Open and Flexible Learning for Whom?
Rethinking Distance Education¹

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every day
do something that scares you
he said
take risks
and don’t forget
to wear sun-screen

so i took my lap-top
and deleted my past
saving only the part
that threatened to digest
the dreams that dared
to frighten a frail
and divided heart

and in my attempt
to re-create the moment
i found several scars
left by unknown people
i have loved in my mind
and wondered

what judgements
or inconvenience
i would cause if caught
trying to escape

from the fear
of getting burnt
basking in a slice of sun (Thaman 2000a)

My response to the conference theme, *Open Learning and Distance Education: Ideology, Pedagogy and Technology*, particularly the technology part of it, is contained in the above poem, which for me, is a reminder that we must remain conscious of the power of modern technology to help as well as destroy our educational goals.

I shall focus my presentation on aspects of the conference theme that relate to issues of equity and access, with specific reference to the small island nations of the South Pacific, a region characterised by small populations, cultural diversity, geographic fragmentation and isolation, and economic dependence; a region usually referred to as “the hole in the Asia/Pacific doughnut” (Fry 1996:305).

**The Context**

The issues of equity and access are not new to our university, a regional, multi-modal university offering educational programmes face-to-face in its three campuses and 12 university centres, as well as via distance (or ‘extension’ as this type of delivery is popularly known). Opportunities for formal education, especially higher education, have always been limited in a region where schooling has a relatively recent history and where post-secondary education was mainly for the privileged and more advantaged of island populations. Indeed, before the establishment of the University of the South Pacific (USP) in 1968, most Pacific Island students had to leave home in order to attend high school and virtually all had to leave their home countries in order to pursue university and other tertiary level studies.
The USP was established and funded by the governments of Britain, Australia and New Zealand in order to address the problem of access to higher education in the region. It was also part of a focus by the international community on the democratisation of higher education as well as the disadvantaged. In our region, university education has always been associated (some would say ‘too closely’) with national as well as regional development strategies and USP’s main mission was to provide for the educational and training needs of its member states, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, which have a total population of only 1.4 million, but are spread out over a sea of islands in some 32 million square kilometres of ocean.

The geography of our region necessitated the early development of distance education as the USP became a pioneer in the use of satellite communication technology to enhance and develop its distance teaching programmes in the early 70s. Today, the USP continues to provide learning opportunities to people who cannot or do not wish to participate in conventional education. This may be because of geographical distance, an accident of birth, financial constraints, failure to reach cut-off points, job commitments. In 1999, out of a total of 10,109 students enrolled, 49% (4,943) studied via the distance mode. It is our intention to increase Extension enrolment by 10% each year for the next five years.

The expectations of increased off-campus study is being facilitated by recent upgrades in the university’s information and communication system, USPNet, a project which has involved heavy investment in software development and computerised communications in the hope that this will result in improved institutional links and administration, and better learning outcomes for students. USPNet is billed to be a modern and cost-effective communications system owned and operated by the USP and providing a flexible education delivery system aimed at enhancing
distance study. Jointly funded by the governments of Japan, New Zealand and Australia, it is a private stand-alone system consisting of a satellite earth station and associated facilities in each of the university’s 12 member nations. The facilities allow communication between the main hub station at the Fiji campus and each of the other campuses and centres via audio conferencing, email, telephone and fax. Since its establishment, USP has graduated over 11,000 students with formal qualifications and thousands more have been able to access both credit and non-credit programmes. Distance learners have included people in full-time employment and housewives, as well as school leavers. Today, through programmes offered on its three campuses in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu, as well as through distance study, the USP continues to provide higher education programmes that are cost-effective and relevant to the development needs of the region it serves.

