

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING ABOUT THE PACIFIC

By Dr Max Quanchi, Secretary, Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies, Pacific Island Historian and Educator, this paper at the National Training Program on *Pacific Neighbours: Understand the Pacific Islands*, October 26 2009

Do Australian students need to understand what is happening in the Pacific Islands - the answer is a clear “Yes!!” One of the key considerations for teachers is contained in the phrase “Understanding the Pacific Islands” - the subtitle of *Pacific Neighbours*. Students need to know how many Pacific Islanders inhabit the region, to be familiar with their nations and territories, government, leaders, and cultures, traditions and customs right down to an understanding of the importance of clans, kin groups and genealogies.

Dates are not that important but I think there are two important milestones:

- When did people first arrive in their new island home?
- When did Island nations gain their independence?

Using these dates as a platform would lead to an important list of topics for teachers to address. These then become classroom lessons that will help students to:

- Appreciate the long occupation of lands, islands and archipelago
- Appreciate the amazing achievements in maritime technology, in the thousands of years during which of Pacific Islanders moved across one third of the world’s surface;
 - from South China and South East Asia through Micronesia
 - from South China and South East Asia down the corridor of islands in Melanesia
 - settling the heartlands of Polynesia – Samoa, Cooks and Society islands
 - finally leaping out to the far corners of Hawaii, Rapanui and Aotearoa/New Zealand
- Appreciate the affinity of Pacific Islanders people to their own land (90% still live on the own family, clan or kin land)
- Appreciate ancient skills in arts and crafts, food technologies, housing and implements
- Appreciate how Islanders resolved conflict (as shown in the launch in October 2009 of the International Red Cross’s *Under the Protection of the Palm; Wars of Dignity in the Pacific* – which shows how traditional conflict resolution in the islands aligns quite closely to the basic laws of International Human Rights. (download from www.icrc.org)
- Appreciate the innovative response, alongside adaptation and adoption of outside ideas, that characterise the way that Pacific islanders now live in the early 21st century – three examples is sufficient:
 - *Tin roofs on fales* built according to traditional Samoan architecture
 - *Imported religions* but now conducted in vernacular languages with a blending of local custom
 - *Democracy* now merged with traditional protocols and conventions for making decisions – such as the Great Council of Chiefs in Vanuatu.

A more dramatic example can be cited if we turn to a small, off-shore island in Fiji – Viwa, with one village and 135 inhabitants. But, to improve yields from their gardens they have eradicated cane toads and rats, built a tourist eco-lodge house to cater for guests, developed a walk way and rest area under the famous John Hunt tree (where the founding Methodist missionary in Fiji landed and lived) and used funds from visiting tour groups to ensure all houses in the village have a tin roof to assist in conserving rain water. The Pacific does need funding for bitumen roads, bridges, hospitals and wharves and government buildings, but the most exciting “development” in the Pacific is being done at village level, inspired by local people, with entrepreneurial ideas, expertise and a sense of community.

This argument suggests I am reversing the premise of *Pacific neighbours* as a professional development package – it should not be only learning about “the challenges they face” (to quote AusAID’s announcement about the launch of *Pacific Neighbours* in the current issue of *Focus* Oct-Dec 2009). It should not only be learning about tsunamis, earthquakes, coups, arcs of instability, Doomsday Scenario and Failed states (although all these need to be discussed by students as appropriate and problematic definitions and descriptions) – but learning about how Islanders proactively plan, cooperate, coordinate, legislate and dream about what will happen next.

What are the key considerations for teachers selecting and planning content for lessons about our neighbouring Pacific islands?

Know where Pacific island people live!

- Include the north Pacific (known as Micronesia) – which we often forget about!!
- Include territories still under colonial rule (Rapanui, West Papua, Hawaii, New Caledonia/Wallis and Futuna. French Polynesia)
- Include those territories in close association with their former colonial rulers (Cook islands, Niue and Tokelau with New Zealand, and CNMI, FSM, palau and Marshall islands with the USA)
- Include environmental management – wonderful artificial lagoons and islands, drainage and irrigation systems, city-like districts of stone housing and ceremonial platforms, harbours and fish farming - and more recent intrusive phenomena such as El Nino, sea level change, deforestation, and mining degradation.

