

## **Shaping lecturers' beliefs about teaching and learning in higher education in the Pacific**

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The aim of this study was to describe the educational experiences shaping the teaching and learning beliefs held by a group of beginning lecturers in higher education at various tertiary institutions in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). A total of sixty three essays written by participants in an online course on teaching in higher education comprised the data for the study. A modified version of narrative analysis was used. This is a powerful methodology in qualitative research that can provide remarkable insights into individuals' beliefs. The critical experiences that were thought to shape their beliefs in teaching and learning were identified and discussed in the light of relevant literature. The participants described a range of influences that shaped their beliefs about teaching and learning including realisation about the need to work harder and know more, the importance of independence, support systems, curriculum, qualities of a teacher, teaching and learning process, teaching and learning strategies, and learning environments. This information was useful in teaching these students and for further courses.

### **Context of the study**

The University of the South Pacific (USP) was established in 1968 as the regional university of the South Pacific, committed to serve its twelve member countries (Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue, Nauru, Marshall Islands, Kiribati and Cook Islands). These island nations host a population of approximately 1.4 million and stretch over 32 million square kilometres of ocean. The twelve USP member countries together with other island nations from Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia are collectively referred to as Pacific Island Countries (PICs) (Figure 1). In all, there are 22 island countries that make up the PICs (SPC website). USP currently offers courses in four modes covering the entire e-learning spectrum. Information and Communication Technologies have played a critical role in transforming the education scene at USP (Raturi, 2010). However in some of the participating nations where courses are offered the facilities are not always ideal because of lack of funds to support the USP offerings. It is also likely that most of the students enrolling for the courses have not experienced e-learning before and need varying levels of support. (Rao, Bhartu & Koroivulaono, 2011).

The Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (GCTT) is offered online; a popular course as many young tutors enrol with the aim to develop professionally in their early teaching career. Beginning lecturers at tertiary institutions in PICs bring with them beliefs about teaching and learning that they have developed as a result of their own educational experiences in school and university. Beliefs shape intentions in teaching and intentions are closely linked to practice (Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Benjamin, 2000)

Some beliefs will facilitate good teaching and others will be detrimental. It is also well known that core beliefs are very difficult to change (Brownlee, 2001). In order to determine some of these beliefs and how they were shaped by experience lecturers enrolled in the GCTT at the University of the South Pacific (USP) are asked to write a beginning essay describing their educational experiences and to explain, where appropriate, how these shape their beliefs about their own teaching.

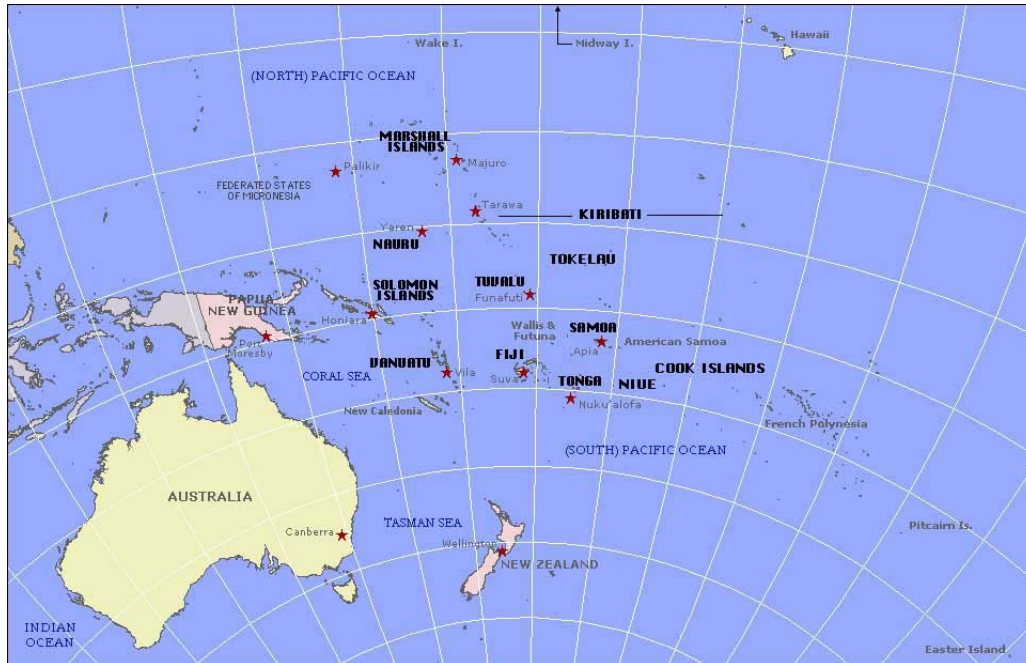


Figure 1: Map of Pacific Island Countries highlighting USP's twelve member countries  
 Source : [http://www.usp.ac.fj/jica/resources/documents/pdf\\_files/ANNEX.PDF](http://www.usp.ac.fj/jica/resources/documents/pdf_files/ANNEX.PDF)

