recall my undergraduate and postgraduate years as a student at the University of the South Pacific some decades ago when studying was quite straight forward – in the Face-to-face mode. Back then, attending lectures was a priority and if I missed a lecture, there were other students in the class I could take notes from. Such a rigid system come to think of it! You're either there and get it, or not and miss out and then play catch up with the text readings, a situation I often found myself in particularly for the early morning lectures. Fast forward two decades and I find myself sitting in the same institution as an employee and a part time postgraduate student. Yes, it took me some time to master the confidence to return as a student. The fear of the unknown and the fact that I would be studying amongst a younger generation let alone my own children, was not quite my cup of tea.

Prior to returning to the University I was warned by colleagues who were part time students that things were quite different now and that students had access to lectures and readings via Moodle. Oh and yes, I was also warned of Turnitin, the "Plagiarism detection device" as they put it. This caused me to cringe even more while contemplating continuing my postgraduate studies. The thought of this policing device which was going to scrutinise my assignments just added to the fear of returning to study. I had been used to being the 'Sage on the Stage' in my 16 years as a secondary school teacher, so you can see my dilemma. I finally plucked up the courage to enroll in a Postgraduate programme amidst the pressures of work and motherhood and there has been no

turning back since. All my doubts and fears of juggling studies, work and family seem to have evaporated once the ball was rolling. What eased my transition into the new learning environment was the availability of courses via flexible learning. Without a second thought, I opted to study in the Blended and Online mode as this was convenient for me. At first I had to clear some cobwebs as I slowly got into the grind of studying.

My courses were structured with two hours of lecture through REACT (Remote Education and Conferencing Tool) which was conducted on a fortnightly basis throughout the semester. This worked perfectly for me and fit right into my demanding schedule. The availability of course readings, recorded lectures and virtual discussions made it seem all the less overwhelming. What also eased my transition and adaptation to the new modes of study was my familiarity of the Learning Management System as I'm employed in the midst of the backend workings of the system. I guess being on the other side of the coin was a bonus. I particularly enjoyed the flexibility of the nature of the course because it gave me the opportunity to study and be in contact with my course facilitator and peers anytime and anywhere. This I felt would be an ideal mode of study for working students. It also afforded me the opportunity to be myself as I pelted away on the keyboard in the asynchronous virtual discussions.

Despite the minimum contact time with our course facilitator, I learnt a great deal and engaged in the course in a way that I probably would not have been able to in the face-to-face mode. I suppose this was partially due to the fact that I tend to shy away from synchronous discussions particularly when I am put on the spot, and I also learn best being away from the crowd or the spotlight. This mode of study gave me the opportunity to read and think things through carefully before

sharing my ideas and boy did I have many thoughts from my years of experience in the field.

One of my greatest fears in resuming my studies was my lack of awareness of where to go and how to find the information I required when I needed it. I guess those of us coming back to study after a lapse of many years can relate to this fear and would like to be reassured that things would be fine. The same could be said for those enrolling to study for the first time. So having a space online where all this information was readily available and where you could read, interact and engage freely with the course content, your fellow learners and course facilitator in the comfort of your own environment, made learning for me now even more fulfilling. There is less time wasted in terms of getting to the lecture room and as my daughter who is currently enrolled in an undergraduate programme recently pointed out, “less time wasted socialising while attending the face-to-face sessions.” Then again I could be biased here but for introverts, my daughter and I included, the benefits of flexible learning far outweighs (in my opinion) studying in the Face-to-face mode. This opinion could be supported if equity and access to technology and resources throughout the regional campuses was promoted more.

Yes, there were times when I lagged behind but then like any other student, irrespective of mode of study, you will have to discipline yourself in managing your time – something I often preached to my children and past students but failed to comply with amidst the range of responsibilities at hand. As I reflect on and compare my years of study as an undergraduate and a postgraduate student, I see the progress made by the University of the South Pacific in leaps and bounds. I’ve experienced the whole spectrum of learning over a 25 year period and can honestly say that the transformation in course delivery has been the pinnacle of this institution. This has had

a positive impact on my results as I strive to complete my postgraduate studies. I can only presume that things will get even better over the years in terms of access, equity, inclusiveness, course design and delivery, and I look forward to the promise that this institution holds the day my younger children enter those gates.

What a journey it has been ... being part of this institution which has held so many memories ... as a shy and timid undergraduate student way back when the University celebrated its 25th anniversary and now returning full circle as a mature, more refined student and employee to celebrate the University's 50th anniversary. It has indeed been a privilege!

Across a 'glassy' ocean and islands away

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In the narrative that follows we embark on a journey of reflection on the experiences of navigator (teacher) and crew (student) on a journey across the Pacific on the UU204 Pacific Worlds *Vaka*³⁸; where both teacher and students navigate the 'process of learning'. It's not all smooth sailing as the navigator and crew later experience, which is normal and symbolic of the vast characteristics of the USP region that is as scattered and diverse as this narrative.

In 2012 I was privileged to take a regional visit to Honiara in the Solomon Islands to teach or rather to 'squeeze' in a 12 week, five unit course into a one week learning and teaching 'marathon'. Characteristic of a sporting event, competition underlined this endeavour. Competition came in the form of looking for space where one could connect to a power point to keep the laptop charged to enable connection to unit resources on the forever temperamental Moodle. For the UU204 students, that week somehow had an advantage because the assigned classrooms and the few labs and lecture theatre times meant that we could claim our space to e-connections with ease. So the crew of the Honiara *Vaka* settled in to the first class filling only a quarter of the lecture theatre. The idle space we had in the theatre and the 'connection and connectivity search frenzy' outside the room was overwhelming. Students were sitting just outside the

³⁸ Teaiwa, T. (2005). The classroom as a metaphorical canoe: Co-operative learning in Pacific Studies. *World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium Journal*, 2005, 38-48.

windows of the theatre or peering in and juggling their e-gadgets from all angles. I didn't have the heart to assert claim over the large space we had the privilege of using. So as navigator along with my UU204 crew, we agreed to share our learning space with students outside with the understanding that they respect our space which at times was noisy with students trying to let the others know who was on the screen inside.

