Diversity, Inquiry and Co-creation: Potential antidotes to neoliberalism

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Abstract: This paper critically reflects on a neoliberal paradigm and attempts to propose ways of addressing issues of diversity through engagement and utilization of inquiry based education within a postgraduate multicultural classroom. The notion of mutuality and reciprocity is examined in the light of a co-creative teaching experience in a postgraduate multicultural classroom. A method of inquiry learning called Academic Co-Creative Inquiry (ACCI), which tends to cater for diversity is presented, explored and open for critical reflection in terms of its viability in a range of teaching contexts. The following questions are explored:

What is the purpose of tertiary education within a globalized context of increasing diversity?
How can diversity, inquiry and co-creation become antidotes to neoliberalism within globalized University?
How is co-creative learning different and how it contributes to the transformation of tertiary education?
What are the challenges of this kind of transformation?
How can ACCI help academics do to remain critics and conscience of society and retain academic integrity within a current paradigm or even help transforming it?

Keywords: Inquiry Learning, Co-creation, Transcultural, Postgraduate learning

Introduction

This paper starts with a short exploration of what is the purpose of tertiary education in a globalized world and how can co-creative learning serve as an antidote to an increasingly neoliberal agenda within Universities that operate for profit. It continues by offering possible antidotes to this restrictive, narrow and outdated paradigm by exploring advantages globalization brings including multi and trans-cultural teaching, inquiry based curriculum and appreciation and admiration of diversity. The paper concludes by offering suggestions for utilization of diversity and appreciation of difference in creating classrooms where diversity is perceived as an advantage and source of wisdom as opposed to something that needs to be endured, tolerated or managed.

What is the purpose of tertiary education within a globalized context of increasing diversity?

Education shapes societies and teachers tend to believe that we perform a service to humanity. UNESCO claims that education is a human right:

> "Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercise of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and yields important development benefits. Yet millions of children and adults remain deprived of educational opportunities, many as a result of poverty." (UNESCO 2014)

In spite proclamations that education is a human right, essential for bringing forth the world, Connell (2013) asserted that contemporary Universities in Australia and New Zealand are increasingly modelled on corporations where Vice-Chancellors and Deans are perceived as entrepreneurs. Earning a considerable income from tertiary education and perceiving students as customers is transforming the purpose of education in the affluent part of South Pacific. Connell (2013) declared that education has been powerfully affected by the rise of a neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda in Australia and in New Zealand with education becoming one of the main income earning 'industries'. As opposed to producing and selling a product, like other industries do, South Pacific Universities became main merchants of hope for students coming from China, India, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa and Pacific Islands, investing in postgraduate education aspiring to find jobs and raise families in this peaceful paradise-like part of the world.

> "Immigration plays an important role in facilitating New Zealand's international education industry – a key pillar in New Zealand's overall economic, social and cultural development. International education contributes more than NZ$2 billion annually to New Zealand's gross domestic product, and supports around 32,000 jobs. Revenue to education providers from international fee-paying students for the year ended 31 December 2011 was NZ$ 732 million. International students who choose to apply for residence play an important role in the New Zealand labour market, particularly if they are qualified and employed in areas with skill shortages. About 20 per cent of fee-paying international students go on to obtain residence in New Zealand. Around 100,000 international students live and study in New Zealand each year. In the year ended 31 December 2011, the largest source countries of students were China (23 per cent), South Korea (13 per cent), and India (13 per cent). For 2011, international student numbers increased by 6 per cent throughout most regions in New Zealand and income from tuition revenues rose by 3.3 per cent." (Immigration New Zealand 2012).

International students are flocking to the country with the hope of better future. Immigration policies are encouraging students to come, pay for their education fees (triple to domestic ones, as international students are not subsidized by government), find employment, upgrade their restrictive student visa to a work visa and eventually become residents after 'proving themselves' by working selflessly, usually for less remuneration than any New Zealander would, creating an underclass of 'working poor' and feeding into a neoliberal exploitative agenda.

