A shell and a stone:
Pacific chaplaincy practice at Western Sydney University

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Abstract

Universities typically host a broad range of students from many different backgrounds and cultural groups. Each of these groups brings with them their own stories, ways of knowing and sensing the world, and experiences that impact upon their relationship with educational institutions as learning and social spaces. Often, students from minority backgrounds face mental, emotional and physical challenges associated with university study alongside the reality of living in two worlds – the first of their heritage cultures, and the other of the university as a Western learning institution. This article explores the experiences of the author, an associate chaplain at Western Sydney University, and the establishment of a monthly event called 'Fellowship Over Food'. This is a night for Pacific students enrolled at the University based around spirituality, building social networks and, of course, food. It explores chaplaincy through Heshusius' (1994) notion of a participatory mode of consciousness, alongside the experience of Flinders university chaplain Geoff Boyce (2010), which highlights the role of multifaith chaplaincy within university contexts framed as hospitality to strangers. This article uses the author's reflections on the first 'Fellowship Over Food' night, which took place in August 2017, to consider how a non-Pacific chaplain can engage meaningfully in this cross-cultural space. This night demonstrated the socio-spiritual connections and affirmation that can take place through such practice, and its importance for Pacific students in a university setting.

Keywords: chaplaincy, Pacific chaplaincy, cross-cultural chaplaincy, participatory consciousness, chaplaincy as hospitality

Introduction

Western Sydney University (WSU) is located in Greater Western Sydney, one of the most culturally diverse regions in Australia. Within the Greater Western Sydney region, 35% of residents were born overseas, and 60% of all new immigrants to Australia settle in this region (Western Sydney University, 2017). Over the past few years, the attendance of Pacific students at the University has increased drastically, and at the time of writing, there are more than 1400 Pacific students attending this institution.

This article reflects on a collaborative event called 'Fellowship Over Food' organised by WSU Chaplaincy and the WSU Pacific Student's Association (PSA) at the University in August 2017. The purpose of the night was to create a space for Pacific Islander students to socialise, enjoy a meal together, and network with other Pacific students (from their own and other

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degrees), as well as reflect on their journey at university. The night also served to foster meaningful relationships between Pacific students and the chaplaincy team. The focus on students' social, emotional and spiritual health was intended to facilitate their progress through their degrees by offering a buffer of social, spiritual and cultural support.

An encounter of cultural values

The university as an institution contains within it value systems and norms that are not necessarily held by all students who attend. Some students, especially those from minority cultural backgrounds, often have the dual challenge of managing their study loads whilst contending with the ongoing realities of engaging with a system that holds very different worldviews to those of their families and cultures. Buckmiller (2017:161) emphasises that Native American adult learners have different "ways of knowing [stemming] from the values, knowledge and wisdom they learned from their family, their home community, and ancestral/traditional teachings."

Where cultural difference is not recognised or considered valuable, this can create considerable challenges for students, and can diminish their desire to actively participate and succeed in their studies (Champagne, 2006 in Buckmiller, 2017: 161). Abu-Saad and Champagne (2006, in Buckmiller, 2017: 162) make the point that the "ground rules" of such institutions, such as "individual capitalism, secular civic culture, and individual achievement via competition" are often at odds with the values of these students, making engagement with university culture a uniquely difficult experience.

Chaplaincy's role within this encounter

One of the ways that Pacific students' value systems can be more widely appreciated is to understand the impact of spirituality on their daily lives. Broadly, university students in America and Australia make a distinction between religion and spirituality (Denton, 2004; Boyce, 2007), with the personalised nature of spirituality considered the "deeper broad meaning to life" (Denton, 2004: 20) as opposed to the more institutionalised and dogmatic experience of religion (Denton, 2004). University chaplaincy can explore different ontologies springing from the students' own cultures, where students' experiences are valued "in an honest, caring environment" (Boyce, 2006: 2). This mode of engagement requires "generative, communicative relationship, [and]...building on-going dialogue" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 1039 in Denton, 2004: 24).

