

Braiding Learning: Weaving Mats and Eating Kim-Chee Pie

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Introduction

We no longer inhabit a world of Christendom. This is nowhere more evident than in Australia which straddles an ambiguous tension between once being described as ‘the most godless place under heaven’ and is now one of the most multicultural societies on earth. How does theological education take this context seriously?

This presentation will explore theological, educational and contextual issues relating to the enhancement of student learning in cross-cultural settings. Issues such as hyphenation, teacher attitude and practice, and cross-cultural learning will be explored. The presentation will describe and discuss the steps taken at United Theological College (UTC) to develop teaching and communal practices that enhance the students’ willingness and ability to use their cultural context in conversation with mainly Eurocentric theological education. Examples of classroom methods, teacher conversation, and student examples of work will be shown. I will discuss how students from a variety of Pacific Island and Asian backgrounds are encouraged to discover theological images from their cultures that resonate with them and help them to describe and define their theological experience. Important in this discussion are the hyphenated youth [e.g. Korean-Australian, Tongan-Australian] and “cappucino kids” [mixed race and colour] from a migrant ethnic background who are caught in a trilemma between two cultures and the peer group, all the while espousing a range of hybrid values.

An invitation will be extended for others to share their discoveries of how teachers may create hospitable spaces for hyphenated beings to explore their contexts within theological frameworks over cheese and bikkies and perhaps Kim-Chee pie.

New steps

In 1996, Rev Dr Sarah Mitchell arrived as the new principal at United Theological College. Sarah came from New Zealand, which has a rich bicultural understanding of living in community where Maoris and all other “foreigners” dialogue about citizenship, ethnicity, cultural mix, and national goals. With energy and vision, Sarah, like her biblical counterpart, took UTC on a journey, often through the wilderness, certainly through the complexities of living in a multicultural society. A new vision was established which would take account of the ever-increasing changes that were challenging theological education. In particular the college saw itself more clearly to be part of the Asia Pacific region and began to focus on the cultural diversity, which makes up the Uniting Church in Australia.¹

Flowing out of this vision, a number of initiatives began so that diverse ethnic groups represented at UTC within the lay and ordained student body would feel more welcome. Some of those initiatives included cultural diversity within worship services, appointment of faculty from different migrant/ethnic backgrounds, a re-evaluation of the curriculum for cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness, a new Field Education program, cultural education in

¹The Uniting Church in Australia was formed in 1977 from the union of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational denominations.

the ministry formation program, theological conversation spaces for different cultural groups, and the *Communitas* program. The conversational spaces and the Field Education program will be the focus of this paper as there is insufficient space to cover all these ventures.

Prior to describing specific programs for addressing the cultural diversity of the student body, it is important to understand from the students themselves how they encounter (mostly western) theological education. Conversations with and papers written by students reveal a sense of dislocation, a need to negotiate a new identity which represents a hyphenation or blending of the various cultural seas they navigate.

Hyphenation

At UTC there is a growing number of students who come from migrant/ethnic backgrounds – mainly from the Pacific Islands and Korea. These students come with a strong religious identity, which has been shaped by their cultural origins. Those who have migrated to or been born into a different culture live on the boundaries of several cultural strands - their culture of origin, the destination culture, and the peer group culture for young people - as they try to describe, define or create their identity. After a long personal journey in which he swung from trying to be a normal “Aussie” to being a true Korean, Robin Yang (2003, 4) created a

“hyphenated identity that takes the best of both cultures and amalgamated [sic] them into one. It is this culture that now continues to be dynamic in nature, swirling and bending, changing and expanding as more pieces are added to the collective.”

