Grounding Hawaiian Learners—and Teachers—in Their Indigenous Identity

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By rooting Hawaiian students first in their own cultural perspective, we provide the lens through which they can view the rest of the world. A multicultural curriculum taught in Hawai'i that is devoid of Hawaiian anything—by omission, obstruction, or obliteration—marginalizes Hawaiian culture. Because we are in our homeland, this type of omission affects our academic integrity. If we do not teach Hawaiian students who they are as Hawaiians, we devalue them and their *kūpuna* (ancestors, elders). This is Hawai'i, and for that reason alone, as teachers we must use a Hawaiian philosophy of education that establishes Hawaiian literature as foundational before moving out to embrace a global perspective.

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As I often share with my graduating seniors at Kamehameha Schools, this is a great time to be a Hawaiian educator, and it is a great privilege to teach our Hawaiian students. The concept of Hawaiian education is exciting, especially as we see the momentum build each year. When I arrived at the conference this morning,* I was thrilled to see two busloads of students—our future educators—arriving. We have come a long way since the first Native Hawaiian Education Association conference on Maui in 2000.

Although exciting, as many of us know, Hawaiian education is not an easy road. We are often met with resistance from without—when we also have to meet national initiatives like No Child Left Behind, new SAT exams, and more competitive college entrance requirements—all to be accomplished with dwindling budgets. "Do more with less" is the expectation and frustration.

We also experience resistance from within our own Hawaiian communities—when parents worry that their child will be shortchanged or no longer competitive if we change our approach to education. And we can't blame them when so many of our Native Hawaiian community are no longer able to afford to live at home. A good education has become even more valuable.

Some of the questions that we, as Hawaiian educators, field include the following:

- "So what is Hawaiian education, anyway? And does that mean Hawaiians learn differently from other students?"
- "Aren't you compromising academic rigor when you incorporate Hawaiian culture, literature, and pedagogy?"
- "How can Hawaiian education help students who have only enough Hawaiian blood to fit in their little toe? Do you really want to cram their Hawaiian ethnicity down their throats?"

*This article is based on a speech delivered at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Native Hawaiian Education Association in March 2006 in Pearl City, Hawai'i.

This essay provides some answers to these questions.

In my opinion, Hawaiian education is a philosophy of education. In many ways, it is like the other philosophies we have learned and incorporated in one way or another throughout our teaching career. When I first began teaching in 1984 in Newport Beach, California, Madeline Hunter and her five-step lesson plan was the philosophical craze. Today the concepts of multiple intelligences and differentiated instruction have become catchwords for educators. As head of the English department at Kamehameha Schools, I receive fliers on a weekly basis for diverse learning seminars. Call it the latest craze, but many of these ideas were introduced by the Hunters, Goodlads, Deweys, and other educator philosophers. Great ideas! Good philosophies! And within our classroom, we use bits and pieces—and discard the rest.

Yet, Hawaiian education differs from these others because it is a philosophy rooted in a sense of indigenous being. And it is a philosophy of education that many of us *know* works best with our students here in Hawai'i. When we shift the focal point away from a Western-centered approach to a Hawaiian/Kanaka Maoli–centered focus, our students make relevant connections to what's being taught, especially our *haumāna* (students) of Hawaiian ancestry, because so much of what is taught and how it is taught is rooted in our sense of identity as Kānaka Maoli. Ironically, many of the Hawaiian teaching strategies we use in the classroom are consistent with what is considered "best practice." Yes, this is yet another philosophy of education.

Hawaiian education is a philosophy that is rooted in a sense of indigenous being.

So how do we describe or even explain a Hawaiian philosophy of education? I answer this question by sharing a story of how I came to my own Hawaiian philosophy of teaching.

First of all, I am a California-born Hawaiian—I'll say more about my upbringing later—and I came home to Hawai'i in 1989. I was assigned four sections of ninth-grade English at Kamehameha Schools, and I began teaching my students the same way I had taught in San Diego, where I had taught the previous year. Initially, my students were very polite and patient, but it became very clear, very quickly, that they didn't have a clue about what I was saying.