Despite the Pacific nations’ commitment to educating their people, the fact remains that only a very small proportion of the region’s population (fewer than 5%) are able to access higher education institutions, either in the region or outside. Moreover, in the past few years, we have witnessed some overseas institutions offering education programmes in USP member countries. The services they provide include distance education courses as well as on-site programmes supported by resident tutors. Some programmes, particularly vocational ones, are offered through existing national post-secondary institutions. In an increasingly de-regulated and competitive environment, we anticipate more overseas-based educational institutions establishing themselves in our region. Most of these are profit-oriented, targeting a small but influential and affluent clientele in areas such as business and commerce, using curricula imported from metropolitan countries, with little effort to adapt to Pacific contexts. Other trends are: the push for market-driven economies and educational development; awareness of and concern about issues such as cross cultural transfer, globalised curricula and appropriate learning strategies. Amidst these
developments, cultural diversity is being blurred and services and products standardised and homogenised.

Over the last decade, many people have been led to believe that the new IT would enhance our access to different educational programmes as well as help us make money, the implication being that any person, group or nation can and does differentiate itself by presenting distinctive qualities in the form of cultural or intellectual services that would attract consumers. However, in PICs, as in most post-colonial situations, access to the prime sites of power, whether they be law, media or education, lies predominantly with already privileged groups, most of whom are monied and urban-based (Wilkins, 1997:236). While this phenomenon has been clearly challenged (but not significantly changed) in developed countries, it has not yet been seriously addressed in Oceania. Here, the challenge is not necessarily aimed at the wealthy and white middle class group per se, but rather at educational institutions with western philosophies, ideologies and pedagogies that continue to ignore the way Pacific peoples communicate, think and learn; ideologies that do not emphasise the values and belief systems that underpin Pacific indigenous/vernacular education systems in which the majority of learners/clients are socialised. The challenge is compounded by our region’s heavy dependence on overseas financial and technical aid (Thaman, 1990) and the recent rush by some Pacific Rim universities and organisations to package education and offer it to our countries as another purchasable commodity in a market and consumer-driven world. An obvious reflection of the global economic restructuring ideology that is being pushed on everyone by influential organisations such as the IMF and the World Bank, it is unfortunately changing global as well as local maps, reflecting what Bottomley (1995:24) calls the ‘new geography of inequality’.
Faith in Distance Education

So far, I have attempted to provide the context in which open and flexible learning and distance education in our region may be considered. For most PICs, distance education is seen as an integral part of national and regional educational initiatives, such as lifelong learning, basic education, democratisation of education etc. For others, it is a vehicle for ensuring better and increased access to higher education as well as a response to criticisms of traditional approaches to teaching in schools and university campuses. Because many politicians, as well as people generally, are demanding rapid responses and cost-efficient higher education, distance education is increasingly seen as a panacea for fast relief to the problems of equity and access, as one Director of Education said recently:

This is what we’ve all been waiting for — a system where our students can live in their little islands while studying courses from USP or Harvard or whatever — and in the end, get higher degrees. In my country, we aim to have a computer on every pupil’s desk and allow all students to access the Internet. In this way they can communicate with the best minds in the world. Moreover, they should also be allowed to take charge of their own learning, and not have to depend on one professor sitting here on campus.

Arguments For and Against Distance Education

The arguments that have been advanced for distance education are well known. In addition to overcoming geographical distance and isolation, it is seen as helping to realise goals relating to cost-efficiency, accountability and productivity, flexibility, cost-sharing, internationalisation and consumer-oriented education. These, plus the fact that distance education is actively pushed by overseas
consultants and aid donor agencies whose interests will also be served by Pacific countries adopting their particular recommendations, means that distance education is on everyone’s lips. However, it is interesting to note that those who are most passionate about open and flexible learning, distance education and the educational superhighways are usually not practitioners of these modes; they do not seem optimistic about their efficacy. In terms of actual practice and experience, our Director of Education may be disappointed with the following general findings as outlined by Paul (1998), and confirmed by our own studies:

1. High front-end costs. Distance education is cost-efficient only when a critical mass has been surpassed (Rumble, cited in Paul 1998);

2. Low completion rates. With few exceptions, completion rates in open and distance learning institutions are lower than for traditional on-campus institutions and this cost must be factored into any economic assessment of distance education (Woodley 1994);

3. One-way learning. This model is not suited to complex learning tasks and provides little for differences among learners. At the USP, much of the communication has been and continues to be one-way through correspondence and, more recently, by television and video. The tyranny of the authority of the teacher originally applied by Cook (1989) to classrooms may be equally applied in distance education, through top down course design, insufficient provision for interaction and critical thinking, or inadequate student support systems (Paul 1998:19).

