THE POSTGRADUATE EXPERIENCE AS LIMINAL SPACE

Pedagogical Reflections on the application of Assessment for Learning in Education PG courses at USP

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PG students in RMI take class in the campus weaving hut during a power-outage, 2011.

PG students in Tonga during final examinations, 2012

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Abstract

- This presentation situates the postgraduate experience as a liminal space in which the student is constantly negotiating between the 'known' rules of academic engagement at the undergraduate level and the 'unknown' expectations of the postgraduate course. It draws on the notion of liminality (Van Gennep, 1908; Turner, 1969) as a space between other spaces, a 'threshold' or 'transitionary' space of being, and explores the role of purposeful curriculum design through reflective teaching practice. Recommendations include a strong PG academic-orientation, short-course bridging programmes, and guided learning experiences through assessment for learning. A comparative analysis of the delivery of an Education postgraduate course offered in three teaching modes over 2011 – 2012 is presented to demonstrate critical pedagogical reflection based on a small scale post-graduate survey conducted in 2007.

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Liminality as theory

- Liminality first emerged in the discipline of anthropology introduced by Charles Arnold Kurr Van Gennep in the early 1900s in his study of "Rites of Passage" or those ritualistic processes that mark significant life transitions (such as birth, puberty, marriage and death).
- He argued that socially constructed 'cultural' ceremonies or rituals enable the liminal experience where a person loses his/her identity temporarily before re-emerging with a new sense of self (e.g. what is the difference between a girl and a woman?
- In the 1960s Victor Turner revisited this concept in his study of symbols in ritual. He explains the state of being 'in-between':
    The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (" threshold people") are <u>necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.</u> Liminal entities are neither here or there; they are *betwixt and between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner 1969, p95).

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Why liminality?

- Liminality is today used in a wide range of disciplines to describe any state of 'in-betweeness'
- Either – a transitionary period between two more stable states (e.g. adolescence as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood)
- Or - a permanent state of 'otherness' as 'in-betweeness' (e.g the child of bi-cultural parents – Indian/Fijian – feeling s/he is never fully one or the other).
- In both states –(transitionary or permanent) liminality – there is an assumption that 'time' is needed in order to reach some level of comfort i… in order to
    (a) move into the next phase; or
    b) remain in the liminal state by developing a sense of 'hybridity' as identity (e.g. feeling strengthened by drawing on the cultural heritage of both parents).
- *"[w]hile "a liminal state is a "threshold" passed through on one's way from a prior to a later stage. …liminality has become a state of existence and experience in itself"* (King 2006, p4).

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Liminal Educational Spaces

- Consider the learning continuum of 'studenthood' from early childhood to the higher degree at University
- Liminal spaces become evident and it is interesting to note that this *"…is rarely investigated by researchers (for an exception see Allan and Lewis 2009)"* (Field & Morgan-Klein 2010, p3).
- 'Threshold' transitionary phases in the learning continuum are represented as T1 – T5
- May be further expanded to T5 (Masters Degree, and T6 , the Doctorate Degree.
- These curriculum gaps (knowledge + skills) are liminal spaces between each level of education
- Highlights the need for more focused research and support strategies to enable smooth transition from one level to another

The Learning Continuum of Studenthood in the Pacific

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Defining the PG experience as Liminal Space

- The typical PG student will encounter a combination of varied positive and negative learning experiences in the duration of their respective programs.
- Various discussions with PG students enrolled at USP indicates that the most negative PG learning experience is the overwhelming feeling of being out of their depth and not knowing what exactly is expected of them.
- Many lament the unspoken expectations of educators and the sense of 'knowing' that PG must entail something more than UG but not quite knowing what that is
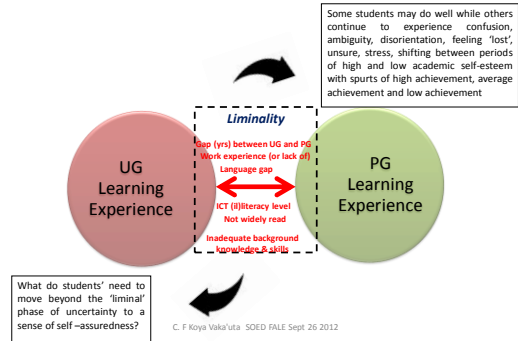- This 'in-betweeness', may be viewed as a significant liminal space.

