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The Higher Education Technology Agenda

Connecting through integration: blending Pacific approaches with online technologies

To date many indigenous/ minority students report significant challenges in engaging in the traditional pedagogies of higher education often resulting in low attendance and achievement. Blended learning approaches that combine both face-to-face service delivery and modern information technologies are now regularly being suggested as radically transforming student learning and teaching (Mitchell & Forer, 2010). However this presentation argues that for blended approaches to be relevant and successful, Pacific cultural approaches and perspectives known to be successful in promoting greater student academic engagement and success need to be integrated into blended learning environments.

This paper will explore a research based blended approach developed for the integration of information and academic literacies into the Pacific Studies undergraduate programme at the University of Auckland. Prior to this, information and academic literacies have traditionally been taught separately with mixed results and with low student and academic staff engagement. As Pacific students at the University are a targeted equity group, support services and approaches likely to raise academic achievement are being actively explored.

This paper takes into consideration that Pacific or "Pasifika" is not a homogeneous group, but is made up of different ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has different languages, cultures, customs, and experiences. Furthermore, a common generalisation in education is that Pacific people often seem to prefer to learn together in groups; however they also have varied learning styles (Pasikale, 1996). According to Helu-Thaman (2014), it is important for teachers to understand their students, and to utilise Pacific approaches and examples students relate to. In addition, a learning, teaching and research environment that upholds cultural democracy, and values a diverse student background is crucial to student success. Support services need to incorporate these crucial elements conducive to student engagement in learning essential in academic success, but remain connected and relevant

in tomorrow's world.

As such this project explores a blending of the traditional, cultural and modern. Using a blended information technology approach with specific Pacific indigenous face to face pedagogies such as Talanoa (effective conversations) (Vaiotele, 2006) and Teu le va (relationship building) (Airini, 2010) helped innovate and transform the student learning environment for Pacific students and staff. Talanoa and Teu le va (common to Samoa, Tonga and Fiji) were employed as processes to help build quality learning and teaching relationships with staff and students in all aspects of the blended learning environment.

As students spend more and more time on the internet, using a blended approach enables students to utilise their existing online skills in an academic context whilst still ensuring preferred face-to-face interaction and engagement with other students and staff. It also enables more opportunities for peer collaboration and interaction outside of the classroom (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, and Freeman, 2014 p.10).

Although course delivery in higher education institutes is shifting to include “the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, 96) the full engagement of Pacific/minority students requires “an integration of teaching and learning methods that are informed by and validate Pacific values, worldviews, knowledge, and experience” (Koloto, Katoanga, & Tatila, 2006 p.4). Such face to face interaction /talanoa with students on a group or a one-to-one basis combined with guided online learning and teaching ensures course development and delivery are user-informed and engaging. Literature indicates that “the most successful students [are] those who reported being deeply engaged in structured learning activities designed by teachers” (Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby & Higgins, 2012).

The authors will discuss how Pacific approaches to teaching and learning can be combined with the integration of academic and information literacies into the curriculum, academic staff partnerships and collaborations, new technologies such as the ‘flipped classroom’, online peer review, interactive learning objects, and the use of Pacific concepts, metaphors and teaching strategies are being used to create a more flexible and dynamic learning experience for students. This ongoing work also involves a three year survey of first year and third year students’ information and academic literacy skills, and their feedback and reflections help inform enhancements to the blended learning and teaching environment.

This paper will be of interest to institutions with growing Pacific and other minority populations, seeking to assist the students achieve with greater success.

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