The first course in the post-graduate certificate program focuses on teaching and learning. It requires students to read and apply recent work on teaching and learning in Higher Education and is constructivist in approach (cf Biggs and Tang, 2007). One of the aims is to assist lecturers to understand that their students will learn better if they acquire functional as well as declarative knowledge. The prevailing teaching approach at the University of the South Pacific, as is still the case in other higher education institutions, is to transmit large amounts of information in lectures and then discuss and explain it in tutorials. Our intention in the course is to convince beginning lecturers that teaching can be improved by being made interactive and that information that has been understood and applied is more useful than that which is merely transmitted. One way of achieving such change is to identify what the lecturers and students are currently thinking and then to persuade them to try other approaches and modify their beliefs.

The main research question that the paper has attempted to address is:

How do lecturers' own educational experiences influence their beliefs and hence teaching and learning practices in higher education in the Pacific?

## **Development of beliefs about learning and teaching**

Most of the recent studies describing 'conceptions' of teaching and learning are derived from phenomenographical research. A well known set of hierarchical conceptions of learning is that proposed by Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty (1993) for learning by Open University students in the United Kingdom. They range through the lowest level of acquiring information to life changing learning as follows: A. Increasing one's knowledge, B. Memorising and reproducing, C. Applying, D. Understanding, E. Seeing something in a different way, and F. Changing as a person. Many related studies have shown similar sets of conceptions. It is likely that these conceptions are context related. For example Eklund-Myrskog (1998) found similarities and differences between students' conceptions of learning in two different educational contexts; nursing and car mechanics. Differences between programs were greater than within programs with only two conceptions common to both student groups. The majority of the nursing students had a qualitative view of learning (ie D,E,F above) whilst the majority of the car mechanic students had a quantitative view (A,B,C). All students however had more developed conceptions at the end of their course. She stated that the results showed that to some extent conceptions of learning were contextually dependent.

There is usually a relationship between what teachers and lecturers believe about their own learning and how they teach (Boulton-Lewis, 2004). Kember (1998) summarised 14 studies of conceptions of teaching in higher education. These included, among others, work by Martin and Balla (1991), Dall'Alba (1991), Samuelowicz and Bain (1992), Gow and Kember (1993), and Trigwell, Prosser and Taylor (1994). They were mostly phenomenographic studies. Kember was able to classify the studies of teaching into five categories which he then reduced to three based on teacher (lecturer) orientation. These were 'teacher centred/content oriented' and 'student centred/ learning oriented' with an intermediate category that he described as 'student teacher interaction/apprenticeship'. It is usually assumed that the student centred/learning oriented conception is the most effective for constructivist learning however it depends in part how this is operationalised. If students can be supported so that they take control of their learning and hence construct their own knowledge then such an approach should lead to deep functional learning and knowledge. However, if students lack the prerequisite skills and knowledge, or motivation to behave in this way, then they can be ineffective as learners and become very frustrated. A recent quantitative study (Arenas, 2009), with teachers working with international students in Australia, showed that they tended towards a knowledge transmission, teacher focused approach to teaching. They argued that this was influenced by context and that their results would allow for staff development that would promote a student focused approach to teaching which, in turn, would encourage knowledge creation and conceptual change in students. Trigwell et al (1994) pointed out the need for discouraging teacher-focussed transmission teaching in higher education and for encouraging student-focussed approaches of teaching to improve quality learning because

these approaches also give rise to independent learning. Stephenson (1990) emphasised that successful independent learning requires the instructor/ teacher to play a supportive role armed with information and guidance for students when needed. Such environments allow a healthy exchange of ideas through a two-way communication process that boosts students' confidence and capability.