The interactive video viewing and reflective writing paper requirements for the course fast became a healthy debate which at times seemed to be moving to a 'challenge session' which called for my guised intervention. Our initial 'sharing and caring of space' had created its own environment for now we had a new audience from the outside. This raised the bar for each group to 'deliver the goods' which also meant impressing the non-UU204! Laptop captures of summaries followed by write-ups by the scribes in the groups were well received by the rest of crew. Nothing seemed to beat the opportunity for students to upload their group work PowerPoint to the big screen and share their presentations in the two hour session. Collaborative learning then took on a reversal of roles with the students taking over as navigator in turn.

When relating to students in the region, learning empathy plays a very important role. Communication skills and timely communication are very important and for many campuses e-communication may be the only lifeline the students have to enable them to meet the demands of the course. When communicating across the screen, be it email, chat or Moodle messages, one is cautioned to be aware of the 'first language influence'. One such example was this request to me, "Dear mum could you please grant me an extension to my Unit 3

assignment because ...". Clearly a lifeline was being requested by the crew so after deciphering the message amidst the laughter, I suppose I had taken on the role as 'mother' as well. Beyond this funny moment, empathy, sensitivity and a deeper look at the students' requests takes on a renewed commitment. The Honiara *Vaka* was definitely a preparation for my next voyage. More often technology was the culprit with connectivity issues. On the flip side the technology was useful especially with resources such as YouTube. Small video productions required in the final units' assessment allowed our students in the regional campuses to actively participate in the *Matai*³⁹ assessment option. This option drew out the different talents in our students to help them articulate a particular contemporary issue in the region in different genres and to draw attention to the solutions that could help minimise or eradicate the problem. On to my next voyage I went.

The waves and the shift of the breeze from the north guided the *Vaka* to the shores of the Polynesian triangle, *kia orana katoatoa*⁴⁰! Two years later I would be fortunate again to take a flexi class, this time at the USP Cook Islands campus in Avarua. Armed with a USB, laptop and a well sectioned out file and prescribed textbook, the navigator replenished supplies for the next leg of the journey. Excitement filled the air even at the first leg of the journey getting on the flight at *Luvuluvu*⁴¹ airport in Fiji right through to the seven hour transit

³⁹ In a Samoan extended family or clan, the person who is chosen to succeed to a chief's or orator's title and honoured as the head of the family. In other cultures, this could mean the one who is the most skilled or adept in doing a particular activity.

⁴⁰ Hello to all in the Cook Islands Maori language.

⁴¹ Refers to the airport in Nausori, Fiji.

at the Auckland airport. This was a good time for the navigator to check in on the focus and plan of the trip. A whisper reverberated in my mind, “the focus is the schedule mapped out for the Units 1-5 with a particular focus on the *Matai* video production for Unit 5”. The anticipated ‘hip shaking’ and ‘muscle movements’ of the local dancers in the new environment must first translate to the ‘hip syllabus’ and focused ‘*Matai* movement’. I bounce back to reality. I think about online quizzes as a great medium for assessment, especially as its self-marking! The ‘Mapping Game’ in Unit 1, I think to myself helps place students in the journey across the Pacific. In the four and half weeks in the Cooks, I took on multiple roles and labels from navigator, friend, tutor, captain, confidante and even a strict or serious teacher. I was not quite prepared for the newest role dawning on me shortly.

The USP Cook Island campus is one of colourful green chairs and apricot painted walls with Papa Ron (Crocombe, Professor Emeritus, patron of the Cook Islands Library and Museum Society) watching over the crew when encouragement of both navigator and crew, trying to find their second wind through glassy seas was needed. One evening after our main interactive lecture had ended, I returned from my tea break and as I walked back to the lecture section of the lab I was asked not to look at the screen that I had left my PowerPoint on a few minutes ago. I was then blind folded by my crew (students) and gently guided to the next room at the end of building. I was quickly finding out that ‘collaborative learning’, ‘cooperative sharing’ and a ‘community of active learners’ concepts had taken on a life of their own. Out from behind the blindfold I see my crew huddled around with technology: tablets, laptops, phones and even the textbook sprawled on the floor or supine on the two bean bags under the screen conferring information to the newly ascribed navigator. This

independent approach to learning and their initiative to delegate me to 'guide on the side' instead of 'sage on the stage' was inspiring. In a way it was my induction to the crew as perhaps a 'sacrificial fish', enabling this '*kuki creativity*' crew to set out on their own quest for full marks on this particular assessment in the following weeks. Creativity online was being also echoed by creativity in the room. Could this be a fusion of traditional learning and technology?

This one incident helped immerse me into the pulse of the island very early. I guess one had to be perceptive of the happenings around them in the islands. "Thank you mama Rosa for the great experience we have shared on this *Vaka* journey" were words that got me emotional. My eyes began to smart with forced back tears but my ears for a second hung on the word 'mama', a respectable title for a woman on the island. For what of a name that is all but nurtures and nourishes? *Meitaki Maata!*⁴²

Strong southerly winds propelled the canoe north to Kiribati. Tarawa, in the heat and dust was the result of the construction of new roads that linked to the capital. Students, staff and locals found creative ways of reaching their destination without suffocating or looking like one had just returned from a *fara*⁴³. What a relief it was when I was told that I could take my class to a lab in the school across the road which meant electricity, air conditioning, Moodle and emails to my colleagues at Laucala to assure them that I had arrived safely

⁴² Means *thank you very much* in Cook Island or Maori language.