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Initial Reflections…

Q: What are some markers of the PG liminal space?

A: Gap between UG and PG, Work experience (or lack of), Language gap, ICT (il)literacy, lack of knowledge, skills, not widely read, etc…

Q: How long does this last?

A: An indeterminable period unless a number of internal and/or external stimulus trigger a shift into a more comfortable (post-liminal) learning space

Q: What are the indicators of a comfortable PG space?

A: Positive sense of worth (i.e. academic self-esteem) and positive relevant learning experiences in which the student feels in control of his/her own learning.

Q: How can we assist students in bridging this gap?

This is the primary line of inquiry in this investigation/reflection.

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Negotiating *place* and *space*

Some students may do well while others continue to experience confusion, ambiguity, disorientation, feeling 'lost', unsure, stress, shifting between periods of high and low academic self-esteem with spurts of high achievement, average achievement and low achievement

Liminality

UG Learning Experience

Gap (yrs) between UG and PG
Work experience (or lack of)
Language gap
ICT (il)literacy level
Not widely read
Inadequate background knowledge & skills

PG Learning Experience

What do students' need to move beyond the 'liminal' phase of uncertainty to a sense of self –assuredness?

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The average USP PG Class includes students who

1. represent diverse socio-cultural and educational learning experiences;
2. have diverse learning needs and preferred learning styles;
3. are at different levels of their PG programme; enrolled in the PGDip, or MED;
4. have had a variety of +ve and –ve PG learning experiences;
5. may not have thought about the 'value' of the PG qualification in terms of :
    (a) their own learning process; and/or
    (b) the application of their learning to their 'professional' practice.

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What PG Students were saying in 2007

- A small scale study was conducted with 25 PG students at SOE enrolled in the PGDip (18), MED (4) and MA (3).
- At the time of the study, seven were enrolled in MA/MED with 2 working on statements of intent.
- One student did not have any teaching experience, 10 were primary teachers and the remaining 14 secondary teachers.

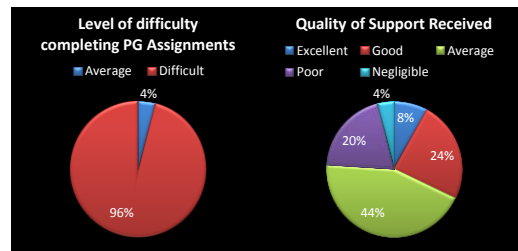| Nationality	
Fiji	20
Tuvalu	1
Kiribati	3
Samoa	1
Total	25

Age	
21- 30	10
31-40	12
41-50	3
Total	25

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Students' perceptions of the level of difficulty of PG courses and support provided:

- ***Level of satisfaction of academic performance***: 72% (18) satisfied to some extent ; 28% (7) pleased with their performance so far.
- ***Level of difficulty of PG courses***: 88% (22) average, 4% (1) difficult and 8% (2) easy.
- ***Assistance:*** 8%, (2) always (in every course and every assignment) sought further assistance from lecturers to complete assessment tasks; 76% (19) did so when needed; 8% (2) never sought additional assistance.

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Level of difficulty completing PG Assignments
■ Average ■ Difficult
4%
96%

Quality of Support Received
■ Excellent ■ Good ■ Average
■ Poor ■ Negligible
4%
8%
24%
20%
44%

Academic Support: 1 student (4%) sought assignment assistance from Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) (now SLS); 1 distance student (4%) sought help from campus staff. 56% consulted with the course coordinator; 84% spoke with other students. [Ten of these students (40%) said that they spoke with both course coordinators and other students to gather information on assignment tasks.]