There is very little work on conceptions of learning and teaching that addresses the issue of how individuals develop these conceptions. There is some information in the staff development research that suggests that changes can be affected by assisting lecturers in their teaching to cause students to operate at least at the level of understanding. Boulton-Lewis (2004) suggested that the apparent developmental sequence for conceptions of learning and congruent strategies is affected by context, general cognitive development, acquisition of content knowledge, and challenges to learn more about learning. If one takes a constructivist approach to individual development of conceptions of learning and teaching one can postulate that lecturers in higher education, without any training in teaching, will develop their conceptions as a result of their own experience as students and then as lecturers. They will make decisions about what is good learning and teaching based on what has worked for them and what they see other senior colleagues doing. Their beliefs and behaviour will also be shaped by the academic context in which they are employed and their experience as a student in school/ university. If these experiences are limited then their conceptions are likely to reflect this. Without new experiences that challenge their existing beliefs they are likely to continue to teach as they have begun without questioning their behaviour.

Lecturers at the University of the South Pacific are mostly of South Pacific or Fijian Indian background. Their ideas of teaching and learning will also be shaped by cultural backgrounds and experiences. Their cultural roots contain influential epistemologies of learning that they need to reflect on and make explicit. Nabobo-Baba (2005) stated that the Fijian lifestyle places a lot of importance on social gatherings, sports, cultural functions, church activities and ceremonies. In addition, Fijian society promotes communal living and work as opposed to individual aspirations for advancement. There is also a lack of desire for competition among most indigenous Pacific people because it can lead to ruining relationships or disturbing peaceful co-existence. Whereas the world of the school, on the other hand involves evaluating objectively other peoples' or cultures' beliefs and summarising, enquiring, justifying, clarifying, interpreting and challenging. Generally learning occurs by observation, imitation, and participation and verbal interactions primarily for the purpose of learning are rare.

Otsuka (2004) conducted research in Fiji on cultural influences and academic achievement. His sociological research makes some interesting points about the cultural differences in values, beliefs and practices that affect achievement amongst Indo-Fijians and ethnic Fijians in the Fiji context. He was concerned with the comparative success of the two groups in formal education. He stated that in Indo-Fijian culture education is respected and valued highly and parents believe that helping students to strive for academic excellence is important. That this striving might result in rote learning to achieve high grades is not really discussed. On the other hand he observed that ethnic Fijian

parents encouraged children to become good members of the community. He also cites Dakuidreketi (1995) who found a mismatch between students' cultural norms in Fiji and those required for success at USP (University of the South Pacific). We would expect these varying cultural experiences and influences to determine to some extent how beginning lecturers would think about teaching and learning.

Hence we were interested in determining how earlier experiences at home, school and university shaped lecturers beliefs about learning and teaching because we believe that these will influence their intentions and practice. If we have better knowledge of existing beliefs we can attempt to address these through the teaching in the GCTT.

## **Narrative analysis**

Narrative analysis is a methodology suitable for qualitative research in learning with a socio-cultural focus. It can be used to analyse individual interviews and/or to extract the common themes across interviews (Polkinghorne, 1995). Humans tell stories to represent themselves and to make sense of their lives and activities within a cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Such stories can be used as qualitative data and analysed to determine how personal experience shapes beliefs and actions.

Marshall and Case (2010) presented a very good analysis of disadvantage in higher education using the analytical process described by McCormack (2000). This approach focuses on three dimensions of analysis and 'moments'. The first dimension was concerned with identifying the narrative processes being used. This included identifying the stories or events being described and their meta-relationship with the processes of augmentation, theorising and argumentation. The second dimension was concerned with the use of language, that is what and how things are said, and what is left unsaid. The third dimension was concerned with the contexts of culture and situation. Finally a 'moment' is where something unexpected is said which constitutes a turning point in the narrative and may be critical in a life story.

Webster and Mertova (2007) described an approach to narrative analysis using critical events. In this approach it is proposed that narratives can be analysed by capturing critical events in the stories. These events then become reportable findings and outcomes of the research. This can be justified on the basis that specific events often determine how we recall our life experiences and lead us to adapt our strategies and processes to a new situation. 'A critical event as told in a story reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller.' (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.73). It may impact on the professional performance of the storyteller. It may include trauma, risk, illness or personal consequences. The events can be extrinsic, intrinsic or personal (Measor, 1985). One cannot predict in advance that critical events will occur in a narrative.

Narratives can be obtained by establishing a good interaction with an interviewee and asking them to tell you all about some aspect of their lives. This may require some supportive prompts to keep going. In this research the focus was on the lecturer-students'

written statements about their own experience of teaching and learning and its effect on shaping their views and teaching in higher education.

The modification of narrative analysis in this study involved the researchers immersing themselves in the statements, scrutinising the language of the text, acknowledging the context in which the text was produced, and identifying the critical moments as well as other important experiential incidents in the essays.