Furthermore, Immigration New Zealand boasts that they have introduced several policy changes aimed at attracting more of the best and brightest international students to stay in New Zealand with the purpose of driving economic growth through increased productivity and innovation. Immigration New Zealand claims that these changes target higher-level students and move immigration incentives away from short, lower-level qualifications, to ensure that those students who choose to stay in the country are better positioned to take up genuinely skilled employment (Immigration New Zealand 2012). The reality is that these students pay much higher fees for postgraduate study, but rarely get jobs that reflect their higher qualification with New Zealand becoming a country with most highly qualified taxi drivers and caregivers.

It is necessary to be aware that in spite of this critique, education is still a main vehicle for bringing forth the world and also an opportunity for expansive learning at tertiary level while engaging with diverse students. As Connell (2013) asserts, education cannot be commodified; but access to education can. This paper attempts to address what we as faculty can do to embrace and respect diversity in our classrooms, enable a range of voices to be heard and encourage the silent ones to lead the way.

A high number of international students in need for adjustment to a new country and a new way of life requires a revision of the way we teach, engage and create contexts for new learning to occur. For that to happen, fear needs to be eliminated and diversity needs to be not merely tolerated or observed, but embraced, cherished and appreciated. In this context, I am not only referring to cultural diversity, but diversity of age, sexual orientation, profession, belief and level of ability. I am referring to domestic student with diverse needs, beliefs and attitudes and a possibility of creating contexts where students can support and encourage one another in being who they are and becoming a best version of what they can be professionally, personally and politically.

Postgraduate education which focuses only on achievement of cognitive understanding and on molding human mind to fit a certain profession cannot satisfy the main criterion of embracing diversity as it is immediately biased by narrowly looking through a disciplinary lens. Transdisciplinary approach in postgraduate studies requires opening of people's minds and enabling practitioners from diverse professions to come together and explore current world issues through a range of lenses. The purpose of postgraduate tertiary education in a globalized world is to teach critical thinking skills and enable students to become critics and conscience of society. This is possible only if academics can role model it through their research, engagement with communities as well as in their everyday teaching practice.

How can diversity, inquiry and co-creation become antidotes to neoliberalism within globalized University?

Neoliberalism is defined as a form of economic liberalism, which advocates support for great economic liberalization, free trade, open markets, privatization, deregulation, and reductions in government spending in order to enhance the role of the private sector in the economy, as such it does not perceive education as a human right but as a commodity that can be bought, sold and modified to suit current power structures (Jones, Parker, and Ten Bos 2005). Neoliberal paradigm within universities has been widely criticized as it destroys collective structures which may impede the pure market logic (Bourdieu 1998). Education, being a human right and a vehicle of bringing forth the world needs to resist the neoliberal paradigm in order to maintain its integrity, coherence and its aim of developing intellectually capable, creative and inventive professionals. As neoliberalism focuses on a very narrow and indivualistic notion of rationality (Bourdieu, 1998) it misses on perceiving complexity of social structures and diversity brought by various cultural understandings as well as potential benefits from uncompartmentialised interactions between people coming from various viewpoints or socio-cultural experiences.

A number of academic articles have been written exposing the neoliberal paradigm within tertiary education and the poverty of thinking it brings together with the destructiveness of the perception of colleagues as competitors (Haritaworn 2011; Hong 2008; Oladi 2013; Bourdieu 1998). Paradoxically, profitable businesses are rejecting the neoliberal paradigm by looking at more sustainable ways of conducting business focusing on common good and long term benefits while universities are terminating courses and programmes because of their financial non-viability and mass producing graduates in professions with very low employability rate just because there is student interest in them accompanied by their willingness to pay. Furthermore, degrees that bring revenue are privileged while courses promoting critical thinking are perceived as a threat although philosophy and critical thought is the essential idea of university education (Connell 2013). As a result, higher education in the South Pacific is becoming an export service industry focusing on a mass production of degrees blinding itself to the necessity of academics and postgraduate students being a conscience and critics of society.