University environments are "commodified" (Boyce, 2007: 1), driven by "changing cultural and political agendas" (Smith, 2015: 214); chaplaincy can offer a "confident distinctiveness of faith and engagement" (214) where pastoral care and the language of faith provide a space for spirituality to be expressed and nurtured (Dietze and Baynes, 2005). In doing so, it offers "alternative knowledge" (Williams, 2013: 205) that emanates from multi-faith and multicultural epistemologies. Cultural differences bring with them different cultural needs which may not be met through standard student support services (Dietze and Baynes, 2005). Through its participatory and relational approach, university chaplaincy is a ready resource that can assist students to feel understood and to develop mechanisms to advocate for their own needs in culturally appropriate ways.
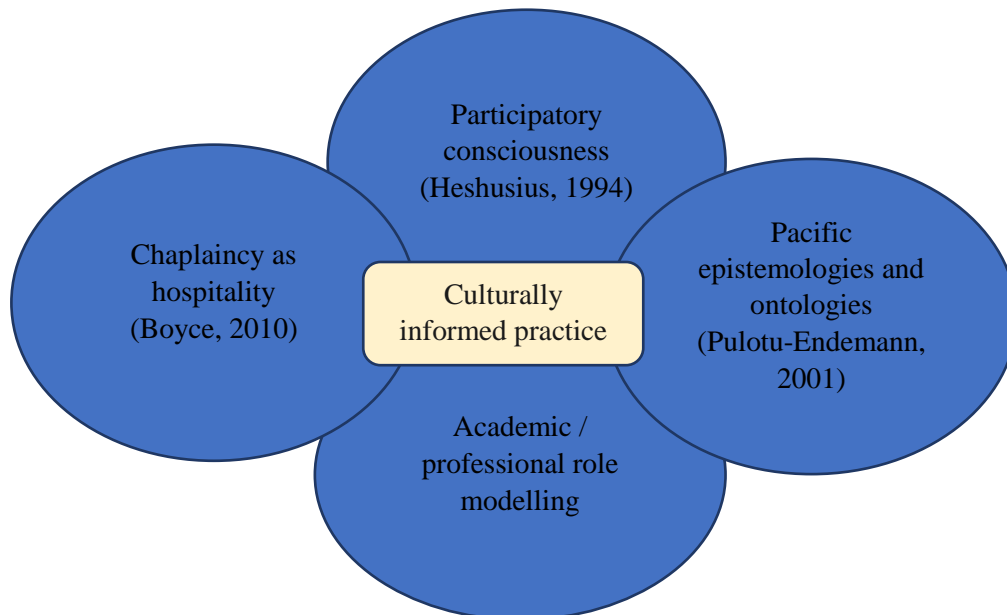
A different way of knowing

There is little research on Indigeneity and religion in higher education, and this article seeks to address this gap through the lens of university chaplaincy. As such, it draws upon a four-part model of engagement with Pacific students in the context of chaplaincy at WSU. Before I begin, I must disclose that I am not of Pacific descent – I am a Maltese-Australian, with both parents born in Malta. However, my role as an associate chaplain has required that I spend much time with and commit to understanding Sāmoan, Māori and Tongan communities, and it is my belief that as a result, I have been accepted as a trustworthy and contributing member in many of these communities.

The night that is the focus of this article was realised through the efforts of a team of two non-Pacific coordinators, one Tongan associate chaplain, the author, and two student leaders from the Pacific Student's Association (PSA) who are of Sāmoan and Sāmoan-mixed heritage. Attention to inter-cultural collaboration and partnership among the leadership team ensured that the decisions we made prioritised the needs of the students at all times. As a non-Pacific chaplain involved in the evening, I made a conscious effort to put the desires and views of my Pacific colleagues before my own in an attempt to engage in effective cross-cultural engagement. Showing respect and genuineness here meant understanding my own positionality in this process and respecting Pacific students' understandings of their needs as learners where they differed from my own such understandings.

The methodology depicted below in Figure 1 is not suggested as prescriptive, but derives from my reflections upon my own chaplaincy practice throughout 2017, as well as drawing upon my former experiences in community volunteer work amongst other Pacific / Māori groups, including churches. It also draws upon relevant literature related to community engagement.

Figure 1: A template for Pacific chaplaincy practice at WSU

The figure shows the different epistemologies that I draw upon as a non-Pacific chaplain seeking to engage meaningfully with Pacific university students in a way that demonstrates understanding and champions their unique cultures and spiritualities. Each of the four tenants of

the model presented in Figure 1 are significant on several levels, as I will now explain in relation to the August 2017 'Fellowship over Food' event.