## **Methodology**

Students who were lecturers enrolled in an online course at USP in a graduate certificate in tertiary teaching were asked to write essays, before commencing other coursework. They were asked to respond to the following statement (in approximately 1000 words): Briefly describe your educational experiences and what they mean for your views of education. They described their personal experiences of education looking back at their primary, secondary and tertiary student journey and how that shaped their beliefs about teaching. It was stressed that there were no right answers and we were interested in what they had experienced and what it meant for their teaching. The information in these essays was analysed using narrative inquiry with the focus on how the lecturers explained their views of teaching in terms of critical events or experiences in their own learning and teaching. At the conclusion of the course the lecturer-students wrote a final essay where they reflected on what they had learned.

## **Sample**

Sixty three students wrote essays. Their permission was requested to analyse their essays. The students had discipline knowledge and lecturing responsibilities in medical and allied fields, law, business, science, policing, and foundation studies. They varied in terms of experience and age. There were both men and women. They worked mainly in Fiji at USP (University of the South Pacific) and FNU (Fiji National University) but also in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands and Vanuatu. In order to enrol for the course at USP they were required to hold at least a first degree and be involved at least two hours a week in tertiary teaching.

## **Analysis**

The two researchers read all the essays independently. They then independently extracted from them what they each believed to be critical events or experiences. They then met to compare and share their understanding of the events and to decide how to organise those on which they agreed. This was done by sorting verbatim quotes by categories until agreement was reached. They then arrived at a tentative set of categories and went back to the original essays to check that these covered all critical events and experiences. Our method was similar in approach as described by Morrison-Saunders and Hobson (2013b) allowing us to collect a rich and thick description and an analysis that focussed on students' texts on their experience thus minimising subjectivity from the researchers.

## Results

Initially the intention was to analyse the essays for critical moments but there were only a few of these, so further extended narrative analysis was undertaken to identify other experiences and influences that shaped beliefs about learning and teaching. These experiences and influences extended over longer periods than critical moments. We further classified the critical moments as those occurring during learning or teaching. We classified the other experiences and influences as independence, support system, curriculum, teacher qualities, teaching and learning process, teaching and learning strategies, and teaching and learning environment.

### Critical moments

The defining characteristic of a critical moment is that it apparently occurs instantaneously. Those described below occurred either during learning or teaching. These experiences were both negative and positive. We could only identify a few of these in the essays. The critical moments evidence reflection and realisation of the need to work hard (as a student) and the need to know more (as a teacher). The critical moments encountered by the students (S22, S3 and S6) show that experience prompted the 'need to change' and that responsibility for teaching played an important part in enhancing the learning process for teaching.

#### *Critical moment during learning*

This is an example of an unpleasant moment and reflection which caused the student to decide to 'work hard'. This resulted in the student believing that work is needed in learning and that this helps students realise their potential.

As a result of my incompetence, I had to stand in front of the class holding both of my ears! It was one of the embarrassing moments of my primary school experience. However, from that instant moment I realised that I needed to change. It was an excellent learning curve ... these experiences encouraged me to work hard and have a personal commitment in maintaining a high level of discipline and respect (values which are not covered in the text books). In addition it also helped me realise my potential, which led to my personal quest of furthering my academic qualifications. (S22)

#### *Critical moments during teaching*

The moments of insight described below occurred when the students first began to teach and realised that they needed to know more about teaching and learning in order to be better in the role. These experiences helped the students realise that in order to be effective as lecturers they needed a strong personal knowledge base.

Here my first perception to be a teacher began and it was strengthened when sharing skills and knowledge with trainee nurses in clinical setting. (S3)

My first class quickly awakened me to understanding that I need to have a lot of confidence and understanding and to broaden my understanding of my work and mode of teaching. It became apparent that learning was not just about notes and exercises but more on active approaches that will stimulate these individuals. (S6)

### **Extended narrative analysis**

The examples in the extended narrative analysis highlight the importance of independence in learning, of support systems, curriculum, qualities of a teacher, the teaching and learning process, teaching and learning strategies, and the teaching and learning environment. These were also critical in informing their pedagogical beliefs and practices. The last three categories are most related to the focus of our analysis; that is, how previous experiences influenced current beliefs and practices in teaching and learning.

#### *Independence in learning*

Students described experiences in school and university where they were encouraged to take control of their own learning. They found it difficult at first but realised the benefits and satisfaction of becoming independent learners. The importance of activities such as group work, discussions, and the devising of contexts to enable development as independent learners was realised through their experiences. They believed that at the university level, independent learning should be encouraged and developed. The benefits of independent learning realised by students (S10, S45, S12, S37 and S61) helped them to use independent learning as lecturers as a teaching and learning strategy.