Yang’s split personality was akin to the experience of Sala who described her double life in Tiatia (1998). Sala, a young Samoan woman, narrated the conflicts she felt as she tried to succeed in the palagi² education system, which discriminated against Island students. Sala thought she led a “double life when it came to education, and when it came to church.”³ As she moved through her schooling she had to make choices about which group she would swim with:

“When I was in education I was a Palagi, I was in A stream. The only reason why I am here at Varsity is because I totally assimilated ... I was like a Jeckyl and a Hyde, in that when I was at church I was always speaking Samoan, doing all these things Samoan and all of a sudden I was in school and doing totally different things.”(Tiatia 1998, 37).

This double life continued for some years till she stepped aside and gradually began to integrate and weave together the separate threads of her multi-cultural life.

Australian and New Zealand born Pacific Islanders find themselves trying to fit into two cultural situations. Tiatia, in *Two shades of brown*, describes the difficulties and injustices with respect to the education system (dominant culture)—prejudice, selective testing, “gate-keeping.” The article includes several first-person descriptions. “All participants identified the struggles they encountered in their educational experiences as Pacific Islanders, where the cultural reproduction of the dominant group disregarded their Samoan, Tongan or Niuean habitus of the home”(Tiatia1998, 51).

² Palagi is a Maori descriptive term for “white person” or non Maori.

For many students coming from a non-European background, theological education is more like drowning in a fast flowing river for which their previous educational experience rarely prepares them. Current theological education derives mainly from a Eurocentric perspective where concepts, language, and customs are unfamiliar and very difficult to understand.

Mata, a Tongan-Australian candidate, commented on the difficulty she faced in trying to interpret lectures delivered in a western style, “A major problem I had was lack of academic (Theology and Bible) stuff – [it was] like a new language. When I first heard “exegesis” I thought they said “Jesus is”.⁴ In addition to the normal confusion and sense of inadequacy experienced by many students who first encounter theological concepts and ideas, Mata also had to contend with a different cultural perspective towards the Bible. She suggested that there was “A lot of work needed in the first year to help students who feel uncomfortable with questioning and [critical approaches to the] Biblical text.”

Faculty has identified the problems faced by migrant ethnic students and has tried to address their concerns. The open questioning style of the western education system can seem rude to those from a Pacific Island or Asian background because respect for the teacher and the Bible result in an acquiescent attitude. They will sit quietly at the back of the room, rarely asking questions for clarification and certainly not challenging the lecturer. To ask for clarification might reveal their feeling of “stupidity” or lack of understanding. To challenge the lecturer would be offensive. For Pacific Island students education is greatly prized. Many families have migrated to Australia and New Zealand for the sake of better educational opportunities for their children. When the teacher is also a minister, the need for respect is enhanced as ministers of religion share a high place of honour in the hierarchical system.

Open ended offers of help for students often do not attract them as once again they dare not reveal their inadequacies and shame. At UTC direct help is offered when specific problems are identified. This help has been two directional. In one direction help is given to students through the study skills program so that they can understand the requirements of a western educational system. Specific ESL (English as a Second Language) assistance has been invaluable for students who have managed to survive barely the secondary school system but discover that the higher standard of theological education is beyond them. Detailed comments on essays regarding form, content and language have proved beneficial and highly productive. One student commented when the use of plural and singular noun/verbs was explained, that “I never knew I was doing it wrong. No one ever explained it to me. Now I know how to write correctly.” The ESL program (with no charge) helps students express their ideas more clearly and has been valued highly by the students from Pacific Island backgrounds. Asian students have used the service less and we are exploring their reasons for avoiding the program. When rumours suggested the ESL course would be cut, students sent a delegation to argue for its continuance. Lecturers have found marked improvement in the written expression of students and their deep consideration of ideas can now be seen.

Theological Conversation Spaces

Of equal if not greater importance is the assistance given to students so that they can contribute their cultural insights into the western system rather than simply assimilate the dominant norms. Rev Dr Clive Pearson, Systematic Theologian, holds regular conversation groups with Pacific Island students so that they can explore in a smaller and safer space the ideas that are confronting, strange or confusing. These sessions move beyond clarification to

⁴ Personal conversation, July 12, 2004.

interpretation and application. Students are encouraged to consider theological concepts from within their own traditions. They are invited to engage with the doctrines of the church from within their own culture, contextualizing them for their current situation, which is often living on the hyphen of several cultures.