The neoliberal paradigm requires compliance, uniformity and restriction which are diametrically opposed to the idea of Universities created and developed to be spaces for collaboration, inquiry and discovery. If academia wants to retain its integrity, it needs to be outside of the neoliberal paradigm, or knowledge development and exploration will be possible only within narrow confines of performativity (Oladi, 2013). If neoliberalism continues to drive us, tertiary providers of the future will need to 'outsource' critical thinking to alternative places where academics would be able to share and grow ideas as opposed to merely reproducing them.

Jinthana Haritaworn explored how are relations of production and consumption constituted in an increasingly neoliberal institution that quells resistance through exhaustion, attrition, evaluation, competition and distinction (Haritaworn 2011). Within a neoliberal paradigm, where the gap between rich and poor is rapidly growing, some are robbed of resources, access to goods and work opportunities and those who are employed within neoliberal institutions are robbed of time through continuous competition, expectations of working more for less and increasing job insecurity. Academics are robbed of time to think, time to reflect, time to explore and invent. Instead of being a laboratory of ideas, within a neoliberal rule universities are becoming places for reproduction of ideas. This is visible in uniformity of courses, offered across a number of campuses and teachers required to teach from same teaching materials. Some uniformity and agreement on learning outcomes is required for certification and accreditation purposes, but creativity and co-creation of ideas while they have been reproduced in classroom with students are probably one of the main ways of creation of new knowledge within academia. The role of the tertiary education is disseminating but also creating knowledge. Knowledge can be created through inquiry, dialogue, participation and research. Inquiry approach to education focusses on students and academics alike discovering;

- Who they are?
- What they stand for?
- What is important for them and why?
- How does that fit in their context?
- How do they connect to one another and what do they want to achieve through that encounter?
- What is their unique contribution to bring forth the world?

It is essential for university students to be able to think globally and see how they can contribute to the world –by organizing an event in their local community or by inventing a global 'peace pill' that can be safely distributed across the world.

The term 'university' originally means a 'community of teachers and scholars'. Community implies allies, communication, commonality and support. A community is a place for growth and development of new ideas. The notion of academic freedom defines tertiary education as it allows scholars to explore and expand ideas regardless of how strange or unusual they may seem. This creation of new ideas happens in the in-between space and that space needs to be protected. This in-between space is created in our diverse classrooms where we can create fearless dialogical spaces where students (and teachers) explore their true calling, strengths, abilities and aspirations. These are the spaces where unilateral assessment can be replaced with authentic self and peer reflection enhanced by teachers' input unique for each student and calibrated to the level from which the student is operating. In these in-between places the ethical issues can be openly discussed and explored from a range of views where diversity becomes a source for learning and not something that needs to be managed.

This article explores possibilities of survival of academic integrity within a neoliberal paradigm, ways of subverting it and ideas how to create an open and safe space where ideas can be freely explored and new knowledge created.

How is co-creative learning different and how it contributes to the transformation of tertiary education?

Co-creative learning is about developing reflexive sensitivity within diverse classroom by encouraging students to make sense of who they are and how they want to contribute to the world. Any engagement in reflexive sensitivity would expose commodification of knowledge as non-viable and encourage students to think critically. Within a co-creative paradigm, questions are asked, courses are continuously transformed and revisited in the light of a specific diverse student group and only purposeful learning is encouraged. Because of its flexibility it requires competent and reflexive teachers knowledgeable in their field, able to think critically and above all, genuinely interested in their diverse student groups. Alongside these attributes they need to be humble and capable of giving up their preconceived ideas about what one cultural group may be and how they relate to learning. It is common that some cultural groups get labelled as 'unresponsive', 'not engaged', 'rote learners', 'more interested in final results than the actual learning', however, when in a co-creative classroom these labels get deconstructed mutual appreciation emerges and true co-creation of knowledge can begin. The stereotype held by some teachers can perpetuate the prejudice and create cultural enclaves within classrooms mirroring groupings in the society. Exposing that myth and allowing space and time to dialogue about it becomes beneficial for students from all cultures as it offers an unbiased discussion about the topic of isolation and engagement that every student can relate. Creating safe spaces for communicating is often the best antidote for segregation and exclusiveness.