⁴³ A gathering of dancers who go from house to house singing and dancing during the festive season on the island of Rotuma in Fiji. Powder or talc is usually smeared on the faces of the dancers by the host family to show appreciation for the dance presented.

in Kiribati! While enjoying our group work in the cool room I noticed that some of my students frequently left class to stand outside. I also found that two of my students had covered their heads with their *sulu*⁴⁴. It seemed that they despised the cold which for me represented comfort. What really caught my attention was how these two students perched themselves cross legged on the table right next to the computer typing away at ease on the keyboard resting on their thighs with heads leaning at an angle to see what was typed on the computer screen. Discreetly I ascertained what had brought about this awkward sitting position, was it the lack of chairs I wondered? No. Apparently the cross-legged position enabled individual warmth and was what most of the students were used to and comfortable with. So the class continued. Engaging discussions and sharing from Moodle resources continued till we were cut off an hour later and this was the most we could get in a day the whole week. I was later told that my crew and I were privileged to have been given that time slot for the use of the internet. I thought to myself, “what happens to student accessibility to Moodle after I leave?”

I reflect on the assumptions we make about the environment and the approach to technology and the learning and teaching processes embedded in the demands of the online courses we taught. One must be mindful of the lay of the land in the approach to preparation and use of technology; there clearly was a disparity in access to technology in the island campuses. It is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach either as each island experience varies in connectivity. So how equipped are our regional students for this advancing technological landscape; be it equipment, skills or connectivity? What’s in a name as far as teacher or navigator goes; be it mum, ma’am, madam,

⁴⁴ A piece or length of fabric often wrapped around the waist.

captain, coxswain, miss or mama that carries with it *Mana*⁴⁵? ... *Mana* to nurture a creative resilient 'Oceanian'. The journey must continue!

*Faiaksia*⁴⁶ and thank you in the sacred languages of our forbearers to all UU204 crew who shared this wonderful journey of discovery across the Pacific and may we all continue to look up towards that guiding star, heed the whispers of the past and continue to share and learn from our narratives. *Tangio Tumas*⁴⁷, *Meitaki Maata*⁴⁸, *Kam bati rabwa*⁴⁹

⁴⁵ In Polynesian, Melanesian, and Maori belief is an impersonal supernatural power which can be transmitted or inherited.

⁴⁶ Thank you in the Rotuman language.

⁴⁷ Thank you in the *tok pisin/pidgin* (e.g. Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands) language.

⁴⁸ Thank you in the Cook Islands Maori language.

⁴⁹ Thank you in the Kiribati language.

Two sides of online learning

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Whether its learning face to face by attending lectures and tutorials, or learning via distance, or learning online, USP provides these modes of learning. I am one of those fortunate ones who had the opportunity to experience all of these modes offered by USP as a student and an academic. This reflection focuses primarily on my flexible learning journey online from two viewpoints. The first is my student perspective in the Post Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCTT) programme. The second is my teacher perspective designing and delivering fully online courses at preliminary and foundation level in the Computing Science and Information Systems (CS/IS) disciplines.

Right from the outset, learning in a purely online environment can be a scary adventure. For computer fanatics like me however, I enjoyed taking up the challenge. The way the courses in the PGCTT programme were designed seriously takes into account the working student and their commitment affordances. The PGCTT set the tone where the course coordinator made it very clear that there was strictly no face to face contact for whatever assistance was needed. It was to be purely via online communication either through Moodle (USP's Learning Management System) discussion forums or via file sharing tools such as Skype and Google Drive.

The course coordinator introduced other mechanics of teaching and learning online where students in a group got to work cohesively without any face to face interaction. The challenge was to use all forms of online social networking to

communicate ideas regarding certain concepts. The information garnered was then composed into meaningful learning documentaries for other groups to comment on. Of course the feedback solicited was used to assess and evaluate resulting in coursework marks. This type of learning clearly showed that online collaboration was almost as good as face to face interaction. The use of the internet and communication tools with information at our fingertips made the learning even easier than initially anticipated. The course coordinator merely facilitated the learning process where students were apparently taking charge of their learning journey.

The flexibility with such a form of learning cannot be over emphasised. Students were submitting their assignments way past the deadlines. Though not encouraged, it was accommodated. The coordinators were very flexible with this and students seemed to benefit from such an approach. All set activities comprised individual and group participation so it rested on the participants to communicate well with each other online. I initiated all my groups' activities and kept my team on the lookout at all times. This made our group stand out from the rest as we were always the first to contribute to online discussions and submit activities on or before the due dates.

Such learning environments acted as enablers for embedding technology into everyday teaching and learning. One good example was the use of relevant Open Educational Resources (OER) in both PGCTT courses that made learning easier. The selection of OER was appropriate in terms of levels of complexity and coherence with course learning outcomes. One accentuating point here was that the majority of the students in the PGCTT programme were either graduates or

post graduates who were mature enough to own their learning in an online environment. Newbies coming directly from a high school environment may find this experience daunting in comparison.

The second part of this reflection is on my personal experience with designing and delivering fully online courses at preliminary and foundation level in CS/IS. Over the last five years, I can confidently say that there needs to be a lot of awareness done at high school level regarding online learning and the wonderful opportunities it presents. Currently, students are joining online courses expecting face to face tutorials and lectures. There is a clear misunderstanding about the notion on online learning among new students fresh out of high school. The question that could be posed at this point is, who needs to take responsibility for advocating the benefits of online learning? While we as academics make enormous efforts to promote online learning, we still need other stakeholders to provide assistance as well.

USP is on a boisterous journey of converting its face to face courses to either blended or online mode but there is still work to do to achieving full implementation. Advancements in technology and internet connectivity are improving but for USP there exists significant gaps that appear to be derailing such initiatives. One of the most recent and evident issues is intermittent network connectivity, especially in our regional campuses. Another significant issue is Moodle's constant service disruptions. While we appear to be leading successfully with online learning, such disruptions cause panic among our students.

