

Kevin Smith — The Tau'olunga: A Pacific metaphor for a caring, critical pedagogy.

On October 5, 2011, I sat in Queen Salote Memorial Hall in Nuku'alofa, Tonga watching the festivities marking UNESCO's World Teacher Day. The hall was filled with teachers, administrators, choirs, dancers, and dignitaries. October is a warm month in Tonga, but my *Kakala* was cool against my skin and I could smell the sweet fragrance of its flowers as they were draped around my neck. The program consisted of speeches and performances, but for me the most poignant event was the *Tau'olunga*¹. A young woman was escorted to the stage. Her oiled skin gleamed in the sunlight cascading through the tall windows in the hall. She wore a *Tapa* dress and stood silently before the dignitaries smiling, her knees slightly bent as she waited for the music to begin.

The music played, the men sang, and she began to dance. She smiled as she performed the *Haka* – the specific gestures that comprise the dance. Her eyes followed each gesture as she attempted to emphasize the meaning of the movements and message of her performance. Occasionally, she would turn her head and body to the side in a fluid movement called *Kalo*. At other times, in tempo with the beat, she would quickly dip just her head to the side in a gesture called *Teki*. The audience smiled and called-out as they clapped their hands in response to the dancer's performance, and soon many approached the stage and pressed money against her oiled skin. The *Fakapale* is an expression of appreciation to the dancer, and tells her that not only is she performing well, but that she has touched the audience culturally, socially, and emotionally — an experience called *Mafana*. Eventually, the *Tulafale* would begin and the cries from the audience would increase as women would join the soloist, dancing in similar movements behind her. Eventually, men would also dance behind the soloist with exaggerated movements that emphasized the beauty of her performance.

I was deeply touched by this experience. Not only because the dance was aesthetically beautiful, but because the collaboration between dancer and audience was equally beautiful. The dance was not simply a representation of a cultural artifact; instead, much like school, it operated more significantly as a method of reaffirming, redefining, and communicating social relations. Again, much like school, it was a process of producing and reproducing culture. For me, it was also a metaphor for teaching, but not just any kind of teaching. The emphasis on participation and collaboration, on feelings of community and mutuality, made this a particularly poignant metaphor for a certain type of teaching — a caring, critical pedagogy that I believe engages an active and hopeful disposition in students and teachers in ways that reveal possibilities for a better world.

I taught in the Cincinnati area for nearly six years, and during this time my belief in schools as not only sites of instruction and reproduction, but also of resistance and transformation was regularly enforced and invigorated. These latter descriptors were especially important as I understand them to be key components for developing and delivering a critically-informed sense of hope for students and teachers alike.

I was fortunate to have read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* before my first job as a teacher. It had a profound effect on how I worked with my students and piqued my interest in understanding what a critical pedagogy is and why it is important. I was not always successful in incorporating a critical

¹ I would like to thank Malu Kava, a well-known and respected *Punake*, for sharing his knowledge of the Tau'olunga with me in preparation for this letter.

pedagogy in my classes, but I knew it was important to try. The results were sporadic, unpredictable, but there were moments when we felt that what we were doing was greater than “just school.” My students weren’t just learning curriculum objectives, we were learning to *think*. Prior to moving to Tonga, I was able to design and teach a middle school technology course that allowed us to tackle a diversity of topics rising from the lived-experiences of my students. Racism, gay rights, poverty, and more — topics that typically were discussed “in the fringes” of the classroom were our main objectives because these were the issues the students were facing in their lives. They wanted to talk about them, to express their voice, and to understand the nature of the issues and problems they were facing, but up until this point the institution that should be helping them to examine their lives, to live a life worth living (to paraphrase Socrates) was too concerned with high-stakes test scores and KUDER results.

My basis for a caring, critical pedagogy is influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and Nel Noddings. Freire is perhaps best-known for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his denunciation of what he called the “banking model of education.” For Freire, this model of education is a system in which teachers authoritatively deposit content into students’ minds. Teaching then is “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 2006, p.72). In this scenario, the teacher exists as the ultimate knowledge-authority and students are reduced to unthinking objects robbed of the opportunity to not only question and reflect upon the content they’ve received, but also of the circumstances in which they received it. Freire refuted this type of education by demanding that teachers and students embrace a critical approach to learning — a dialogical process of problematizing the reality of the lives of students and teachers, and posing questions that seek to unveil the social, cultural, economic, and political contradictions present in their lives (Freire, 1985). Freire emphasized that there is never “teaching without learning” (Freire, 1998, p. 31) — that teachers must recognize that which is known by the student and honor students’ curiosity as they work to understand what is being taught. In doing so, Freire also emphasized that teachers must demonstrate humility, tolerance, and “impatient patience” in crafting a critical approach to learning (Freire, 1998, p. 80), and it is with these relational elements of a critical pedagogy that I find the work of Noddings and Freire to be most complementary.

Acknowledging the real experiences of students, the knowledge they possess, and their right to see an unfair world as subject to change, is a demonstration of the recognition of the humanity and distinctive worth of that student. Such a demonstration exists as a type of caring. Noddings, who is well known for her work involving the ethics of caring, provides an important distinction between caring in terms of virtue and relational terms (Noddings, 1995). It is my belief that a teacher must constantly strive to maintain an attitude of relational caring with students in order for a hopeful and critical pedagogy to be enacted. One important feature of relational caring is that the “carer” is attentive and receptive to the needs of the “cared-for” to such a degree that the carer’s personal motivations are placed into a heightened correspondence with those of the “cared-for” (Noddings, 2003). This correspondence then contributes to a reciprocal relationship in which the cared-for recognizes the caring attitude of the carer.

So what does all this mean in regard to teaching? The *Tau'olunga* is a dance of specific movements interpreted through a performer and members of the audience, and it is a practice that recognizes the historical significance of social and cultural elements while acknowledging the potential of such

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practices in the future. A notable performance is built upon the performer's active, real-time reflection on her performance, the audience's knowledge, and their shared reaction and participation in the elements of the dance. It is an experience that illustrates the importance of relational care, and the collaboration of the audience and the dancer create new opportunities for epistemological, ontological, cultural, and social forms of meaning-making. Schools should operate in much the same way, but what about the critical element? There is no component in my metaphor of the *Tau'olunga* that compares to a critical perspective. However, similar to how the *Tau'olunga* engages both audience and dancer in an active representation of the social ties shared by those involved, a critical pedagogy should engage both the teacher and students in active investigations of the elements of their lives. Freire wasn't describing a teaching method when he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He was specifically addressing the necessity for teachers and students to critically engage with the real circumstance of their lives in the *hope* of transforming an unjust society into a society that no longer has the capacity to reproduce oppression. Hope is the operative word here, and it is fueled by caring, by shared-resistance, by solidarity, and the joint actions of teachers and students in the struggle to achieve common goals. It is my hope that you and your students will engage in the metaphor of the *Tau'olunga* as you perform a critical, caring approach to learning and teaching.

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