From this contextual exploration, new and exciting understandings of the Christian life emerge to challenge our compliant acceptance of traditional images. Students are able to develop new metaphors and concepts to explain theological terms from within their multi cultural settings. Robin Yang devised the notion of kim chee pie (blending traditional Korean and Australian meals) to express his blend of Korean and Aussie identities. Mat theology captures for many Pacific Islanders the hospitality and connectedness of the gospel stories.

With “theological ears”, Clive listens to students as they tell their stories of dislocation and alienation. Then, using a variety of theological tools, he encourages students to interpret their experience from within different aspects of the Christian tradition and by using different Christian doctrines. One Samoan student, Ete (1996), by exploring the theology of Samoan hymns found that only Pauline theology and John’s gospel were mentioned. There were no synoptic based songs. Ete concluded that only a “deaf” Christ was presented who could not hear the cries of young Samoans trapped in a bicultural world. Clive encouraged students to choose biblical texts or stories that would connect with their experience of being “quacking swans”.⁵ Pacific Island students chose stories about Jesus at the age of 12 (disobeying parents for the sake of religion), Luke (for his bias for the poor), or Mark (for the disciples who kept getting into trouble like we do).⁶

This theological contextualisation is not a romantic acceptance of everything from the culture of origin. Students stand at the side of two or three cultures holding a strong conversation with both as they move to inhabit a new space where identity is formed from a creative mix of cultural influences. A strong critique of their culture of origin (as well as the domicile culture) may create more alienation as they challenge its base structures as Pacific Island students are given theological tools to build their own theology. They do not need psychological therapy but theological bases given their identity is so informed by Christianity within their home culture. When Ete confronted opposition from his family for his research, his peers told him that he spoke for them as no one else had. They could now live a hyphenated life instead of feeling unconnected with any culture.

Culturally Resonant Spaces (Communal Practices)

What enables these Island students to sit with a revered lecturer and begin to talk of their struggles, to share their sense of dislocation and to explore the value of their culture of origin within a theological enterprise? UTC has tried to be a culturally resonant space where people see, hear and experience parts of their culture so that they have a little bit of “home” in this strange place. Communal practices include diverse cultural artifacts and customs in worship, class and social times. Worship is a key contribution to this resonance. When I asked Mata, a Youth Worker candidate, what had helped her in her studies at the college her first comments were about worship:

⁵ Ete described himself as an ugly duckling in the Palagi culture, but in Samoa there was no happy fairytale ending but he was seen as a quacking swan.

⁶ UTC Theology of Youth Ministry course, Brisbane, June 18-21, 2004.

“There was a big attempt in chapel to be culturally inclusive – through music and style (not one way of doing the sacrament. Siti [a Fijian] brought who he was and his culture to the Pentecost service – through his voice.”⁷

In Mata’s Tongan culture, worship is extremely important. Sunday worship (with many services) and the church’s practices frame and order the daily living of the people. For Island and many Asian students what happens in the class room is affected by what happens in chapel. How classes begin – with or without prayer – determines how “religious” they seem and determine how open students will be to receiving information.

Physical settings and decorations operate on a subliminal level either inviting or excluding people from feeling “this is my place.” The ability of a community to address aesthetically these concerns influences how welcoming these spaces are to people from different cultures. What images are used in the classrooms, hall ways, and worship space? If the pictures, wall hangings and furniture depict only the dominant culture, then students from other cultures may feel excluded. At UTC students recognise familiar elements by seeing special Island mats that adorn walls and are used in worship services. All students learn to sing Korean and Island songs. The many art exhibitions held at the Centre present different images for all students to interact with and to process. Naturally more can be done in this area and some of the classrooms are still very Anglo dominant with bare walls and staid portraits.