Creating friendly and collaborative contexts within universities becomes one of the main ways of resistance. Collaborative projects, inter and transdisciplinary communication between departments and between academics and practitioners can contribute to that vision, however, this may be dependent on how can we protect space for thinking, development, expansion of our minds within neoliberal constrains?

Academic Co-Creative Inquiry (ACCI) (Napan 2009) was created out of desperation to transform current university teaching and make it more exciting, more relevant to students' multicultural realities, interests and aspirations, aiming to inspire and encourage them to take on a task of being engaged with the world they live in and at least attempt to make it a better place. In ACCI students and teachers co-create the content and the process of the postgraduate course by balancing negotiable features with 'non-negotiables' and thus creating small transformative action projects that, apart from changing students' perceptions and their communities, serve to influence the neoliberal paradigm by promoting transparency, engagement and the 'bottom up' approach.

My students are very diverse in terms of their prior knowledge and tertiary learning experience. Some are very versed in academic writing and jumping through academic hoops; some are new to the country; some have a wealth of life experience but have not read many books. The Academic Co-Creative Inquiry, (Napan 2012) requires focused time at the beginning of the course to set up personalized learning contracts and each student needs to define their individual plan of action. At the same time they need to explore commonalities with other students and possibly engage in the creation of a joint project that may involve their community. They also

choose peer assessors to reflect on their work and help them improve it and these can be other students or people in the community. This time investment at the beginning scaffolds learning in a way that once the inquirer (student) is set on track, they become unstoppable. At the outset, students are given time to reflect, develop, create and innovate and when they develop a clear focus learning happens everywhere, in the bus, while reading newspapers, when reflecting on their family situation.

When learning outcomes are personalized students learn with their minds, hearts and guts and from learning being only an individualistic academic endeavor, it becomes a preoccupation which links to their passion and their basic need to improve the quality of their lives while finding a way how to contribute the best to their communities. This relates to the idea of education for citizenship (Roth and Désautels 2004) where personal, professional and political (Noffke 1997) merge in order to co-create a better world in organizations, communities and nations.

Learning contracts (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 2005) enable students to personalize prescribed outcomes into inquiry questions or "how to" statements. From the long list of recommended readings they choose which books, articles, movies, media, people or any other resources can help them to achieve those personalized outcomes. Text books became resource books that students can use in the context of their inquiry in the way they see fit. Some students also bring new literature to the course and, upon approval, the new resource gets added to the list of recommended readings.

Students set dates when they want to submit their creative inquiry assignments (within certain academic deadlines), they choose if they want to do it alone or in the group, they negotiate 'negotiables' and agree on 'non negotiables'. Students chose the format of their assignments, some do case studies, mini projects, art work, multimedia presentations, some even choose to do traditional essays. Regardless of which format they choose they need to cover prescribed learning outcomes (non-negotiable) in their unique and personalized way and they can opt to work individually or in groups.

Face to face work happens in interactive classes where artistry of teaching comes to fore. Long lectures are replaced with 20 minute presentations followed by a dialogue, discussion, debate, interactive exercises or role plays. Skillful facilitation is essential and this approach can cater for up to 125 students in one class, however, the smaller the class the better as this allows a development of community, co-creation of ideas and development of synergies as well as perception of similarities and differences between students. These differences become main opportunities for learning. Students co-create the process as well by suggesting ideas of what they need and want to learn justifying it by finding out why is this specific skill or knowledge needed. They offer group presentations educating their colleagues about special features of their culture, area of interest or experience. For example, once a student shared his 'coming out' as gay in a small mining town experience which in turn freed a fundamentalist student from his prejudice which would disable him in working as a non-discriminatory social worker.

Peer and self-reflection is part of the process with the purpose of students helping each other to improve their assignments and to realize that there are many ways of covering same learning outcomes. This creates a spirit of collaboration as opposed to the spirit of competition. I have also found that the quality of assignments significantly increases when students need to share it with one another. Plagiarism becomes almost extinct and motivation sky rockets.