I was teaching the best and the brightest from the Hawaiian community, yet they did not relate to the literature, to me, or to my philosophy of teaching.

Besides the fact that I was talking 100 miles an hour—I talked as fast as I drove in Southern California, and I was dangerous—the literature that we were discussing was written by authors—mainly dead *haole* (foreign, Caucasian) males—who lived 2,500 to 9,000 miles away from Hawai'i. The majority of the literature came from the East Coast of America or from England.

I was teaching the best and the brightest from the Hawaiian community, yet they did not relate to the literature, to me, or to my philosophy of teaching—which at that time was: I am the teacher, the imparter of all English knowledge, and I have *all* the answers because I went to college. So these students needed to listen to me because I controlled their grade. What a naive philosophy I had back then.

In my desire to figure out how to better connect with my students and to understand why they were struggling, I began to envision them and their attempt to connect with the literature as a tree, upside down with its roots in the air, trying desperately to connect with both the literature and my expectations—because as good students, they did try very hard. I soon realized I had two choices: One, I could continue teaching as I was, dragging 100-plus students through my curriculum, pass them on, and then continue the pain and torture, or, two, I could change the way I approached teaching and essentially change my philosophy. I soon realized it would take less effort for me to change than it would take to continue dragging my grade-conscious students through my egocentric, haole-centered curriculum.

This shift in philosophy was spooky. No longer could I be the imparter of all knowledge because I needed to root my students in literature *they* could relate to before I could introduce the literature I knew best. As a California-born Hawaiian, that meant I needed to learn about my own identity as a Hawaiian as well as learn new Hawaiian literature. My students became my teachers as we worked through literature they knew well. And instead of my voice being the loudest in the classroom, my students' voices came to the forefront as they became empowered—my perspective became just 1 of 25. I realized that the moment of student empowerment had arrived when one of my students said he thought my reading of the text was "too sensitive."

The best part about the shift in focus was that it worked! Using our own cultural literature, my students were able to personally connect to the literature and gain the necessary literary analysis skills from examining Hawaiian *moʻolelo* (stories), which they also were able to successfully apply to other, more Western—canonical—literary pieces.

My new philosophy worked especially well when teaching American literature. I began each unit with relevant works from home. For example, we examined the persuasive techniques found in journals and protest letters written by Walter Ritte and Richard Sawyer in *Nā Manaʻo Aloha o Kahoʻolawe* (Honolulu, 1978) as well as other pieces generated by the Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻOhana during their efforts to stop the bombing on Kahoʻolawe. We read these materials *before* we discussed Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, who staged a similar "David and Goliath" struggle with a superpower. By placing American literature into a sharper Hawaiian-honed focus, the passion and motivation of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, the founding fathers of America, became familiar to my students because as Native Hawaiians, they held similar passionate opinions regarding the bombing of Kahoʻolawe. The connections were made, the bridges were built, and my students began to see relevance in literature generated far away from our island home.

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However, as expected, my new approach to teaching English was met with the question, "Aren't you compromising academic rigor when you incorporate Hawaiian culture, literature, and pedagogy?" Unfortunately, yet not surprisingly, my department head and many others at that time questioned me about this new approach.

It was a fair question, but my answer then and now is—*No!* To assume that including Hawaiian culture or a Hawaiian worldview would decrease academic rigor would mean that our *kūpuna* (ancestors, elders) weren't very bright and had no standards of their own.

Was it not our kūpuna who told us *"kūlia i ka nuʻu"* (strive for the highest)? It was our kūpuna who told us, even scolded us, to believe that perfection and rigor were to be celebrated. It was our kūpuna who produced the finest *kapa* (tapa made from tree bark) in the Pacific and whom Captain Cook labeled as having established the

most sophisticated society in all of Oceania. Therefore, if we expect that same rigor from our students, then their performance should be their very best at all times. These were rather high expectations, and I am certain many of you can also share stories of how it works and how our students truly rise to the challenge.