The first tenant is **chaplaincy as hospitality**. Practicing chaplaincy in a university context means providing a space for reflection and non-judgmental / non studies-focussed listening and conversation, which can greatly assist in the wellbeing of students at university. Boyce (2010) expounds upon chaplaincy as hospitality as that which creates:

- A physical space for a gathering, welcoming each other in the hope of learning and sharing mutual respect and love;
- A social space as we share a meal together, which is "not some kind of surface politeness…[but] it is a practice that causes radical transformation in the giver and receiver" (13) due to the desire to know and be known;
- A unique service within a university context, fostering an intellectual space, where such hospitality "allows [participants] … to entertain ideas, engaging the creative imagination" (13);
- Emotional hospitality, where "the nurture of self-understanding" (13) is offered to all.

Such hospitality fosters "space for life" (Boyce, 2010: 13) and actively resists dominant power relations, as the social space created is one of inclusion and participation by all involved. By simply allowing others to 'be', their individual worth is validated and "growth in their being" is encouraged (Boyce, 2010: 13).

The second tenant is participatory consciousness. Heshusius (1994) describes this as "kinship between the knower and the known" (16). She encourages researchers to develop this kinship, but chaplains might do well to work on it as well. Participatory consciousness entails an intentional letting go of "boundaries that constitute self" (16) and the barriers that are created to distance oneself from another. There is an intentional desire to come together in order to know the other, manifested through a "temporary self-forgetfulness" (18), which allows for the researcher / participant or chaplain / student to be more fully involved in the present moment and the lives of those around them at the expense of their own competing desires and interests. This is a practice that is commonplace within chaplaincy. Due to its student-oriented focus, chaplaincy that is informed by participatory consciousness can serve as a decolonising tool within universities as it validates Pacific / other minority groups' epistemological and ontological realities. Chaplaincy can therefore establish places of safety and solidarity for minority groups which can in turn lead to better physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of those that partake of its services.

The third tenant relates to Pacific epistemologies and ontologies. In order for chaplaincy practice to best meet the needs of Pacific students, cultural awareness and understandings of how respect and love are enacted should be sought by chaplains as much as possible. Pulotu-Endemann's (2001) Fonofale Model of Health offers chaplains and researchers a model of understanding Pacific students and individuals, highlighting concepts that are "considered to be important component[s] of Pacific people's health" (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001: 2), namely, the role of kinship and family ties, connection to land and sea (4), cultural heritage, including how living in non-Pacific nations affects one's personal development and values (4), and physical, spiritual, and mental health, gender and socio-economic status (5).

The fourth tenant is **academic / professional** role modelling. Role modelling by academics and professionals, including chaplains, has significant influence on students. When Pacific students see Pacific professionals in different roles, it has the potential to bolster self-esteem, especially when life narratives are articulated that describe the challenges of navigating one's Pacific world and the non-Pacific professional world successfully.

A space to reflect: a shell and a stone

The fellowship night was attended by around twenty Pacific students, some in their first year of study, others commencing Master degrees, and some WSU alumni who had strong connections with the Pacific community at the University. The night started with the sharing of Pacific food in an informal meet-and-greet atmosphere, that then moved into introductions from the Pacific Student's Association who facilitated the night alongside the chaplaincy team. The formal activities of the evening began with an icebreaker, allowing students to work in teams on a (slightly) competitive game, resulting in laughter and healthy sportsmanship.

The key feature of the night was the mandala, which refers generally to a "painting, diagram, or architectural structure with a particular symbolic meaning" (Gordon, Shinon and Garcia-Campayo, 2017:1) in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Mandalas are often used as a means of spiritual reflection, contemplation and mindfulness (especially in their construction), and can serve to "deepen our relationship with the present moment" (Gordon, Shinon and Garcia-Campayo, 2017: 1). They are often transient – built of matter such as leaves, stones, or other materials that are easily scattered – and therefore emphasise the transitory nature of life (ibid).