Going back to my fully online courses, I see that due to connectivity issues, almost 40% of my students are unable to

complete their course work components offered through Moodle. This causes unnecessary confusion and calls by students to switch back to either face to face delivery or print mode. Flexible learning does have its fair share of issues especially for students still coming to terms with this mode of learning. However, I am now able to provide more online support via Skype and Moodle chat in my courses and though adoption is slow, students are beginning to realize its vast potential.

Professor Don: my experience with a flexible learning champion

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It was August 2014 on a Friday afternoon at Emalus Campus, Vanuatu and my mind was beginning to wonder what to do during the weekend when an email popped up on my screen from none other than Law Professor Don Paterson. There was an attachment which had the questions for his online scenario-based multiple choice weekly test for the coming week.

Abraham died in Fiji last month leaving a will in which he devised his freehold land in Fiji to his trustee, Joseph, to hold for his son, Jacob, for life, and then to Alice and Bronwyn, the two daughters of Jacob when they graduate from USP. Assuming that Joseph has obtained and registered probate of the will and transmission of the property of Abraham and has executed and registered a memorandum of transfer of the land to Jacob, and that Jacob is alive aged 40 years:

- 1. Joseph has (a) a vested legal interest (b) a vested equitable interest (c) a contingent legal interest (d) a contingent equitable interest (e) no interest in the freehold land?*

2. *Alice and Bronwyn have (a) a vested legal interest (b) a vested equitable interest (c) a contingent legal interest (d) a contingent equitable interest (e) no interest in the freehold land?*

These scenario-based multiple choice tests required Professor Don's online students to analyse a given situation and apply concepts and laws that were relevant to that scenario. Questions started forming in my mind: Was the 30 minutes given to these (online) law students enough to complete these online tests? What about the law students in the Honiara⁵⁰ Campus who had to wait in a queue at the computer lab for a free computer and then when they finally got one, had to hope and pray that the internet connection remained stable? What if the power went off in the middle of the test for our Tokelau student?

In anticipation of the issues mentioned above, Professor Don had decided that the students do twelve online scenario-based tests but that Moodle (the USP learning management system) would mark and select only the highest ten so that it didn't really matter if the student botched or missed one or two. He had also decided that if they had issues with these online tests—such as connectivity problems, power cuts or other unforeseen circumstances—they should report them immediately and we would assess each student's situation and respond appropriately. We tried to ensure that the online scenario-based multiple choice test was up and ready by Monday so that the hundred or so LW301: Property Law II students in the 12 member countries, spread over 5 different

⁵⁰ Capital of Solomon Islands.

time zones—in the region—would have time to complete the test in the next three days.

The first LW301 tutorial of the week was around 12pm Vanuatu time on Wednesday so the Test should be closed by then as the answers and feedback would be discussed and the Professor did not want students accessing the tests after the answers had been discussed. I remember pushing the Professor to include the feedback for these scenario-based tests in Moodle—as recommended by the literature—but shelved these sentiments after witnessing the robust discussions of the answers and questions in the face-to-face tutorials as well as in the video-conferencing tutorials. Oral feedback through these tutorials allowed the flexibility to discuss grey areas in law and the opportunity for online students to practice their oral communication and critical thinking skills. This would have been hard to replicate with static online feedback. This did not mean that there were no issues with the videoconferencing tutorials; it had its fair share of problems. Some students complained that they were not able to participate in these discussions due to the lack of microphones and the overcrowding in these video conferencing rooms.

As I pondered on some of these things, I thought back to how far back my relationship with the old Professor went. I thought back to when I was a student in the early 80s at USP in Suva, Fiji, fresh out of boarding school. Professor Don was actually my lecturer in one of the Administration or Land Management courses I took (it's so long ago I can't remember which). I am pretty sure he looked the same then as he did today, some 30 odd years later. I made a mental note that I should be thankful

if I retained half the memory and sharpness of mind the Professor has by the time I reached his age—which was anything from seventy to over a hundred depending on who you asked on campus.

One of my earliest recollections of working as a Course Development Assistant in the mid-1990s at what used to be known as University Extension (now Centre for Flexible Learning) was the complaints from our then Text Processors (now Electronic Publishers) about the handwriting of some of our Professors including that of Professor Don's. Our Text Processors had to decipher these handwritten tomes of knowledge and type them out as well as format them in their word processors before passing it on to our Editors and Instructional Designers. They edited, asked pedagogical questions and made recommendations back to the Professors to ensure that these printed course materials were ready for our distance students studying in the region when the new semester started.

It is now May 2018 and I am looking at some of the old printed Law course materials from the 1990s in our CFL archives. The majority of these materials have the name Professor Don Paterson of the Pacific Law Unit as the Coordinator of these courses. As my mind went back to this pre-online era of printed materials, I remembered how one of my colleagues, Padric, actually bled over one of Professor Don's course books after he cut himself on the paper while photocopying late into the wee hours of the morning trying to ensure that these books would get to ports in time for them to be transported to the islands where our law students were waiting for them.

We have come a long way. Instead of students waiting for weeks or months for printed course material that were held up by weather, shipping schedules or human incompetence, students can now access these learning materials online at the click of a mouse. However, challenges have not gone away as students and teaching staff face a different set of issues with connectivity and the issues associated with new technologies. Now, the regional law students for example, complain about the need for more facilities: slots, rooms or channels etc. for video-conferencing—so they can all have a chance to talk. But together with the complaints, there have been some positive feedback. One law student said that, "The video-conference discussions of the weekly tests have developed my understanding better of the topics covered during lecture as they are based on real life expected scenarios. And so helped to develop my understanding of the application of the principles learned in theory."

As USP celebrates its 50th Anniversary, I am thankful for the privilege of having studied under and toiled side by side with one of the champions of distance and flexible learning at USP for over a number of decades if not the whole life of the institution. *Tankiu tumas*⁵¹ Professor Don Paterson.