The reality is, our students must function in multiple worlds. As Native Hawaiians, they are the next generation and the hope for our people. They also live in the Western society with its economic, sociopolitical, and cultural realities. These same students must also function in a third world of pop culture and technology. Navigating between multiple worlds takes talent and sometimes we, as their *kumu* (teachers), need to guide them through the maze. I believe that giving my students a solid grounding in their indigenous identity, then transporting them to other cultures through our study of literature, is one way to help them navigate these different worlds.

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With this conviction in mind, I embarked on a second mission: building the bridge for my colleagues to understand that solidifying students' indigenous identity does not mean lost rigor. I needed to justify and demonstrate that the same skills could be better taught to my students when they were rooted first in a Hawaiian perspective. When I made my philosophical justification, my department head did not buy it. It was one of my colleagues and mentors, Richard Hamasaki, who taught me that the secret to changing the status quo was to "answer questions before they were asked." I began including my justifications in unit plans and yearly overviews as well as project instructions. I also identified the required skills and assessment for the study of both Hawaiian and American literature.

As I introduced earlier, my unit on Kahoʻolawe compared the Hawaiian-generated protest literature with the protest writings of the American Revolution. I required my students to analyze the same persuasive techniques and strategies used in the writings of the Protect Kahoʻolawe ʻOhana in comparison with American revolutionary writers like Patrick Henry and his "Speech to the Virginia Convention" (1788). Not surprisingly, when these skills were taught in this manner, my students got it, even though they still thought Patrick Henry was far too long-winded.

By rooting our students first in their own Hawaiian cultural perspective, we provide the lens through which they can view the rest of the world. Thus in the discipline of English, I first start with Hawaiian literature, then move to traditional and global literature. This process expresses a Hawaiian philosophy of education.

To silence the naysayers, my goal was to overwhelm my department head with information—to answer the questions before being asked—so I showed her everything I developed. In turn, she supported my efforts as a Hawaiian educator. It took many more years before I began to truly win her over, but during that time she allowed me the space to explore and develop new curriculum.

Our Hawaiian identity stays in our DNA!

Even as a kumu at Kamehameha Schools where I am privileged to teach only Hawaiian students, I have had students who initially thought they were getting shortchanged because I was not teaching them "real English"—whatever "real English" is. In fact, on more than one occasion, a parent or one of my colleagues has asked: "How can Hawaiian education help your students, especially when most have only enough Hawaiian blood to fit in their little toe? And do you really want to cram their Hawaiian ethnicity down their throats?"

This two-part question deserves a two-part answer. My first answer is one that I learned from Aunty Pua Kanahele in her 1995 article "Ke Au Lono i Kahoʻolawe, Hoʻi (The Era of Lono at Kahoʻolawe, Returned)" documenting the Makahiki on Kahoʻolawe (*Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, 7, 152–167). She calls it *ancestral memory*. Our Hawaiian identity stays in our DNA! It doesn't matter how much or how little Hawaiian blood our students have—it takes only one ancestor to connect students to the many who came before. And I have personally seen this played out in my own life.

I was born and raised in a small town on the Russian River in Northern California called Forestville. For most of my childhood, we were the only Hawaiians in the predominantly White town. My Hawaiian father was the baby of a family of eight children who were also born and raised in California. My grandparents are from Hawaiʻi Island—Grandpa was a Kaiwi from Kona, and Grandma was a Kumalae from Hilo. Both left home at the beginning of the 20th century, making me, their granddaughter, a second-generation California-born Hawaiian.