4. Lack of attention to individual learners. Research has shown that most successes in distance education have been among
highly motivated, often part-time, adult learners. Furthermore, many teaching staff at USP are now questioning whether distance education can match the broader benefits of campus life, especially for young, full-time undergraduates experiencing freedom to pursue ideas and socialise in an open atmosphere for the first time in their lives. This is not to deny the tremendous advantages of distance education but simply to recognise that education is much more than an academic endeavour (Paul 1998:19).


6. Lack of awareness of the fact that Technology is not value-free. We often make the mistake of starting with our technological ‘toys’ and not with the learning needs of students. Institutions need to plan for the introduction of changes and to be sensitive to their impact on both staff and students. As Paul (1998:20) warns, “our biggest problem with educational technology lies in how we interact with our students, not with the supporting hardware and software”.

Continuing Challenges for Distance Education

We continue to face the many challenges in distance education (Thaman 1997a; Va’a 1997; Wah 1997) today, despite improvements in many places, including our use of technology. For example, at the institutional level, we continue to be concerned about the impact not only of the content of distance education materials but also the mode of delivery itself. The majority of our students grow up in societies where traditionally they learn from close kin and from one another, through their interaction with each
other as well as with their environment and where doing, listening, observing, and imitating are basic means of learning. Furthermore, the traditional role of the teacher is being undermined as the focus is shifted to the learner in learner-centred approaches that are encouraged through distance learning. It is interesting to note here that, despite attempts to ensure that our instructional materials are ‘stand alone’, our students continue to request face-to-face interactions with tutors (Thaman 1998; Landbeck and Mugler 1999). Perhaps this is mainly because of the decontextualised nature of the content of most course materials which continue to be largely Eurocentric in outlook, academic in orientation and culturally undemocratic in their expectations of students.

In terms of the mode of delivery of distance education, we now view geography and its impact as having been conquered by modern information and communication technology (in the form of print and electronic media), making the physicality of place irrelevant to social interaction. Over our upgraded USPNet, students and staff may be transported to any number of island countries without ever being in them. The traditional sense of place, emphasised by most Pacific societies, is lost as an artificial sense of ‘being’ is introduced. This loss of geographic centredness or ‘place’, although a feature of global cultures, may cause some of our students to become disoriented because where they are physically will no longer determine who and where they are socially (Meyrowitz 1987:115).

The need to better contextualise instructional materials by including more local (Pacific) content continues. Whereas, in the 70s, this was more difficult because teaching staff did not have the knowledge or the experience to carry out such a task, recent advances in ethnoscience, ethnobiology, ethnomathematics and folk taxonomy have provided much for science and mathematics course writers to choose from. In addition, the use of field-based studies in the social sciences has assisted staff in making some of our
programmes more relevant and meaningful to learners (Thaman R. 1997). In my experience, the valuing of indigenous notions of learning, knowledge and wisdom, and including these as legitimate areas of study in the curriculum of higher education have proven to not only enhance students’ understanding of their own education, but has helped them to realise that Pacific cultural knowledge and languages are worthy of study at the highest levels of formal education (Thaman 2000b). Unfortunately, in most disciplines, much remains to be done.

Flexibility and Cultural Inclusivity

There is no doubt that, over the last three decades, we have witnessed how distance education has improved access to higher education in our region, but the education itself is exposing more students to the conflicting demands and expectations of their home cultures and those of their formal education. Many more are facing learning modes, codes of conduct, curriculum activities, not to mention metaphysical belief systems, that are more typical of foreign, metropolitan cultures than those of their home countries, and an increasing number of them are leaving their homes in order to make use of their education elsewhere.

This is probably because of the fact that much of what our students are learning, either face-to-face or via distance education, are of little practical value to them given the realities of their home cultures and societies. (Thaman 1993a and b, 1997b; Va’a 1997; Wah 1997). For example, most of our graduates will not know the uses, let alone the names, of plants and animals in their island environments, or how to fish or pursue agricultural practices — knowledge which will continue to be the basis for the subsistence affluence that gave many Pacific societies their cultural and economic resilience (Fisk 1972) and, according to sustainable development experts, will form the foundation for sustainable living in the future. Recent regional and national environmental concerns about Pacific environments
must first address the loss of traditional environmental knowledge among Pacific peoples themselves before considering long term solutions to environmental problems.