As well as physical location, classroom discourse and teacher attitudes affect the level of hospitality⁸ that students experience. Mata valued “Lecturers [who] used images and analogies and stories that were relevant to the people of the college (not just when Pacific Islanders were in class).”⁹ In her Feminist class she learned about Latin America and other cultures so that she felt the lecturers were “not just inclusive of my culture but I learned about another culture”. This openness to other cultures as well as the inclusion of her own through stories and analogies represented a cultural sensitivity that formed an hospitable space for learning and sharing. Pacific Island and Asian students “existed” and were named through the variety of examples that illustrated classroom input.

Cross Cultural Intensive

The increasing multi cultural diversity of the Uniting Church is reflected in the student body of UTC. Over the last few years a number of Pacific Island (Tongan, Samoan, Fijian), Korean, or Philippino students have asked to take a Field Education placement with an Anglo or multi cultural congregation so that they could better understand the Uniting Church and how they might minister in its diversity. However, few if any Anglo-Australian students asked for the same kind of experience - to learn how to minister with congregations that were of a different cultural or ethnic background to their own. For them being Anglo was experienced as "norm, as transparency, as national/natural state of being." (Frankenberg 1997, 16). They seemed unaware of the need to reflect critically on their "whiteness" or “Anglo-Australian-ness” so that it was no longer transparent but seen and open to critique.

In response to this anomaly the Field Education department decided to create a cross cultural intensive of four weeks from November to December of each year. Conversations were held

⁷ Personal conversation, July 12, 2004.

⁸ Parker Palmer (1983) talked about the creation of an hospitable space for learning where students feel safe to explore difficult ideas as well as being confronted by the stranger.

⁹ Personal conversation, July 12, 2004.

with the Sydney Presbytery Cross Cultural Committee and the Board of Mission regarding the college's response to the growing multicultural nature of the Uniting Church. A small group¹⁰ developed the outline of the first Cross Cultural Advent Placement in December 1998 with the following outcomes:

Candidates will

- be able to speak in the language of one ethnic congregation. They will learn key phrases needed for worship, eg. Welcome to worship, Assurance of Forgiveness, Dismissal.
- understand some of the dynamics of cross-cultural communication.
- understand the distinctive elements of the culture of their placement.
- understand the religious affiliation background of the congregations and their attachment to the Uniting Church.
- have some insight into the spirituality and worship life of that cultural group.
- appreciate cultural norms and cross-cultural ways of relating to people.
- name some of the issues that are involved in ministering cross-culturally.
- theologically reflect on the practice of ministry in a cross-cultural setting.
- gain an appreciation of and willingness for working with another culture
- achieve one learning goal that they set for themselves

The placements were not about practising skills of preaching, leading worship etc but rather of learning from those who come from different cultures. In these placements, partly due to the short time frame, students could not "do" a great deal. Students were encouraged to listen to the stories of the people who have come recently to these shores. They were encouraged to "hang out creatively" at the local shops, gathering places, and to visit the town council, library, and migrant-ethnic centres. They might read the Scriptures, lead prayers with a bidding in the language of the congregation and visit church members in their homes.

Behind these outcomes was the hope that students would gain a greater understanding of the cultural stories and practices that shaped the people with whom they would be in ministry as well as a clearer view of their own cultural position. The Anglo students were to be the "odd ones out"; the ones who had to learn the cultural heritage, to decipher the rituals and traditions of their placements. Greater self-awareness and respect for cultural difference were unstated goals of the program. As Foster (1997, 14) suggests, "Encounters with something different or unfamiliar bring to consciousness that taken-for-granted embeddedness of our own cultural perspectives, values, and practices." Encountering the unfamiliar can be dislocating and disorienting. We were conscious that going into unfamiliar territory could challenge a student's frames of reference and thus might unsettle them personally as well as their understanding of ministry. Regular supervision and times for reflection were important so that students could find a "safe" space to explore what confronted and challenged their personal views.