Know how Pacific Islanders settled how they were formed into the nations of today

- Include the long occupation of Pacific peoples
- Include the much shorter and recent history of decolonisation and independence
- Show the linkage between Island histories and transnational, global and world histories
- Particularly, Australian students should study the two former colonies of Australia – Nauru and PNG.

Know what is important on a daily basis

- Feasting, fighting and ancestor worship (said Roger Keesing of Malaita in the Solomon Islands – today that would be Food, Leadership and Ancestor Worship)
- Gifting, welcoming, knowing one's place
- Emphasise the family (*but acknowledge kin and clan relationships)
- Emphasise the village (*but also acknowledge that towns and cities are significant)
- Study festivals and other nation building and regional events
- Include dance, art, tattoo, Rap music, oratory
- Study contemporary events in Australia like the Wantok Music Foundation's "Australasian World Music Expo" in Melbourne (19-22 Nov 2009) or the "New Ground Festival" in Logan City, Brisbane (2-5 April 2010) or the annual "Vaka Festival" in Darwin
- Watch recent Island films and documentaries made by Pacific Island people.

Know about the importance of mobility

- Why islanders do not want to leave their island home?
- Why do others move out permanently or for short terms to the USA, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia?
- What is a Diaspora – learn about the half a million Australian-Pacific Islanders
- Why are 40% of NRL players are of Pacific Island descent?
- Why has Australia introduced a Guest Worker Scheme?

Find ways to speak to Pacific Island students and hear their voice and share ideas

- Include Internet, Blogs, NING and Facebook
- Arrange exchanges and fieldwork trips
- Attend festivals, concerts and fund-raisers, Church services and sporting events where Pacific Islander-Australians contribute to the mosaic that is "Australia".

In teaching about the Pacific it is important to empathise – remove the furniture, sit on the floor, put the boys in the centre circle and the girls behind to reflect on gender balance (and imbalance) in Pacific social structures and decision-making. In Kiribati, however, everyone knows that the women outside the inner circle actually whisper instructions on how they want their male leaders to speak. And, in Vanuatu it is often the less noticeable Women's council, committee or group that are making all the right moves in local village development and improvements.

In Australia we now have half a million people of Pacific island descent, perhaps more, so in most schools in Australia there is a chance to engage with people of Pacific Island descent.

Let me finish by listing some recent Pacific Island related events in Brisbane:

- Public seminar at the State Library on Australian aid in the Pacific (Bob McMullin, July 22)
- *Talking Tapa* exhibition opens at the Museum of Brisbane (25 July)
- Pacific Response to Global Climate Change public seminar Brisbane Town Hall (28 July)
- Launch of IRC *Beneath the palms* at Queensland State Library (Oct 14th)
- David Bridie and George Telek concert for the Samoan Tsunami (October 18th)
- Jim Burtons's next monthly Public Library meeting held on a biography of Australians who have worked in the Pacific (Oct 26)
- *Island Vibe* festival on Stradbroke Island (Oct 30)
- *Paperskin: barkcloth across the Pacific* exhibition opens at the Art Gallery of Queensland (Oct 30)
- "New Ground" South Pacific Youth Festival Logan, (April 2010).

This exciting schedule of events, found now in all capital cities, suggests that teachers will have no trouble connecting with the Pacific in their own suburb or city.

Teachers also have the support of the *Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies*, an association that takes as its aim the expansion of teaching, research and study of the Pacific in Australian universities, galleries, museums, archives and libraries, and as noted in Chapter 8 of its recently published report, *A National Strategy for Pacific Studies in Australia*, is also concerned about expansion of Pacific content in schools.

The Report argued, as part of a survey across all states and territories, that:

- "There is excellent classroom teaching on the Pacific occurring across Australia, but it is isolated and relies on individual initiative and enthusiasm.
- Schools need to develop collaborations with Pacific Islander communities in order to expand their teaching on the Pacific.
- Schools need more quality resources to support teaching about the Pacific." (p.137)

The last of these is partially answered here today by *Pacific Neighbours*, this AusAID professional development project.

Chapter 8 of the AAAPS Report concluded that, "Although themes related to Global Warming or political unrest are necessary components of teaching, there are many other aspects of life in the Pacific Islands that illustrate the complexity, vitality and harmony of Pacific cultures. It is time that the emphasis shifted from relying on individual teachers, to planned approaches at government level to incorporate positive images of the Pacific Islands into teaching practices. (p.144)

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