I grew up in a typical American family that denied our cultural background. Although my mother is 100% Moscow Russian, early in my childhood, she stopped practicing Russian traditions. And my father was intent on capturing the American dream. He talked very little about being Hawaiian, besides fighting the racism that accompanied his dark skin and a last name only identifiable on a map of Hawai'i—the channel between O'ahu and Moloka'i. And I was told that Kaiwi meant "the bone," which seemed very strange to me at the time. I really didn't have a clue.

When a Hawaiian keiki walks into my classroom, I realize that he or she comes with his or her 'ohana—those living and those who have passed.

For the most part, people in my small town thought I was a rather whitewashed American child with a difficult last name that no one could pronounce; however, I was also very aware of the fact that I saw the world differently. I saw *hō'ailona* (signs, symbols) in the environment around me and connected with my surroundings in ways that my friends never understood. I remember I prayed to be like everyone else—to be "normal." I didn't know what normal really was, except that this brown girl wasn't it.

In fact, the first time I began to feel normal was when I came home at age 27 and sat in Kekūhaupi'o gym on Kamehameha Schools' campus with 3,000 other Hawaiians who looked just like me. It was then I knew I wasn't so weird after all. But I had yet to understand what being Hawaiian meant.

My *hānai* (adoptive) parents, Dani and Philip Hanohano, were the ones who took the time to remind me about who I was as a Hawaiian and to guide me in understanding what I knew in my *na'au* (gut). It was 17 years ago that I began my journey of remembering, which brings me to where I am today. It took my kūpuna 70 years before the first of their *'ohana* (family) returned home, but they made certain that even though I was born two generations away from the *'āina* (land), I would not forget that I am Hawaiian.

So how does my story relate to the Hawaiian students in my classroom whose Hawaiian *koko* (blood) can fit in their little toe? Simply put, it is not *only* about the students. It certainly was not only about me when I came home. My kūpuna had a plan (and in many ways, I came back kicking and screaming). But I have no doubt now that they wanted me home. So, when a Hawaiian *keiki* (child) walks into my classroom, I realize that he or she does not come alone—he or she comes with his or her ʻohana—those living and those who have passed. In fact, on the second day of class, my students introduce themselves with their *moʻokūʻauhau* (genealogical succession, pedigree)—not necessarily for their classmates' benefit but to remind them of who stands with them and to help me to understand who has been entrusted to my care.

This is Hawaiʻi, and for that reason alone, I am obligated to use a Hawaiian philosophy of education that establishes Hawaiian literature as foundational.

My hānai dad always says that as kumu in the classroom, I am merely the conduit, the guide, creating the environment and opportunity for the journey to begin. I may not see the fruits right away or ever, but I just need to trust that I am part of the process. My educational philosophy dictates that I teach to the whole student—represented by those who have come before and the adult each keiki will become.

So what about the here and now? Do I really want to "cram their Hawaiian ethnicity down their throats"? No, but I also don't want to ignore their Hawaiian heritage. A multicultural curriculum taught in Hawaiʻi that is devoid of Hawaiian anything—by omission, obstruction, or obliteration—marginalizes our Hawaiian culture. And because we are in our homeland, this type of omission affects our academic integrity. If we don't teach our Hawaiian students who they are as Hawaiians, we devalue them and their kūpuna. There has been enough of that for too long.

Most importantly, out of the chop suey mix of ethnicities that I could possibly root my students in, there is only one ethnicity that can truly claim Hawaiʻi as its ancestral homeland. We are not in the Philippines or Portugal or China or Japan. This is Hawaiʻi, and for that reason alone, I am obligated to use a Hawaiian philosophy of education that establishes Hawaiian literature as foundational before moving out to embrace a global perspective when teaching my students, *especially* those of Hawaiian ancestry.

I have done my best to answer three of the many questions we face in Hawaiian education. My hope is that somewhere in all I have shared, you can find something that can work for you. It is truly an exciting time to be a Hawaiian educator. And we are all in this together. Mahalo to our kūpuna and *Ke Akua* (God) who continue to guide us each day.

About the Author

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