Early Steps

The first step in the process was a two days' briefing session where candidates were introduced to some of the issues of working with and in migrant ethnic congregations: principles of immersion; body language; handling invitations to homes; gender issues; leadership issues; "really full time" ministry (24 hours a day); gatekeepers within

¹⁰ This group consisted of Katalena Tehafe-Williams (Board of Mission), Bill Thomas (Deacon), John Jegasorthy (Minister of the Word who is involved in ministry at the Villawood Detention Centre) and myself.

communities; integration and/or segregation issues; use of time and space (what is sacred?); shame/honour; and authority/power. Cultural norms, behaviours and expectations were discussed by ministers who had worked in multi-cultural settings or who came from one of the migrant ethnic backgrounds students would be encountering. We stressed the importance of hearing the stories of the migrant ethnic group without the bias of the Anglo-Celtic parishioners, particularly if the church property was used by mono and multi ethnic groups. The briefing class was held at Auburn Uniting Church, which has Tongan and Anglo congregations, and away from the college to help students gain a sense of entering a new place outside the security of the familiar college grounds. Attending the evening Tongan worship was a good introduction for those students who had never participated in a different cultural worship.

The purpose of the briefing day was to name the frameworks, to identify areas where care was needed, to warn students about pot holes, tripping places, and difficulties they might encounter. It was to give them an awareness of the need for sensitive cultural reading, and to introduce some methods they could use.

Placements - different dancing spaces

Since the introduction of the intensive, students have attended congregations and agencies associated with many cultures: Korean, Tongan, Samoan, Indonesian, Aboriginal, Chinese, Rotuman, Tamil, and a Migrant Ethnic Centre. For the first time Anglo students were intentionally placed in congregations where they did not share the dominant language. Candidates visiting Cheil Church (Korean) participated in 5am daily prayers at the church. Others learned to read Samoan children stories or sang in the Tongan choir. Most participated in worship services where for the first time they could understand very little of what was said. Through their many and varied experiences they were invited to “explore the assumptions we make about the construct and behaviour of a community.”¹¹ They confronted personal and ministry issues such as the complexities of status and hierarchy, servant leadership, communication and worship styles and expectations. For many the lack of specific tasks and responsibilities challenged their concepts of what it means to “be” a minister.

Midway

In the middle of the four week block students gathered for a two day peer supervision and theological reflection session back at college. Interspersed with case studies, verbatims and reports, students were invited to reflect theologically on the issues they were encountering. Theological input and reflection on cross cultural issues generated by lecturers from the theology department deepened the candidates’ understanding of the specific issues they were confronting in a mono ethnic situation. The involvement of the theology lecturers was a crucial element in helping students to integrate the academic and practical aspects of the candidates’ formation. Theological reflection focussed on ideas of the stranger, hospitality, and pilgrim.

Debriefing Day

After the placement, candidates gathered for a final debriefing where they presented their learning in creative formats around images they had gained from the cross-cultural placement. The de-briefing days were rich with colour and story as they shared their experiences. One student had joined the Tongan choir in her placement and used their

¹¹ Christine Cargill, Cross Cultural Intensive Peer Supervision Days, November 19, 2001.

musical practices as a thread for her response. One student learned to live with Island Time by carrying a child's story book and a dictionary in the language of her placement. By the end of 4 weeks she could understand and read the story of that culture.