Co-creative learning attempts to balance academic requirements with relevant learning for the specific field of practice students are interested in. My area is social work, counselling and

community development. These professions need competent, reflective practitioners, able to think on their feet and attend to issues of diversity in their everyday practice. Inquiry classes become laboratories for respectful, transcultural work where students' unique learning styles, aspirations and prior knowledge are utilized for dialogues about ethics, prejudices, beliefs and political convictions. No stone stays unturned and classes become truly transformative.

What are the challenges of this kind of transformative learning?

Universities are slow and administration structures may feel threatened with this kind of learning as students start challenging the teaching/learning orthodoxy and start requiring from other lecturers to employ similar methods. Students start asking questions and inevitably the university becomes vibrant. This vibrancy may at times result in social action which may not be well accepted by the establishment. This approach is challenging as students have been seen planting native trees and vegetables in urban zones, organizing anti oppression marches, camping in the center of the town joining the Occupy movements. Some have left their abusive partners and stopped enjoying Friday drinks when racist or sexist jokes are a main feature, some have stopped abusing their children or expecting from them to fulfill their dreams and started listening more to them to find out what their dreams might be. Students may even start requesting from lecturers to 'walk the talk' and openly challenge institutional racism. When these 'unpredicted outcomes' happen it is important to have proper processes in place and enable student voices to be heard by still retaining the main purpose of university in focus. In other words, every challenging situation should be used as an opportunity for learning.

Another challenge is that at the outset, some students find it threatening as they have to take initiative to create their own learning processes. For these students I offer the option to do a prescribed assignment and in rare cases I prescribe it for them, like it would be prescribed in any traditional course. I found that when this approach is offered for the first time students are suspicious as it offers a lot of freedom and students think 'what is the catch?' When they get introduced to the process and experience it by participating in it, every inquiry that follows becomes more and more engaging and relevant to what they really want to do in their lives. Contributing to their community becomes stronger too. Playfulness and appreciation of diversity becomes a main resource for learning. Co-creative classes are emotional and transformative and emotional and social competence of teachers becomes equally important as subject knowledge.

Some students may feel uncomfortable sharing their work with their colleagues, but the purpose of effective education is to go outside of one's comfort zone and experiment with something new and unknown. Peer and self-reflection mirrors the appraisal process in many professional organizations and practicing giving and receiving feedback is an essential life skill. I scaffold the process of peer and self-reflection carefully. In the first instance I ask students to choose who will reflect on their work – and this is usually their best friend. In the next inquiry based course, I ask them to choose two peer assessors – one very similar to them, and one very different to them. Later on I ask them to ask one collage from the class and one external practitioner to comment on their work. It is interesting to note that many of these external practitioners have joined our Master program upon reading some of student assignments as it raised their curiosity and interest in further study.

Over years of experimenting with peer and self-assessment (Napan 2012) I discovered that terminology is important and I have replaced terms self and peer-assessment and self and peer-evaluation with self and peer-reflection. Students strongly resisted assigning marks or grades to

each other's assignments and when I inquired about it they responded that they do not like assigning marks to each other's work because this 'destroys relationships' and that it is actually my job to do that. I wondered … my job as a teacher is to 'destroy relationships'? I listened to my students' critical feedback and decided to ask them only to give feedback to their colleagues with the aim of helping them to increase the quality of their project. In that way collaboration is promoted as well as focus on improvement as opposed to 'finding fault'. Self and peer-assessment can be done 'for real' or 'just for the sake of doing it' and I have found out that when students do it 'for real' it mutually enhances their learning, the peer assessed student learns equally as the one who assesses the assignment. One of the students recently commented:

> *I have learnt a lot from my colleague regarding the theory of servant leadership and how to use it to solve management issues, also I have leant from the way she explicitly explained theory and issues in an inductive way, which is easy for me to understand. Her assignment inspired me to explore more about the theory of servant leadership. It was useful to reflect on somebody else's assignment because now I know what I need to improve (Management in social services course, 2014).*

The idea of reciprocity is diametrically opposed to the idea of competition, and in that sense it challenges the neoliberal paradigm by promoting communal approach to learning and on one hand appreciates uniqueness of each student and on another raises their awareness of the common good by encouraging them to help one another to succeed.