⁵¹ *Thank you* in the Bislama language, the national language of Vanuatu. It is a pidgin derived from English, French and indigenous languages spoken throughout the country.

Moodle, modes and my understanding of DFL

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My introduction to distance and flexible learning (DFL) was somewhat a brief overview at the orientation week in Semester 1 of 2017. According to those speaking, there were all sorts of features specifically designed to help a learner from great distances away understand lessons and not be left out. A freshie from high school, I thought I had quite a fair idea of what this new method of learning was, but I had absolutely no idea and would only understand it in the following semester when two of my units were online and one of them in the blended mode. Let me make my stance clear in stating that distance and flexible learning has its ups and downs. However, whilst I acknowledge both sides, this reflection is my take on DFL.

Introducing myself ... well, my background to be exact ... I have endured thirteen years of the education system in Fiji and as evident so far, have survived. Last year (2017), I started a new chapter by entering the University of the South Pacific. With only words of advice heard from those who had gone before me, and the occasional annual fieldtrip to excavate insights about the university at USP Open Day, my understanding of university life seemed insignificant next to my die-hard school attitude. Coming to USP after five years in an all-girls boarding school with its rules and regulations, this environment meant I could finally breathe and breathe I did!

By the time Semester 2 came around, I relished the fact that I didn't have to travel all the way to school (mind you I don't live all that far off campus but the monotonous routine can get boring) to attend tutorials or lectures. So long as data

connections for Internet access were reliable. I could sit from the comfort of my home and read the weeks given notes and review the videos provided by the ever-efficient course coordinators. Trust me when I say 'efficient' as they were always responding and reminding (the two R's). Compared to my first semester, all four of my units were in the Face-to-face mode which meant that the 'physical workload' was a hundred percent. Schedules and timetables made my head sore and so it came as a blessing when I heard that my units in the second semester were seventy-five percent DFL. I major in Accounting and Finance so yes I am pursuing my Bachelor of Commerce degree. My two units, AF102 and AF121 were offered Online whilst UU100 was in the Blended mode. Now, mind you I had only heard from experienced peers that units taken online must never be taken lightly, but this good piece of advice was the kind that you tend to remember when it actually hits you!

I must admit that it did take me quite a while to get used to DFL as my interaction with the Moodle platform in the first semester was only limited to quizzes, notes and additional resources. The shift in the second semester left me struggling to grasp the basics of the system first before eventually moving on to the actual learning part. However, this did not deter me from completing the online and blended courses and successfully too. The fact that Moodle was quite engaging and easy to navigate scored some brownie points with me. The graphical user interface saw me enjoying the online experience without much hassle or complaint. The listing of courses undertaken was neatly placed. The various sections to which the courses were categorised looked professional. The welcome you get to your virtual course space was inviting. The chronological listing of weekly notes, tutorial activities and additional content was intuitive enough to follow. One

only had to start at week one to get the hang of things and the flow was soon consistent from there.

A feature of studying via DFL that I found most accommodating when it came to Moodle was the check boxes. Alongside each of the week's articles and notes, a check box was always present to ensure that a student actually completed quizzes, reviewed notes and such. Of course, some check boxes you could tick yourself but there were certain boxes that ensured that activities could not be skipped. This 'censored' student activity online was particularly interesting especially perhaps discerning whether or not actual time was spent reading articles and answering questions and completing assessments. To be honest I sometimes ticked these check boxes for the sake of furthering my course completion assessment but later paid the price when I found it hard to understand some lessons because I had not covered the activities properly.

Another aspect of my DFL experience was with my UU100 unit where online satellite tutorials meant that students from virtually anywhere could attend as long as they had good network connections. I found this amusing at first. Ok, this was highly amusing! It was funny when all of us first year students tried it out for the very first time and of course you cannot expect everyone to get the hang of it on the first try. The many voices speaking at once and the irregular and peculiar questions coming up on the chat screen had me laughing my head off whilst still being a part of the tutorial. The tutor was able to monitor our attendance easily and see how much time we actually spent being a part of the whole session. These sessions boosted diversity in terms of individuals asking questions that applied to their respective situations and home countries. If this were not the case, I would not have had the chance to understand what some of

my peers went through and why they failed to understand some of the things being taught.

This year, the Moodle programme was upgraded. I guess Moodle is being personalised for the University of the South Pacific. It can't be compared with other programmes out there such as social media software and Google tools so despite the long road ahead as far as enhancing Moodle, we must acknowledge how far we have come. I believe that DFL has positively affected the lives of many students; both living nearby (like me) and those living away over long distances. With what the university has to offer in terms of learning, it would be foolish to miss such an opportunity.

Teaching and learning at USP through the distance mode, old and new technologies and CFL's teaching professionals

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When I began teaching at USP in 1987, the university's distance education programme was housed in what was called Extension Services⁵². It was a pioneering programme, offering University level courses across the region from the 1970s in what we now refer to as 'print mode'. Course Books, Readers and Study Guides, written by lecturers and produced by the USP 'Extension Services' own printery, were dispatched to students enrolled in the various USP Centres (as they were then called) before the start of each semester; assignments were received by special USP mailbag and dispatched back to students after marking by the same means. In a region of far flung islands and far less regular or direct airline services than we enjoy today, the system was amazingly efficient, although it's entirely possible that a script or two may well have gone astray once in a while.

The use of satellite tutorials through the USP's PEACESAT⁵³ facility, which a number of the academic staff at USP at the time worked to set up, including the then Peace Corp volunteer Dr David Berkowitz, enabled us to hold satellite tutorials with extension students in different centres simultaneously. The one-hour satellite tutorials worked a

⁵² Now known as the Centre for Flexible Learning.

