

Distance Beyond Measure A View from and of the Pacific¹

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I bring greetings to the Canadian Association from PIRADE, the Pacific Islands Regional Association for Distance Education. PIRADE is perhaps the newest of all DE associations, having had its Inaugural Meeting only last October in Papua New Guinea. PIRADE is also perhaps the most geographically stretched association, representing countries throughout an area more than four times larger than Europe. At present our members live in fifteen Pacific countries and just one of these, the Republic of Kiribati, has similar distance challenges to the whole of the U.S.A.

CADE played a part in our earliest beginnings. One of your executive members, Debbie Ball, joined our small Steering Committee in Vanuatu in March 1993. Some aspects of CADE's Constitution and experience are reflected in PIRADE's Constitution.

I also bring greetings from the University of the South Pacific (USP) which, like the University of the West Indies, is a regional institution. The USP is owned by and must serve twelve Pacific Island countries spread over 33 million sq. km of ocean. It is 26 years old and has been dual mode for 23 of them. As none of these countries has English as its first language, greetings could more appropriately be conveyed thus: Bula vinaka, Konamauri, Namaste, Om Yoran, Kia Orana, You Orait No moa, Fakalofa Atu, Talofa, Malo e Lelei, Yokwe.

The issue of language takes us directly into the heart of the topic, *Distance beyond measure*. Even to greet in ten different ways is an oversimplification. More than 265 languages are spoken in the USP region. Over 100 of these are spoken in Vanuatu. These languages are

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integral to 60 distinct cultures. For this reason the official language of the USP is English. Value judgements aside, there was and is no other way for such diverse communities to gain access to higher education.

The twelve member countries are not equally affected by this. Many Niueans, for example, are functionally bilingual. For most, however, English is clearly a second language, for some it is only a third, and for others a foreign language. For the main ethnic groups, therefore - Polynesian, Micronesian, Melanesian and Indian - the varying 'distances' between them, and between them and the university, begin with language: not only in their differing familiarity with the vocabulary in course materials but also in the differing world views proceeding from or created by language. These can differ not only from country to country but from island to island, atoll to atoll. Our students do not live in a common world but in diverse linguistic worlds of differing conceptual frameworks.

In economic terms, the Pacific Island nations constitute the world's most highly aided developing region on a per capita basis. The acquisition and management of aid have become highly professional skills. (Luteru, 1991: 73). Yet this generalisation also belies differences among the countries. Some are totally aid-dependent, some to a greater extent, some to a lesser extent, and one (Nauru) not at all.

In historical terms, all have traditional ties with the developed or outside world. They differ, however, in the nature and effect of those ties. For some, colonisation has been political and overt; for others the ties derive from commercial exploitation. For many, the cultural colonisation has been effected by Christianity. To varying degrees, all except Nauru are also tied by the political agendas of aid.

In geographical terms, all countries fall within the small-to-minute land-mass category. In land dispersal terms, however, differences are marked. Nauru and Niue, for example, have only one island; Tokelau is three atolls; Fiji more than 300 islands; Solomon Islands more than 400; the Marshall Islands 32 atolls; Vanuatu 80 islands; the Cooks 15. Distances between these islands vary from 20 - 3,500 km. Fiji's largest island is approximately 18,500 sq.km; Tokelau's total area is only 11.2 sq.km. On the main atoll of

Tuvalu (Funafuti), the Australian Government recently sealed the airstrip. Land reclamation had to be done jointly in the project as the strip was the only available piece of ground large enough for a game of football.

In educational terms, all countries hold in common systems that are still underdeveloped. (Renwick et al, 1991: 1). Completion of high school is, as yet, for the elite, and only 1% progress to higher education. In most countries many teachers still lack qualified teacher status.

But differences are also marked between Pacific education systems. In Fiji, for example (and by no means for the majority), a 13-year school programme has been developed. In Tuvalu, high school ceases two years short of completion. Education in the Marshall Islands follows a North American curriculum model. In Nauru the curriculum generally has come from Australia. In Vanuatu, there are both English and French systems. Tonga and the Cook Islands have adopted a New Zealand curriculum for the minority of students selected for the final year (Form 7 or Year 13 of schooling).

In communication terms, overall, the Pacific developing world is part of the technological age. Its larger commercial and tourist centres have computer facilities, e-mail and access to international networks. Facsimile machines are common. The USP itself pioneered and began the use of satellite for student support back in the early 1970s. Even video conferencing via satellite is becoming less of a novelty. But the simple telephone has yet to be launched in many villages and outer islands. Some (as in Tuvalu) have no communication system at all, other than an occasional HF radio call-up. At present we are trialling a telephone network in Kiribati that can operate with solar power. Many communities throughout the region still lack electricity and broadcast radio.

In terms of transport systems, all countries except Tokelau are now served by international airlines. Some can (and do) accommodate even 747 sized aircraft. Most countries now also have small national airlines that regularly hop between some of their islands. But many of our distance students still have no postal services. Tokelau students are visited only once a month by a boat. Tuvalu outer island students may have to wait even longer. In

Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, a student living on an outer island might still need to walk for hours to meet a canoe returning his assignment.