My concern with distance education is also a concern about the possible impact of the type of education and training that is made available, on people as well as our environments. Lawton (1971), a British curriculum expert once wrote that a curriculum was a selection of the best of a culture, the transmission of which is so important that we cannot leave it to chance. Today, the content and process of much of our education are selections of the best of foreign, globalised cultures and not those of Pacific learners (Thaman 1993b). Critical analyses of what constitutes open, flexible, and distance education need to continue in order to ensure their relevance in the contexts and realities of our learners because education must be organised for the production of knowledge and skills that serve to develop and enhance our various societies and their cultures, NOT to perpetuate their marginalisation.

That task is difficult since those who are best placed to do it have largely accepted the ideologies, educational philosophies, pedagogies and psychologies of learning and learners that they were taught at universities and colleges in metropolitan countries, often despite their own knowledge and experiences to the contrary. Today in Oceania, distance education is not only fashionable but desirable, and impersonal and individualistic approaches that de-emphasise the human element and embrace new information technologies have come to be seen not only to be ‘natural’ but also ‘inevitable’. Yet there is nothing ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ about distance education. It is, perhaps, what Foucault calls a “fiction which functions in truth” where the ideas associated with distance education have become incorporated into the way in which the system works in practice, producing the very thing it claims to describe through the ‘truths’ that are presented in its delivery. In other words, distance education is structured the way it is because
it is precisely what is sought. This often means that the theories and ideologies associated with higher education in general and distance education in particular, have themselves become ‘truths’ that serve to proclaim desired outcomes as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’, hence pathologising opposing perspectives. We must be careful not to advocate something simply because our own education has largely been through it and/or our jobs depend entirely on it.

A further issue that needs repeating relates to the fact that distance education continues to be very closely associated with globalised curricula and opportunities to sell education at the global market place. In Oceania, we know that globalisation, however that is defined, is not about globalising Pacific cultural knowledge and wisdom but is about the globalisation of mainly western cultural knowledge and the importation of values and practices which have already served to dis-empower many Pacific peoples, especially the majority who live in rural areas and whose lifestyles are the least westernised. Even UNESCO has warned that the mass export of the cultural practices and values of the industrialised and post-industrialised world, including their languages, communication and entertainment networks and non-sustainable consumerism, may well contribute to a sense of dispossession and loss of identity among those who are exposed to it (Teasdale 1997:1).

The critical reflection of the type that I am advocating would help us realise that the education that we are offering is not culture-free and gender-central, nor does it occupy a kind of ideologically neutral high ground, because academic, scientific and liberal beliefs and values, like all beliefs and values, are embedded in a particular cultural curriculum and agenda (Vine 1992:169-210).

As educators, we know that we cannot change the labour market nor eradicate discrimination. But we can begin by helping to create a considerably more culturally democratic education for our students and play a more positive role than many others have so far been
prepared to concede possible. We can substitute a more culturally inclusive approach to instructional design by incorporating different worldviews and ways of knowing into the usual Eurocentric and Anglo-American approaches we have adopted so far. We can begin by recognising the need to address the dominant paradigm with which discourses in distance education have been limited so far, and advocate for the incorporation of local knowledge and wisdom into the content of university education (and hence distance education) in order to encourage the valuing of ways of knowing associated with peoples in the Asia/Pacific region and the acceptance of their multiple wisdom, thus enhancing their employability and further developing their critical abilities, knowledge, entrepreneurial and occupational skills.

Furthermore, it is our responsibility to make all learners aware of such tensions between what they are exposed to through their (distance) education and their various cultures, and encourage critical analysis of all instructional materials. We know that there are forms of indigenous knowledge that are in contradiction to the inevitable march towards the rationalisation of globalised culture and knowledge, a trend that may be compared to the spread of monocultures in agriculture where imported hybridised, fertiliser-dependent seeds produced at a profit for multinational corporations crowd out the indigenous local varieties.