⁵³ The Pan-Pacific Education and Communication Experiments by Satellite.

little like radio telephone and much time was usually taken up by checking who was present at every centre, before asking about and dealing with any problems, or answering queries on course content. But it was brilliant in that it connected distance mode students across our vast ocean region with their lecturers at Laucala Campus and with each other ‘in real time’. David Berkowitz’s son, Larry, who is a good friend of mine, said his father regarded it as “one of his more major accomplishments in life”. He said David had got Hewlett Packard⁵⁴ to donate some of the original equipment and in late 1970 or 1971, when it arrived, he got to accompany his father to Nadi in a USP jeep to collect it. On the way back the jeep spun out on a bridge during a rain storm and got stuck between the curbs on either side of the bridge road. Helpful villagers came to their rescue and the equipment was brought safely back to Laucala Campus to be installed. In today’s world of high speed internet, 4G broadband cellular network technology and 5G wireless systems, it may not be appreciated how path-breaking this satellite technology was that USP was given privileged access to for regional education purposes, *and that it was completely free*. [Yes ‘those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end’ as the song goes’. None of us back then would have anticipated the wholesale marketization of education and other public goods that would come with the impacts of neoliberal economics in later decades].

Developing teaching materials for extension or distance mode teaching at the time was a challenge for many of us, particularly those of us who were not trained teachers, and

⁵⁴ The Hewlett-Packard Company or shortened to Hewlett-Packard was an American multinational information technology company headquartered in Palo Alto, California.

there were many of us in that category in the School of Social and Economic Development (SSED)⁵⁵. As with most other universities, holding a teaching qualification was not a requirement for University teaching jobs back then. It strikes me now that it must have been a real challenge for the Course Developers in Extension Services to have to work with some of the academic teaching staff. We had had training in our disciplines and so could teach content with a passion, but many of us largely developed our own teaching methods and learned what worked as we went. Today, we would describe it as 'winging it' and I confess that that was certainly what I was doing when I began. Mind you, teaching is not only about methodologies of imparting information, but about presenting knowledge in a way that captures students' interest, turns on a little switch (that 'aha' moment), and encourages them to ponder and question, and want to read and learn more... just because it's ignited interest. But teaching by the distance mode poses a challenge in this regard.

A teacher in the classroom can read the faces of students and know whether they are being effective as teachers, by stirring students' and engaging their interest. How do you animate students who are doing courses by distance mode, and know if you have set them a bit on fire? Content and passionate delivery are key and in the earlier years of teaching, there was much reliance on dynamic local tutors who provided the interface between lecturers and students, to enthuse and encourage distance education students. For distance mode students, tutors, much more than lecturers, are the real animators and educators, working as they do at the coalface.

⁵⁵ The School of Social Science and Economic Development, now known as the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE).

It would have been frustrating for USP's Course Developers, most if not all of whom were trained and experienced teachers, to have to work with lecturers from so many different disciplines teaching content that they could not have been expected to be familiar with, but nonetheless trying their best to suggest simplified language, breaking up screeds of text into shorter, digestible chunks, and introducing appropriate self-assessment questions etc, without causing offence. In short, struggling to ensure we were teaching in a pedagogically sound way so that distance students would learn, and do well. I am sure I drove Joan Teaiwa (a very experienced teacher and mother of the late, legendary Pacific scholar, and a dear friend, Dr. Teresia Teaiwa) up the wall with the Course Book for *HP100 Introduction to Politics*, which I taught for several years on campus (or 'Face to Face' as we now term it) and by extension.

The Course Book was originally written by New Zealander, Alan Robson, who as a Politics lecturer in the History/Politics Department, as it was then known, had written and taught the course for several years before me. As detailed and, okay, dense as it was, I loved Alan's Course Book for its critical analysis of political theories and theorists, its masterly contrast of two opposing political frameworks, and yes, for its underlying Marxist bent. I don't think Joan, who was the Course Developer⁵⁶ with whom I worked, was at all enamoured by the HP100 text, but I was very resistant to changing it, except by revising it periodically to eliminate outdated information and include relevant new information. I held onto that Course Book until, following the collapse of socialist regimes and the effective discrediting of socialism as an alternative model, it became impossible to continue to

⁵⁶ Now known as Instructional Designers.

offer a Marxist analysis without being challenged about its relevance. In today's 'fierce new world', overtaken by the global dominance of neoliberal ideas and policies that have privileged wealthy classes in all countries, empowered investors and corporations over states and ordinary citizens, and enabled the most extreme concentration of wealth in the hands of a very few (6 at the last Oxfam count), I think we rob our students of tools for critical social analysis if we do not expose them to Marx's brilliant class analysis and critique of capitalism.

I do not remember my pass rates for Extension students back then, but I do recall that over the years I had many wonderfully bright students enrolled in the course who did as well, if not better, than those in the classroom. Without the benefit of ready reference internet sources via computers and smart phones, extension students back then read, and absorbed what they read. They worked hard, no doubt struggled over the texts they read, and passed deservedly.

Developing teaching materials for students who are enrolled as extension students today is so very different. With the use of the online teaching platform, Moodle, we have new challenges, but also enormous new possibilities. We have dispensed with printing Course Books and other print materials such as Readers, as all the information students need is made available to them online via the course Moodle page. The Online mode has emerged as the dominant mode of teaching for distance education. With the help of technologically savvy Instructional Designers in the Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL), and CFL's Multimedia Unit staff, lecturers not only record lectures and have recorded audio and video files uploaded onto the Online Moodle site for the students, we also are encouraged to introduce innovative kinds of assignments and assessments, which Instructional

Designers set up and provide instructions for. Assessed online discussion forums are very popular as are online debates between teams of enrolled students. When they work well, online debates can be very lively and involve the most competitive students in extensive research. Online debates also have the advantage of linking students across different campuses who are in the same team, and engaging them in the collaborative work of preparing for the debate. CFL's Instructional Designers are not only trained teachers with years of teaching experience (like their Course Developer predecessors), they also are highly skilled in using the Moodle platform in innovative ways. More so than in the past, lecturers work very closely and continuously with CFL staff, as they are often dependent on them for Moodle support, even for Face-to-Face students, who have a separate Moodle site. Setting up online Mid Semester Tests have certainly depended completely on CFL Instructional Designers.