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HOW STUDENTS RANKED THEIR OWN SKILLS/ COMPETENCY LEVELS AGAINST A LIST OF EXPECTED ACTIVITIES AT PG LEVEL

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	Self-Ranked Skills	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Poor	Negligible
1	Basic computer skills	6	6	12	1	
2	Use of internet/email	6	8	7	4	
3	Public speaking/ presentation skills	6	7	8	4	
4	Formal essay writing	3	11	8	3	
5	Annotated Biblio.	3	13	6	2	1
6	Literature Review		10	9	6	
7	Critical Review of an article	1	4	12	8	
8	Small Scale Research		6	13	6	
9	Statement of Intent		6	13	5	1
10	Research Proposal		6	11	6	2
11	Prepare/Present a seminar	3	5	13	4	
12	Interpret data/ research reporting		5	13	7	
13	Use of ICT tools to present data	1	6	10	6	2
14	Various referencing methods	1	8	11	5	

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Common problem areas appear to be:

About 1/3 i.e. 1 in three students ranked poor/negligible in the following areas:
- Critical Review of an article
- Writing a Research proposal
- Interpreting data and reporting

About 1/5 i.e. 1 in five students ranked the same in:
- Literature Review
- Statement of Intent
- Conducting a small scale research
- Use of ICT Tools for research

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Perceived PG Support Needed

	What PG students are suggesting:	Total = 25	% needing help
1	Short course bridging Programme	22	88%
2	PG support prior to beginning PG	23	92%
3	Formal Essay Writing	17	68%
4	Referencing Methods	19	75%
5	Statement of Intent	23	92%
6	Proposal Writing	23	92%
7	Conceptualizing Research Questions	22	88%
8	Basic Computer Skills	18	72%
9	Data presentation and interpretation	22	88%
10	Literature Review	20	80%
11	Annotated Bibliography	21	84%
12	Critical Review of articles	25	100%
13	Seminar Presentations	18	72%
14	Internet and Email	16	64%

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GENERAL STUDENT COMMENTS ON THE PG LEARNING EXPERIENCE

1. Some **lecturers** had been demeaning/ laughing at students' mistakes; some ambivalence
2. **Timing** of courses late evening classes when teachers are tired after long days and travel a long distance
3. **Thesis writing** needs to be taught in more depth
4. Lack of **general support**
5. **Racism** experienced with preferential treatment of lecturer's own ethnic group
6. **Travel** problems (long distances)
7. Inadequate **ICT support** in the use of particular research programmes e.g. for data analysis
8. **Assessment** criteria not always clear very few rubrics/ marking criteria shared
9. **Handouts** not clear

10. More **contact hours** (2 hours not enough)
11. More **group work**
12. Lecturers not always available for **f2f consultation** after hours (for workers/teachers)
13. **Email** not preferred mode of communication
14. **Faculty expectations** of PG students are high
15. More **discussion time** needed in class
16. More texts and research books in **library** needed
17. Difficulty with **understanding research**
18. Very little **guided learning** (not hand holding but general explaining/clarity)
19. **Unsure** of expectations
20. Many **simply 'get through'** their courses

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FIVE YEARS ON WHAT ARE OUR STUDENTS SAYING?

An Ongoing Talanoa
20 students,2011 (15 Laucala based, 5 RMI)
+ 30 students, 2012 (16 Tonga + 11 Labasa + 3 Laucala based)

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Has anything changed?