At the outset, students may think that it is really easy to complete assignments that they have set out to do, but paradoxically, they spend more time on them and put a lot of extra effort while perfecting them to be ready for peer reflections. It seems to me that students are more concerned to present good quality work to their peers then to teachers. I have noticed that the quality of work skyrockets when Academic Co-Creative Inquiry is employed and it correlates with high motivation and engagement that accompanies the method.

It may appear challenging to uphold the standard of the work and ensure that all learning outcomes are covered, but when a teacher assesses the work, they compare what has been achieved with prescribed learning outcomes and makes sure that these were covered. This is a critical part of the inquiry process. When a student submits their learning contract these personalized outcomes need to be approved by a teacher bearing in mind prescribed outcomes. This adds a little bit of work at the outset of the inquiry process, but benefits are multifold. Contracts are living documents and they can change, so the teacher assesses only against the latest copy of the contract. Online teaching platforms like Moodle, Stream or Blackboard can easily cater for the administration of the whole process.

As ACCI is based on a Cooperative Inquiry (Heron 1996) which is an action research methodology, action and reflection cycles are embedded within it which makes it easy to evaluate, research into it and continuously improve it.

Experimenting with inquiry learning within a traditional tertiary teaching paradigm provided me with more questions than answers. Being inspired with student inquiries I took quite a few inquiries myself or with my colleagues through peer supervision or inquiry groups.

Namely:
  • How can we ethically and supportively address issues related to culture, difference and diversity in multicultural classroom within a neoliberal tertiary education structure?

And this large question engendered many new questions:
- How can we, as academics utilise our strengths; keep publishing our concerns, get together, dialogue, share knowledge, blog, do our best and find ways to replenish our spirits?

- How can we retain our enthusiasm and find strengths to transfer it to our students and colleagues while another compliance procedure is taking up a whole day you planned to finish that long awaited article or plan a new workshop using some novel methods of teaching and learning?

- How can we appreciate and encourage diversity in classroom when learning outcomes and assessment criteria advantage some groups over others?

In order to be the best academics we can be, comparably to our students, we need to eliminate fear in order to be able to provide mind opening educational processes. Fear within academics' minds and hearts prevents creativity and disables academics to reach students coming from various backgrounds to their own. It may be a fear of academics' paradigm being shaken or fear of offending students because of our ignorance of their culture or way of being. This fear can be dismantled by getting to know our students and their culture and by being genuinely interested in what they bring to class.

Non colonizing attitude needs to be cultivated through professional development workshops, self-education and participation in various cultural events and festivals.

Auckland boasts with a range of multicultural festivals and celebrations of diversity on many levels. These events could be used for education. For Master of Applied Social Work course, I take my students to Pasifika festival and to the Multicultural festival. This is a great opportunity for a cultural inquiry and students are given inquiry sheets with following instructions:

Table 1.1: Pasifika and International Festival Inquiry Learning Sheet

Prepare questions that may help you learn something about Pacific Island and other cultures relevant for your social work practice.   **Interview at least two persons from a culture different to your own who are presenting at the festival.**   **Feel free to modify or change your questions during the day.**
Write a short report on your learning, fill the form provided and bring it to class after the festival (it counts as one journal entry). We will debrief after each event. Before the events please check the following websites: http://www.aucklandnz.com/pasifika   http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/newseventsculture/events/Events/Pages/aucklandinternationalculturalfestival.aspx   1. My questions (or "I would like to learn statements") BEFORE 8th of March 2014. (or

before 30th of March for International Festival):

2.   Questions that appeared during the festival:

3.   My questions at the end of the day:

4.   What have I learnt?

5.   How can this experience help me to become an effective social worker?

6.   Additional comments and ideas for improvement of this learning experience

Source: 179.781 Social and Community Work Theory and Practice materials, Massey University, 2014.

This field trip enables students to connect with one another and suddenly students from minority cultures become leaders. It is really important not to misuse these students and make them obliged to teach students from the dominant group, but instead create a context where reciprocity and mutuality is cherished and appreciated. Occasionally, New Zealand/European students feel disadvantaged by saying: "I have no culture, because I am white", but brief exploration of their origin and ways of living and relating to family, community, education, children and relationships quickly makes them aware of what constitutes their culture.