There are also several challenges in relation to online teaching. One of them is that we may have moved too fast down this track, given serious connectivity issues in some of the countries we serve. It is not a level playing field. Moreover, many students only have access to the internet on their campus, where student demand normally outstrips the supply of computers in labs. It is not easy to be an online student and to do well, as some of my frustrated students, pleading special consideration, have told me over the last six years. And as some of our best Tutors in other Campuses, like Dorothy Regenvanu and veteran USP academic, Howard Van Trease, both of whom have taught at Emalus Campus in Vanuatu, have emphasized time and again. With the transition to online teaching, inequities have emerged which were not there before. Online students need some face-to-face teaching support - having a good tutor can make all the

difference and is more effective than having a visit from the Lecturer during the mid-semester break. Keeping a register of high-performing former students each year who would potentially be good tutors and preparing them for a part-time job of tutoring, would improve online student satisfaction and performance. Alternatively, CFL might even consider experimentally establishing its own after-hours anonymous tutoring service for online students, to read and provide feedback on draft assignments rather than engaging a pricey Australian-based tutor service provider as USP recently did.

I also think the pre-occupation with transitioning to online teaching may have gone too far – I was shocked to learn this semester that Sociology has gone completely online and offers no Face to Face teaching at all, not even to Laucala-based students enrolled in the online mode. It should, I think, be remembered that distance mode teaching/learning was devised for those who could not access face to face teaching – it was the next best thing to face to face teaching/learning. Online teaching and learning and virtual classrooms will in my view always be poor substitutes for face to face teaching/learning in an actual classroom, inhabited by real, live students who relate to one another and participate as a class in the learning process. USP has a long and proud history of educating generations of our people over its 50-year history. Online teaching is important in giving remote or full time working students access to university education, and we can do distance education so much better, thanks to new technology. But we have to recognise the realities of the digital divide and technological inequalities within our region, and ought not be led into ever believing that it is equivalent or equal to having the far richer experience of being taught by real, live educators within actual classrooms.

The Senior Instructional Designer (SID) ... a day in the life of

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It's 8am when I arrive at work. The day's schedule already fills my head from the ride home to my coffee pickup to work. Randomly, three research papers with my team for an upcoming conference come to mind in addition to due dates for my teams' monthly progress report. This is even before I get to the office to open Microsoft Outlook. I take a deep breath while the rustle of keys twists in the door to my office. I look at my name on the office door for a second as if to remind me about my job. I smile at the thought of how far I have come at USP. Lights on, fan on, windows open, I begin!

My PC⁵⁷ is acting up on start-up. A power failure overnight I suspect that's stopped the UPS as well. That's the new normal, no sweat! Several attempted boot-ups later, I am in MS Outlook scanning through my appointments and catching up on overnight emails. Apparently some lecturers do not sleep. Add the Outlook appointments to the ones that popped in my head on the way to work and I officially need two extra hours today somehow. Okay, I actually have more time to do some of the tasks but the perfectionist in me says, "Start now and get it done ASAP⁵⁸." This of course almost never happens as the reasoning side of me says, "Let it rest, simmer and fine-tune it later." Ah the familiar sound of quality control seeps in when my routine feels like everything is important and urgent. Breathe Valentine, it's only 8.30am! Somewhere in my head a

⁵⁷ Personal Computer.

⁵⁸ As soon as possible.

Def Leppard⁵⁹ and Enya⁶⁰ song tussles for calm. Enya wins this round!

The secretary walks in a while later, smiley and bubbly as usual. There is something about her entrance that perks me up, especially on mornings where I don't envy my upcoming schedule. She sets up my tea, coffee and water and proceeds to regurgitate my day's schedule. I already know this, but the reassurance in her voice is comforting. We have a brief chat over pending items then it's off to my first meeting. It's an hour long and discusses online student support. I am again reminded about why I am here after all ... to serve a diverse student base somewhere out there in the expansive USP region. It reminds me of my years at the university and all that my team and I have done in course development to bridge the access and equity gap for students.

There's a 10 minutes break as the meeting finishes earlier than anticipated. I dash back to my office and grab the candidate file for appointment interviews scheduled for the next two hours. I seem to get asked to be on specific appointments committees. I am not sure why but I am not complaining as the familiar panel has a nice camaraderie with generous servings of off-key humour. The pool of candidates was interesting; practically spanning the globe with worldly nuances coming through their interviews. You get to a point in these interviews where you can tell who's in it for the sheer pleasure of wanting to be in the job and genuinely helping and those who aren't. On the same token it may just be putting up a good poker face. Of course my tendency to overanalyse has come with recently completing PhD studies. The interviews are done and I grab a bite. That's the added bonus

⁵⁹ A British musical group that sings rock songs.

⁶⁰ An Irish singer that sings new age songs.

of these familiar panels; they provide hearty refreshments like the “thank you without saying thank you for coming”, after the meeting. Mental note: put in an extra hour on the tennis court after work today because of the extra samosa choice instead of fruit.

I’m back in the office again checking emails mixed with corridor runs checking in with various team members on course development and other issues. There are a couple of urgent emails if I were to prioritise what needed to be done first. The Strategic Plan for 2013-2018 is concluding on USP’s 50th birthday and there are important KPI’s to be met and reported. We have met 1 KPI⁶¹ and the other is not far off. I am optimistic. I report this to the Senior Management Team. There is always apprehension when I send emails to the SMT but our line SMT member seems to have our backs – a real take no crap type of person who tries to get the job done without the fluff. That makes my work easier and it helps when the line SMT member is in tune with you.