Much of the same…
1. ICT know-how an ongoing concern
2. Students seem more comfortable with internet use and email **but**
3. Moodle and internet access/connectivity
4. Writing skill level varies from very poor to excellent
5. Little or no theoretical understanding
6. Limited (if any) methodological understanding (teach myself attitude)
7. Assessment issues ongoing
8. Lack of theoretical/ methodological know-how
9. More discussion/group activities sought
10. Little applied learning opportunity through guided learning (AfL)
11. Irrelevant materials – lack of correlation/ connectedness to Pacific realities
12. Difficult to get on with some coordinators (dismissive and abrasive)

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AfL AS REFLECTIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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The ED457 Experience
A Teacher Notes

Three groups of students	Modes of learning
Semester 1, 2011 [13 – Fiji + 1 – Sol Is + 1 Kiribati]	F2f + Moodle support
Flexi Labasa, 2011 [11 Fiji]	Flexi + Moodle support
Flexi Tonga, 2012 [16 Tonga]	Flexi +Moodle support

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Coursework changes

Laucala Semester 1 2011	Labasa Flexi 2011	Tonga Flexi 2012
1. 4 x Short fortnightly paper (2-3 pages each based on 2 readings per Module) 20% 2. Researched essay (Library/fieldwork research) 20% 3. Chapter/book review 10% 4. Attendance & participation (Participation= discussion questions, Q&A, presence & comments on readings & lectures + moodle 10%	1. 4 Reflective online Journal Entries (Blog) – 1 per module - 10% 2. Seminar Presentation – 10% 3. Research concept paper – 5% 4. Research paper – 15% 5. Annotated Bibliography – 10% 6. Participation – 10%	1. 3 Critical reflections – 15% 2. Research concept paper + pilot study – 10% 3. Annotated bibliography – 10% 4. Seminar Presentation – 10% 5. Participation - 5% 6. Oral presentations/open forum/debates – 10%
(1 x D grade/ 2 x C Grade/3 x C+)	(3 x B Grade)	(1 x B Grade)

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Teacher's Notes

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Laucala	Labasa	Tonga
1. Problems writing 'critical reflections' – re-submit options had to be provided with guided writing activities in class 2. Poor referencing skills 3. Even those who had done other PG courses did not stand out as critical thinkers 4. Difficulty in articulating their ideas & most reluctant to be 'wrong' 5. Some seeking 're-mark' option or reconsideration for extra ½ mark rather than understanding their weaknesses 6. Handful of outstanding students who worked hard at their studies 7. General complacency / laxity 8. Sense of 'rote-learning' waiting to be told what to think. 9. Lack of applied educational theory, 10. Difficulty in understanding/applying the logic of the disciplines/ foundations of education 11. Lack of awareness or use of basic academic language expected at PG level 12. Communication skills (oral and written English was very poor) – some better at oral than written and vice versa.	Similar situation to Laucala f2f class BUT…. Rethinking – readings, assessment and teaching strategies (AfL) 1. Difficulty in research – seminar – applying theory – analysis of data 2. Conceptualization and use of modeling 3. Deliberate incorporation of theoretical discourse and key-terms 4. Group work was introduced 5. Online assessment introduced Positive Outcome – two students invited to participate in USP ICT International conference funded by USP research office and working towards publication for submission C. F Koya Vaka'uta SOED FALE Sept 26 2012	Initial diagnostic - same problems resurfacing – BUT further re-thinking and fine-tuning 1. Increased number of readings /offering student options + CD of readings provided 2. Further changing course assessment,, oral assessment, group work 3. Teaching how to conceptualize and modeling 4. Purposefully selecting a number of theories and engaging students in actively applying these to local/Pacific discourse 5. Introducing Key-terms per module 6. Teaching students how to conduct a policy analysis 7. Written reflections per module (3 0f 4 assessed) 8. One-on-one discussion on draft written papers 9. Debates/open forum (Talanga) as culturally appropriate oral assessment Positive Outcomes: One group – may possibly incorporate into larger SOE research project Two students identified with potential for further thesis work with little guidance Students beginning to see changes in thinking processes and in their spoken and