The distances and diversities in the Pacific Islands region - in language, economics, history, geography, education, development, culture and world view - do indeed render it a formidable distance education environment. As the Commonwealth of Learning said in its 1991 Review (Renwick, 1991: 41)

There can be no other part of the world with as many challenges to the development of effective distance education as the region covered by the USP. ... The problem which other institutions have to some degree, the USP has on a massive scale.

Immeasurable as many of the intra-regional differences are, creative educational responses to them have to be found and made. All involve compromise, seeking some elusive common denominator.

Thus, we produce tapes of 'simulated tutorials', using students as actors and asking likely questions, for those too remote to ask their own. Thus, we allow Tokelau students 30 weeks to do a 15-week course to remedy the problem of the rare visits of their boat. During the northern winter (the high tourism season), materials may be sent by sea to avoid the airlines off-loading them. We even use travelling staff and friends to be hand-carriers. Where transport schedules disrupt delivery to outer island students, special examinations can be set for a later date.

Thus, local tutors and markers (where qualified) are employed, to explain unfamiliar material in the vernacular and to reduce assignment turnaround times. So, too, our Centre staff visit outer islands, by plane, ship or smaller boats, and often then walk miles to remote villages. Students use our Centres for quiet study space. One Centre even lets its students sleep in the classrooms. We seek aid assistance for many to pay their fees or allow them to pay in weekly instalments.

Thus, we provide distance courses also at senior high school levels to enable students to bridge the gap in their national systems. We provide

materials to some schools and other post-secondary institutions, not only to spread resources but also in our own intake-interests.

Thus, we avoid as much as possible the prescription of expensive 'foreign' textbooks, and currently purchase no course materials from metropolitan institutions. The university develops all of its own materials, utilising Pacific examples and experience as far as is appropriate. Students are not expected to find essential resource materials in a local library.

Thus, the prescriptions for practical work are sometimes kept flexible to allow for the substitution of local specimens. Power conditioners are supplied for all Centres' computer equipment because of fluctuating, erratic electricity. Because of water shortages, some Centre laboratories have had extra water tanks and pumps installed. Our inter-Centre e-mail system uplifts and downloads nightly around 1:00 a.m. to address the scarcity of international circuits in and out of most countries.

Increasingly our systems are being traversed or intersected by others from metropolitan institutions outside the Region. Many of these activities come under Overseas Development Assistance programmes. These are not all bad by any means. (The USP's own particular experiences with CIDA projects have been extremely positive.) Region-wide, however, the politics and practice of aid assistance have many, now well-documented, negative impacts. The 1992 World Bank Study of post-secondary education substantiated that literacy rates in the Pacific are declining; that post-secondary enrolments within the Pacific are falling; that post-secondary institutions in the region are being rendered unviable or are being undermined by some donor scholarship activity; that much ODA endeavour accrues greater benefit to the donor than to the recipient. In 1991, US\$50,000,000 of educational aid to the Pacific remained in institutions in the donors' own countries and only US\$23,000,000 actually came into the region (Fairbairn, 1992: 6). The best and brightest of Pacific students are still increasingly sponsored away to rim country institutions at up to 10 times the cost of educating them in the region. The majority of these do not come back.

These issues aside, there are other concerns, related to overseas providers' inappropriate expertise and unfamiliarity with local conditions. The regional distances and national differences outlined at length earlier *can* become an educational minefield for the providers themselves. They can also become a minefield for the recipient Pacific students, in terms of curriculum, methodology, support systems and assumptions.

For those who work as distance educators within the Pacific region, therefore, the primary challenge of measuring and respecting diverse national identities and the exigencies of individual sovereign states is accompanied by the challenge in the *global* theatre of distance education, of achieving a Voice: One Voice, Pacific. We have sought to do this with the establishment of PIRADE.

The regional association's aims, as specified in its constitution, include:

- to advance and promote the practice of distance education appropriate to Pacific island countries and territories;
- to promote distance education's contribution to the development goals of the Region;
- to support and assist institutions in the Region wishing to establish and strengthen a distance education capability;
- to foster communication and cooperation between distance educators in the Region;
- to form links with appropriate other distance education organisations and institutions outside the Region, and
- to represent the Region in international forums and international collaborative activities.

In 1994 almost 100,000 students in the Pacific are receiving their distance education from Pacific Island providers. Some of these institutions are no longer small or new. One (in PNG) has the highest student enrolment in the

southern hemisphere. Another has long term experience of delivery into rugged highlands, another to minute atolls without modern communications. One has the largest area of the earth's surface to cover. Historically, we have been working separately, each devising our own solutions to our many common problems. Already PIRADE has established many useful bridges between us.

It will also, hopefully, build bridges between Pacific and appropriate *external* providers. Already several large ones have joined PIRADE as Institutional Associate Members. We welcome this as a means to dialogue and understanding and shall support ventures that proceed on the bases of these.

Another 'organisational' project addressing the Region's special characteristics is being planned and implemented by the Commonwealth of Learning. Well advanced in its technical and administrative protocols, the project will establish an Asia/Pacific Distance Education Network. It will comprise telecommunication and education delivery links at regional, national and local levels. Although the Commonwealth of Learning has yet to name it officially, it is being referred to, in the meantime, as CAPDEN. It will enable the Pacific providers to share among themselves; to deliver to their constituencies even on outer islands, and to cooperate with colleagues in Asia. It will also, through its Protocols of Management, assist appropriate external providers with delivery into the Region.

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