Often I have noticed a massive gap in what is proclaimed from the top and what actually happens on the ground, definitely not an isolated case but therein lies the rub in any large dispersed organisation perhaps. My human resource management undergraduate days flood back occasionally when I think about organisational structure, teamwork, communication and efficiencies. Well at least I can still rely on my Human Resources background even though I shifted gears to Education Technology and Distance Education some 20 years back. It has been 20 years of remarkable and challenging progress, from typewriting page numbers and cutting (with scissors) and pasting (with glue) readings, to using PC Mail and Windows 95 – 98 – 2000 – XP and so forth; developing courses

⁶¹ Key Performance Indicator.

on the fly courtesy of the video broadcast mode of delivery due to the coups, to learning and teaching online. Building resilience? I'd like to think so. Until the next SMT request, I remain calm.

I pause for a moment and realise my phone has been vibrating away in my pocket intermittently. I check my messages and two members of my team are down sick today. I hope they are okay. I message them back telling them to rest up. Sometimes these messages wake me up in the morning, especially Mondays! There's a missed call from mum. She seems to call me at odd times during work hours. I'll call her back when I am sure I have enough time to call and have a chat with her. Perhaps lunch time if I remember to take a break. When I eventually call her back it's an update of the family affairs and of course the grandkids and what they've been up to and when I was going to drop by for a visit next.

By now some CFL stats report requests are coming from my line manager. It's nothing too serious as the secretary and I are pretty much on the ball with reporting this. The downside is when the requester sometimes wants it ASAP and I am a sucker for detail and quality. Mentally I tell myself, "It will be ready when it will be ready." A couple of emails have come from the Faculties requesting scrutiny and sign-off on course proposal forms; staff review comments and attendance at upcoming ASQC⁶² meetings. A couple of courses are in dire need of revision (i.e. over 10 years old in print mode!) so I am pleased to see the proposal forms come in for these. I also tend to scrutinise proposed course writers on the basis of their past experience with CFL⁶³. There are the eager beavers who get straight down to writing the course with minimum fuss.

⁶² Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

⁶³ Centre for Flexible Learning.

There are the cautious writers who wait for all the paperwork to be sorted first before starting but ultimately deliver, and there are writers (as nice as they are) that will eventually start and never complete the writing. Of course there are extenuating circumstances that pop up which genuinely prevent them from completing the writing although at times there really isn't a reason and that's when I take my faithful red pen over my team portfolio and drop a course before any major damage is done (we can't be promising students something we can't deliver, right?). There is mediation that happens between writer, Head of School and I so it's not like I drop the course instantaneously ... although sometimes I wish I could as my gut feeling has been spot on in course development. The student focused part of me tends to hold out hope that even the delayed writers may pull through in the end.

In between the emails, texts and stats a couple of team members drop by my office letting me know about certain course issues. Some come to me in complete panic while others come with a bit more chill. I try to make them leave my office more relaxed with the knowledge they have communicated and/or took the load off their shoulders. The team generally seems comfortable with me which validates my open door policy. It sometimes gets to a point where I look up from my emails and find that they're already seated in front of me and I barely heard a knock at the door. Oh well, distractions such as this help when I am mentally stuck in a rut trying to respond with calm to one of our more challenging colleagues in the Faculties. Then I remember a blended toolkit document I had written and circulated. Mental note: check in on the team for any feedback. How did I forget this? Oh well, important not urgent I guess.

It's 1.10pm by now and I thought I'd carry on with some course conversion audits that I had started a week ago. The grub from the appointments panel in the morning was sufficient so I wasn't hungry at this stage. My next meeting starts at 2.30pm. It's my team of Learning Designers (LD). Along with the Education Technologists (ET) and Electronic Publishers (EP), they have monthly operations meetings that I try to attend if my schedule permits. I'd rather attend these over other meetings to be honest as it gives me good mileage with my team and to gauge the pulse of the team as far as their activities are concerned. Sometimes my presence seems to offer reassurance and I'm okay with that. I have a few choice comedians at these meetings that add comic relief; something that keeps me excited about my job. There are some interesting professional development opportunities discussed along with some Moodle issues. I'll have to defer to the Learning Systems Team for the Moodle issues but it appears that course development is flowing smoothly. There's talk of the end of year LD luncheon so that puts a light touch on what was generally 'serious business' for the past hour and a half. At this point I think as long as there is alcohol at the proposed function, I am in!

It's nearly 4pm by now and my mind recalls what other urgent work needed to be done. There are several items and for a moment I feel unaccomplished. Then I realise the due dates are still a way off and I'd started working towards these deliverables anyway. I calm down and proceed to read and respond to the remaining emails for the day and schedule tomorrow's action items. I touch base with the secretary at this point. She has some missed calls for me to respond to when I was away at meetings. I also have to sign off some study sponsorship forms for staff. I oblige as I am excited for

my team who are making progress towards undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

My mind immediately goes to tennis at 5pm. Yes the best de-stress in my life happens to be where I hit something really hard and it's legal ... well a green ball at least. It's also a great sport in my biased opinion. I finally leave the office, saying my usual goodbyes to the corridor crew who I walk past daily, past the EP spaces, the secretarial team and REACT room. I glance at the staff photo board to my right. There are 26 team members relying on me. I see beyond the pictures. I see their lives, their families, their aspirations. I have an awesome team! Tomorrow beckons, but for now a good old fashion game of tennis is waiting, where I'm not SID for a moment, just Val.

This book is a collection of reflections which provide insight into the learning journeys of students, teachers and administrators at USP. While generally following an informal narrative style, the stories represent a cross section of personal experiences, challenges, desires, ambitions and most of all lessons in lifelong learning. The inspiration for this book came from an earlier publication titled, *"Negotiating the distance: a collection of experiences in teaching extension courses at the University of the South Pacific"*, released by Extension Services (now CFL) on the 25th anniversary of USP. It was only fitting that a follow-up sibling publication be released on the 50th anniversary of USP's ongoing journey in flexible learning filled with resilience and progress.



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