

## Hints for Teachers at the University of the South Pacific (Multi) Cultural Sensitivity

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**Editor's Note:** We are reprinting this extract from a University of the South Pacific publication entitled *Hints for Teachers* as we feel that it offers important ideas for teachers in the Pacific, especially but not exclusively in multicultural contexts.

It is important for a new lecturer at the University of the South Pacific (U.S.P.) to recognise the multicultural nature of both the staff and students here. Cultural sensitivity, manifested in one's behaviour, is a very real advantage.

There are general differences in cultural orientations between people from western industrial backgrounds and most Pacific Islanders, particularly those who have grown up in a basically rural environment. I list below what I consider to be some very general differences in cultural orientations which I have found useful in analysing and understanding students' and colleagues' behaviour. Of course one is bound to find exceptions if one is willing to look for them.

### Cultural Orientations

#### *Pacific Island cultures emphasise*

- the spiritual
- rank/authority
- specifics
- conformity
- interdependence
- others' feelings
- all blood ties
- restraint

#### *Western/Industrial/Urban cultures emphasise*

- the secular/scientific
- equality
- universals
- individuality
- independence
- individual rights
- the nuclear family
- criticism

Some examples may help to illustrate these. Firstly, many students here take their religious affiliations and rituals seriously. On a Sunday, one is bound to find many groups of students attending church and prayer meetings around the campus, as well as outside. A large proportion of students devote a lot of their time to religious activities, both during the week and at weekends.

Many students come from societies which are socially stratified and have been socialised to respect persons because of their social rank. Teachers and other officers of the university are generally regarded as people with authority and therefore demand respect. Many students will not openly express disagreement with a lecturer or a senior officer because they have been brought up to believe that such behaviour is inappropriate.

Some students find it difficult to transfer knowledge and skills they have learned in one situation to a different situation. This is probably because they are used to context-specific learning. For example, most Pacific island cultures are kin-based, with the kinship system determining the way people treat each other and behave towards one another. In modern society, where most people often are "strangers", people have to create their own rules about behaviour and sometimes this is quite difficult, especially for someone who is new to the situation.

In many of the societies from which Pacific island students come, conformity to social norms is very important and deviant behaviour is frowned upon. This is not to deny the importance of creativity, but generally people do not directly encourage and/or tolerate difference. At the U.S.P. many cultural groups serve as important mechanisms for sanctioning non-conformist behaviour; this has both positive and negative effects.

Many Pacific island students like to work

together with their peers on an assignment or project, sharing freely ideas and knowledge. Some are even willing to "lend" assignments to friends; even if one does feel that this is not right (the friend may copy the whole assignment) one does not want to be regarded as selfish or individualistic, this being culturally inappropriate behaviour. The downside of course to group work is the fact that there are usually those who are on a free ride, and a few hard-working students seem to end up doing all the work. But this is what happens in real life, and in many Pacific situations, this is generally tolerated.

Being forthright or frank is not usually regarded as a virtue among many Pacific people, particularly Polynesians. This is because in many of our societies, the space between two people (*vaa/wah*) is regarded as fragile and precious and must not be "broken". In a society where there are too many broken spaces, violence and chaos result. Many people therefore tend to display non-confrontational behaviour. This is often interpreted by those who do not understand as "shyness" and/or lack of initiative.

Most Pacific island students are closely associated with their extended families; in fact, their cultural identities are intricately tied to their place in the kinship system and the way they perform within those relationships. Such relationships are often outwardly manifested in people's participation in various family/community functions and can take up a lot of time and energy. Many students, especially the older, in-service ones, often have difficulty in finding adequate time to meet the requirement of their studies amidst days or even weeks of celebrations or mournings whatever the case may be.

Development of a critical mind is certainly what university education is all about, but many lecturers have complained about the apparent passivity of many students, particularly their inability to take part in class discussions or to make verbal critical appraisals. This is partly because of what I mentioned earlier; about the importance of keeping good relations with others, but it is also a function of the desire to restrain oneself from saying anything that might make one appear "too smart" or "superior"

particularly if people in authority are present. Questioning one's peers is usually regarded as acceptable; but doing so to one's superior is out of the question. This is probably why the technique of peer tutorial/discussions seems to work well with U.S.P. students; many feel at ease with their peers and there are usually free exchanges of views and information. It is interesting to note the sudden silence among group members once the tutor arrives on the scene!

I trust, therefore, that the above will be of some help to U.S.P. colleagues. We are fortunate to work in an institution with students coming from a rich variety of cultural backgrounds - knowing something about these backgrounds, especially some of the shared traits, can make our teaching and our students learning an even more rewarding experience.

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