The notion of communal and individual needs to be carefully managed in multicultural classrooms and the best example I can offer is a story from a Professional Practice class in the year 2000.

Sixty seven students were engaged in an Academic Co-creative Inquiry class and some decided to go group projects. A group of competent students from five different pacific islands decided to cover some of the learning outcomes through a presentation. As four of them were talking one after another, the fifth one was weaving a flax basket. When they finished, the one who was weaving said that this was a metaphor of interwoven strands of social work practice and how physical, psychological, social and spiritual need to be continuously interwoven as well as a metaphor of the importance of relationships and how all cultures need to work together for betterment of the world. The whole presentation was so moving that most students in the audience had tears in their eyes, but one New Zealand/European student was sobbing. After the applause at the end, she just would not stop. Then she exclaimed: "I am sick of it, girls, I am… I am looking at you and every lunch break, you giggle together, share food, have a great time … I want to join in, and I just bloody, don't know how ….so I envy you and it feels awful!" And she continued sobbing in her painful realization.

Immediately, a Tongan girl, who just presented, jumped and hugged her saying: "Hey sister, you teach me how to be more individualistic, and I will teach you how to belong to a group and we are square…."

Innovation is a collaborative process. At times talking over lunch with a learned colleague can be more useful then reading ten esteemed articles. A dialogue characterized with mutuality and reciprocity enhances creativity. Sharing knowledge at conferences and symposia is a way to expand it, and it should not be a privilege of academics but a common experience for students and practitioners.

Universities are originally meant to be communities for lifelong learning not institutions of merely awarding academic degrees. Focusing on the original purpose of learning at higher level may be the best antidote to the increasingly neoliberal way of perceiving tertiary education in the South Pacific.

Instead of conclusion: What can academics do to remain critics and conscience of society within a current paradigm?

Being critics and consciousness of the society we need to be able to stand up and challenge the current paradigm, support each other and not buy into threats that there is not enough, as creative and transformative teachers are needed. It is our job to promote well-grounded excellence which embeds collaboration. Confronting manipulation and unethical practice may be a cause of confrontation with university administration especially in cases when academically sound decisions are overruled by short term financial gains.

In spite of the 'customer service maxim – customer is always right', we need to assess students' work vigorously and justly and assign only purposeful work to students with their future profession in mind even when academics' existence and existence or viability of the program depends on retaining 'a happy customer'. In the long run programs with reputation of being rigorous outlive those that 'produce' incompetent students. Along these lines, giving students a critical feedback even when one wrongly accentuated word can create a massive complaint that will take up a lot of teacher's time that could otherwise be spent on creating better teaching/learning processes, is a way of retaining academic integrity and indirectly contributing to creation of honest and competent workforce.

Our links with the profession and collaboration with practitioners are essential for our teaching being current and relevant as well as for our continuous professional development. Being able to excite and inspire students instead of hiding behind a pile of publications and yet, finding time to publish and spread the knowledge may be a difficult balancing act, but it needs to take priority.

Being good allies to each other, find time for collegial conversations, initiating dialogue, creating projects that promote collaboration and minimize competition can happen through engagement in collaborative activities which promote collegiality and a creation of the sense of community and camaraderie within academia.

This is an invitation to academics to play with ideas, encourage mutuality and reciprocity in the classroom, appreciate diversity and engage students in creation of a better world as our future relies on their integrity, creativity and competence.

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I am a curious scholar keen to immerse myself in new discoveries of cutting edge science of 21st century. I value social justice, academic relevance, sustainability and kaitiakitanga (sustainable guardianship) expressed in a context of collaborative and respectful relationships with integrity, joy and creativity. My passion is in the integration of seemingly opposing polarities like research and practice, science and spirituality, internal and external, tertiary education and fun, individual and communal. I am interested in intercultural communication, inquiry and collaborative learning. I believe that quality education is essential for improvement of the quality of life of communities, families and individuals.