In my own writing and teaching, I have tried to be more inclusive, open and flexible by incorporating Pacific content as well as pedagogy in the courses that I teach. In a second year paper on *Educational Theories and Ideas*, students are required to analyse their own vernacular educational ideas before studying those of major western educational thinkers and theorists, and to compare their own educational values with those of the western canon. We know that in the high-status universities of the west there is the typical objection to what they call ‘area studies’ or ‘ethnic studies’ as elevating the ideas of ‘lesser’ writers and not the so-called ‘great
writers’. This study of ‘lesser’ writers is exactly what I am trying to do at our university. I also try to show that educational philosophies are intricately connected to the linguistic discourses of local languages and cannot be said to be ‘universal’ (Thaman 2000b).

Such denial of universality is, as you know, a contradiction with the historical mission of the ‘university’. Theoretically, it should be possible for my ideas to be available in the global market place. But we know that there is no level playing field in the global selling-power market, because I know about the amount of local content I see on our TV screens. I also know that the nature of the modern information age means that some forms of local writing and knowledge are getting universal electronic distribution while others are deemed to be marginal. We will need to work harder towards reclaiming cultural democracy in distance education and to move closer to making education not only more open and flexible but more culturally inclusive as well.

**Conclusion**

In concluding, I wish to say that I do recognise the contribution of western analysis in offering me a way of understanding how distance education, its content as well as methods of delivery, might affect Pacific societies, both positively and negatively, as I have described. I also acknowledge the fact that distance education offers opportunities for individual mobility, despite the fact that it may also serve directly and indirectly to encourage group inequalities, and improved access to formal education may not necessarily improve equity. Over the past ten years, much work has been done in industrialised countries on the way inequalities in the broader society have been sustained through formal education, how schools prepare students for unequal futures and how students construct identities which themselves perpetuate these inequalities (Weis 1992). The heavy emphasis of most distance learning materials on academic
subjects and achievements as well as the use of English and other foreign languages would suggest that formal education is an important agency for the perpetuation of unequal conditions which ideologically suggests exactly the opposite role for educational institutions as sites for foreign cultural transmission. There is, therefore, an urgent need for more intensive dialogue to define and formulate alternative policies and practices for distance education in response to the cultural diversity in our region. Views, although diverse themselves, have at least one thing in common, and that is the commitment to cultural democracy, human rights, and the need to combat discrimination and prejudice.

Although the need for alternative strategies for research and knowledge creation has become a significant element in the recent debate about development education, the need for illuminating indigenous knowledge in that process has not been adequately addressed by educators both in our region and beyond, nor has it been subjected to transfer into the educational discourses of industrialised nations. This is despite efforts by the international community to affirm the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In most international discourses on education, such disenfranchisement is usually felt by most ‘minority groups’, including women, who feel that the existing democratic framework and corporate economic structures do not sustain and in some situations, even undermine, the commitment to their special needs and wishes (Middleton 1992). High tech education may well serve to further entrench already unequal access to higher education.

For most people in Oceania, improving access to formal education can only happen through practices that value and recognise existing inequalities as well as our cultural knowledge, histories, contexts and realities. Open and flexible teachers will be expected to provide more contextualised learning experiences and more democratic learning environments that will encourage students’ acquisition of
knowledge, skills and attitudes that are supportive of a critical appreciation of all cultures, including their own. Responsible distance education providers must understand the complex ways in which cultures influence the way people behave and learn, inside and outside institutions, if they are to broaden educational opportunities. I sincerely hope that my contribution today might help in facilitating such an understanding and that the current euphoria over internationalisation, democratisation and globalisation of education, over virtual universities and the like, will NOT prevent the emergence of a real synthesis of western and non-western educational ideas that provide for a more culturally inclusive education for the majority of our people.

I end with this little verse about such a synthesis:

thinking is tiring
like paddling against the waves
until feeling comes lightly
late into the pacific night
when the islands calm me
stroking my sorrows
i ask for silence
and they give it
i ask for forgiveness
and they raise my face

(Thaman 2000)

References


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