Student commentary/Evaluation

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Laucala	Labasa	Tonga
•Not privy to the results of the online student evaluation form but sure that some students were disappointed with their performance. •Most felt there was too much in terms of (a) readings ; and (b) assessment tasks ** All students said they would have preferred 100% coursework	students' excited by their achievement – feel more ICT literate after guided learning experiences, more confident in academic writing, in theorizing, in expressing their views, in theoretically grounding ideas, grateful for guided learning, feel they have accomplished something. "This was a wonderful learning experience. I have learnt so much." "There was a lot of coursework but I learned a lot." " I wish this was t he first course that I took in my program" ** All students said they would have preferred 100% coursework	Students excited to use new terms & apply concepts, enthusiastic to theorize & conceptualize new models and ideas, confident in applying theoretical ideas both Western and Pacific interchangeably, proud of their achievements, sense of huge leap in their own development, enthusiastic to learn more (some disappointed this was the last course) – wanting to study some more. "I like how we were put into groups to reflect a lot. We did a lot of peer learning and sharing. Different teaching pedagogies were used that we usually did not realize that we had run out of time" "Everything about the course was great" "I just love this course except if one or two assessment could be taken out because of time limitations but overall I love and really enjoyed this course" "I really like the readings provided on the CD – appropriate and clear" "I love this course. It made me work extra hard and bridge skills from this course to others" "I wish that I took this course as the first one when I started. I suggest that PG students should take this course first" ** All students said they would have preferred 100% coursework

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Labasa Student who presented at ICT Conference writes…

"…I was there sitting with all those big people and gave a talk in front of them. I felt happy and proud of myself being there and given that sort of treatment and also all those comments(mainly positive) after the presentation. … So much appreciation from my entire family. Though this visit I was able to make another of my long time wish come true- to meet Konai [Thaman] in person"

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Lessons Learnt

- Assessment for Learning can and should be applied at PG level in conjunction with Assessment of Learning – it makes pedagogical sense.
- Most PG students are full-time workers and therefore need some additional support
- Moodle support is sporadic at best – inaccessible and costly for regional students
- We need to teach (a) critical thinking skills; (b) theorization techniques; (c) conceptual mapping; and
- We need to re-think some of our pre-existing assumptions about what PG students already know

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Lessons learnt..cont…

- We must think about adult learning pedagogies in the broader context of preferred Pacific learning styles against our preferred teaching styles
- Important questions: How do our students' learn best? How do we effectively teach them to think critically and creatively for themselves on par with our expectations of the PG student?
- Prior knowledge is at the core of constructivism.
- It is good practice to know what our students' prior knowledge is in order to bridge the gaps within the PG experience.
- When guided appropriately , the results can be astounding.

Potential Outcome?

- Some of these students write and express their ideas (i) more coherently; (ii) more critically, (iii) more theoretically grounded - than some academic papers that I have reviewed.

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Plausible Assumptions about why liminal spaces exist/persist in the USP PG context?

1. Students may not be adequately equipped (attitude, knowledge and skills) for PG expectations (foundation not taught/learnt at school and UG level);
2. Our entry criteria (recruitment level) may need to be reviewed;
3. We may not be offering (or cutting) courses that could provide the theoretical application/interrogation needed;
4. We may not be teaching/including enough Pacific academic writing for students to correlate Western-Pacific educational discourse;
5. Our teaching models may need to be revisited;
6. PG Academic Orientation/Induction programme may need work;
7. Either current PG support is not meeting students' needs or students are not maximizing on support provided.

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Recommendations

1. There needs to be wider research into the PG experience at School and Faculty level;
2. Listen to what our students are saying;
3. Rethink our prior assumptions about our PG students;
4. PG lounge where students can meet and talanoa;
5. PG students need to be engaged in citical intellectual debate and scholarly dialogue;
6. **The next step?** Researching the thesis student learning experience as a liminal space (post-phd perhaps ☺ !)

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