Our mandala was realised through a circle of stones divided into three segments of equal space. The theme of the night was balance, with three objects chosen to symbolise the three areas that the chaplaincy team felt were competing priorities for our Pacific students. The three areas were education / university study, symbolised by a graduation cap; commitment to family and culture, symbolised by a ta'ovala (Tongan ornamental dress) and kava bowl; and a mirror, symbolising one's personal desires and interests. Each student was given a stone to place in the mandala to represent where, in relation to these three areas, their attentions were currently focussed, and a shell to lay down to represent where they would like their attention to be.

The Tongan associate chaplain modelled the activity. After some quiet reflection, she placed her stone and shell in the areas that represented her current and hoped for positions. She then gave a brief narrative of why she placed the objects as she did, why she aspired to reach the position of her shell, and how she intended to do it. Students were then given approximately half an hour to place their stones and shells in the mandala and to discuss their placements in groups of threes and fours with those around them. Once the small group discussions were complete, the group then spoke as one, sharing some of their experiences and their journeys.

A key feature of a mandala is the dual relationship between the centre and the periphery, representing how one's individual actions affect those around them and their surroundings more generally: "Our individual lives might seem small or insignificant, [but] with each thought, word and action, we touch and influence the entire present moment as well as all future moments" (Gordon, Shinon and Garcia-Campayo, 2017: 2). The placements of the stones and shells were small actions, yet reflected significant realities for the Pacific students and their collective reality more broadly.

The impact of the night

As a member of the small group discussions and the larger group, I was able to witness the impact that this simple activity had upon our Pacific students. Some students with whom I was not well acquainted shed tears when describing their motivations to attend university – to honour their families and the sacrifices of their forebears— as well as the tensions that can arise from the difficulties posed by tertiary study. Other students discussed how they felt they were being selfish in pursuing their own personal goals, such as career advancement, at the expense of time being

spent with family and community. There was a strong consensus among students around the importance of balancing time in order to allow sufficient focus on their own cultural values of connectedness and family commitment. Students then wrote some personal goals on sheets of paper to be opened at the end of the year. This acted as an accountability measure and goal-setting tool for the students.

The feedback from the night was very positive. Pacific students that attended have shared with me that they ask about each other's 'shell and stone', and how they are progressing in their journey. This simple activity has provided a source of accountability for Pacific students' goal-setting and pursuits, and has created anticipation for the next 'Fellowship Over Food' event. When asked what activities to include in the next event, one Pacific student suggested team building exercises. This collaborative approach is therefore creating spaces for Pacific students to have ownership over and to determine what sorts of services should be offered by the WSU Chaplaincy and the WSU Pacific Student's Association.

Contextualised learning and considerations for chaplaincy

The student responses mentioned above make clear that university chaplaincy that is culturally informed and directed by the needs of students has the ability to form meaningful intersections between the spiritual, social and emotional needs of Pacific students. Consultation with chaplains from Pacific cultural groups and with Pacific student leaders ensures the efficacy of this model of collaborative chaplaincy.

Pacific spaces, chaplaincy, and culturally informed practice

The role of chaplaincy within university contexts is unique and multifaceted. This article has explored the benefits of collaboration between chaplaincy and Pacific staff and students to create spaces where Pacific students are able to articulate their university journeys in an atmosphere of respect, love and reciprocity. When the collaboration is successful, it assists non-Pacific staff and chaplains to make their practice more culturally informed and effective. The aim of such engagement is to foster physical, spiritual, emotional and mental connectedness and a sense of belonging amongst students who have embarked upon the often challenging journey that is university life.

Figure 2: Pacific students at the Fellowship Over Food Night with mandala matter in forefront

Dedication

This article is dedicated to a Pacific brother that was taken from us too soon. I will not state his name out of respect for his family and their privacy, but his heart and spirit have been etched into our hearts forever. May you rest in love eternal uso.

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Author's biography

Shannon Said was awarded his doctorate in music from Western Sydney University in 2017. His thesis explored Christian-Maori diaspora identity in South West Sydney. His research interests focus on decolonising research in diaspora and minority group research contexts, and promoting Indigenous and diaspora approaches to research and community engagement. He also has an interest in his own Maltese-Australian diaspora community, and how notions of national identity are impacted by migration, dual citizenship and hyphenated cultural identities.