Many issues were raised for the students during their time in this four week block. Here is a brief list of some issues that would be faced in cross cultural ministry work:

- Spirituality – different forms
- Status and hierarchy
- Blending – cultural blending in marriage and families
- Racism
- Identity – fractured and patchwork selves
- Generational issues – 1.5 and 2nd generation
- Location of culture
- Socioeconomic groups – wealth, immigration (refugee status – trauma), legal issues
- Authority and role of the minister (often considered very high and unchallengeable)
- Prejudice
- Conflict resolution – management
- Gender – women in leadership, roles of women in the culture
- Integration
- WHAT culture we are crossing over with?
- Generalisations of culture
- Language
- Understanding
- Leadership style
- Complex diversity
- Anglo cultures – what are they?
- Ministerial competition
- Perceived threats
- Sexuality (taboos on discussion)
- Intra-cultural tension
- Socialization
- Understanding of ministry
- Understanding of power
- Hierarchical nature of some cultures
- Hospitality
- Power, authority, compliance
- Ignorance of the other culture
- Understanding the dominant culture from an “underneath” position’
- Cultural literacy

Post Reflection

Students wrote a Post Placement Reflection guided by the following questions:

- How will you thread the issues, stories, events, people and theological constructs?
- Choose one theological construct to tie the knot, or add to the colour of the thread.
- What have you learned about ministry in a cross-cultural/ multi-cultural setting?
- What questions do you still have?

In terms of outcomes what was achieved? Naturally, the level of language acquisition was limited by time and ability. However, it was surprising how many students valued the opportunity to learn a few words in another language, particularly words relating to worship. Knowing the relevant words for God, Christ, Spirit and some blessings opened up avenues of communication that were continued in college where songs and prayers of other languages are often used.

Candidates' evaluations were overwhelmingly positive about the cross-cultural intensive. Despite their concerns about being "the stranger", candidates experienced great warmth and hospitality in the congregations. In the debriefing day, students were enthusiastic, reflective, and deeply moved. All outcomes were rated as highly achieved and the candidates valued the cultural briefing day where issues of power, language, migration were discussed. In hindsight, the outcomes were probably too grand and optimistic. In four weeks it is not possible to understand the dynamics of a culture let alone the politics. However, the experience increased student sensitivity to one other culture and hopefully reduced their simplistic categorizations of "the other". Candidates felt they had a beginning base from which they could engage the people in these mono-ethnic congregations and went into full time ministry with a greater appreciation of the multicultural nature of the Uniting Church.

What highlights stand out? The students were impressed by the hospitality given so openly. They were welcomed as honoured guests and were humbled by learning the stories of people who had travelled great distances and through tremendous difficulty to reach Australian shores. They heard stories of migrant and refugee struggles to maintain elements of their culture of origin in a new land while facing enormous financial burdens. The hospitality and sharing of resources that characterise Island communities (and the early Christian church) were greatly strained when attempted in Australia, a country of individualism and status seeking, unemployment or low employment for migrants. The deep spirituality of the different congregations was noted as the students shared their worship. The too-easy spirituality of many Anglo-Celtic congregations was raised in sharp relief for those who rose early once a week to attend the 5am Prayer Worship held regularly in Korean churches.

Conclusion

Along with many other events at UTC¹² there has been a culture shift amongst the Anglo Australian students. In Field Education more candidates ask to learn in a variety of placements where there is a diversity of cultures. The faculty is devising curricula and other programs to be more inclusive of and sensitive to the diverse cultural mix that represents our student constituencies. Along with other workers in this area¹³, we have found that our initial steps lead to students wanting more knowledge of and participation in diverse cultural practices as well as a greater cultural self-awareness. Part of the success of the Field Education program lies in the college's integrated approach¹⁴. It is not only one course or teacher that raises cultural awareness and sensitivity. From the Vision Statement to the selection of faculty and the development of overall curricula, there is an awareness of the

¹² Worship (includes songs, prayers and bible readings in other languages), faculty is no longer only of Caucasian background, cultural studies programs, providing courses in Korean for ministers moving into the Uniting Church, inviting leaders of the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths to address students, through art and other activities.

¹³ Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000

¹⁴ Hansen, 2003, p.2.

need to take cultural issues as central to the formation of ministers in the Uniting Church in Australia.

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