The first few weeks [at university] was educational culture shock! The students were expected to do all the learning independently, with guidance from their lecturers.... The method of learning that made me quit one of the subjects in secondary school proved to be the most effective way to learn and retain knowledge in the classrooms, lab sessions and clinical sessions. (S12)

From secondary moving to tertiary institute taught me to understand education better. Here, I was taught to be an independent thinker. It was a requirement to do a presentation and participate in tutorials and group discussions. (S37)

More self directed learning whereby we discover knowledge by ourselves.... We had constructive discussion. I reflect back and realise that this was effective teaching. In this activity it made students think and teach each other and at the same time prepare to teach others. (S61)

#### *Support systems*

The student below described how he struggled with problem based learning and found that he could cope by setting up his own support system through working with friends. He does not say it explicitly but the covert message is that he believes successful learning occurs when students work together under supervision. The support system plays an



important role in the success of a student and it has been highlighted by S27 through his own experience.

In one of the classes I took, problem based learning; I should have finally felt a sense of belonging ... [in the group was] a lateral entry student and the other was a best friend, he was a genius, the top ranked student in the year. We studied together, and struggled through the class, and in the end, I was the only one of our study group, and one of only a handful of people in the class who did not have to take the final because I had done so well in the class.... I would not have had the success I have had if it weren't for the support and guidance of my supervising teacher and the students themselves. (S27)

### *Curriculum*

Below students made comments about the influence the curriculum had on their learning. The first excerpt explains that knowing in advance what was in the curriculum was positive. The next student believed lecturers just wanted to cover the curriculum without checking that the students were learning. The last two were critical of the content and relevance of the curriculum they experienced at school. It can be concluded that the most important aspect realised by the teachers through their experience was the need to revisit curriculum and contextualise it in order to suit Pacific needs. Experiences by S2 and S29 show that even though their teachers/ educators used curriculum as syllabus to be transmitted, these students were quick to identify that curriculum should instead be treated as a process or praxis. S50 and S20 along with Pacific educators have highlighted the need for contextualisation of the curriculum (cf. Thaman, 1991, 2001).

The biggest challenge was learning from the tutors and lecturers. They were sometimes more conscious of completing the syllabus or finishing the discussion of the assigned questions for that particular week and they seemed not to care whether the students actually 'got' anything or not. (S29)

When becoming a teacher it became really clear to me that the education system and the curriculum were not really meeting the real needs of the people ... This is still a real challenge especially to teachers and the Ministry of Education as a whole. (S50)

I think the bulk of what I learnt in both the formal and informal educational system has not been directly useful in my everyday adult life. Being able to draw the map of the United States of America and show the corn growing state of Nebraska, the wheat fields of Idaho, the Appalachians' Mountain ranges or the Great Lakes; or locate the Pampas of Argentina and the Ural mountain of Russia, or recite Lord Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* has not, apart from helping me pass my University Entrance Examination, been of direct usefulness to me.... This raises a number of questions.... How do we determine what is relevant and what is not? How do we reconcile the need to demand academic excellence from our Pacific Island students when we also know that most of these students are excellent doers rather than memorisers? (S20)

*Qualities of a teacher*

In the quotes below it is apparent that teacher qualities had both negative and positive affects on students. Positive qualities were enthusiasm, empathy, knowledge, being interesting and a motivator. Negative qualities include lack of ability to communicate and the determination by the student not to be like the lecturer who 'made life hell'. These experiences gave rise to realisation of the need for the teacher to be a role model since the students often emulated their teachers. Teachers' qualities can have an everlasting impression on learners' mind. Thus the need for an exemplary role for the teacher was highlighted by some of the students. It was encouraging to see that the students picked up the "right" qualities from their teachers behaviour and practices to implement in future during their role as a tertiary teacher. Some of the common-sense approaches seem to have made an impact on students such as S14 who described the secondary mathematics teacher's enthusiasm, empathy and ability to communicate with students at their level. Student 35 learned that a teacher who did not frighten you or worry about mistakes could have a deep effect on lives and learning.

His classes were very interesting and he was a motivator. He was a person of whom you did not feel frightened to ask questions or admit mistakes.... It was the first time I truly believed that a teacher could have a deep, indeed life-altering, effect on the lives of his students. (S35)

I have encountered tutors and lecturers who have in-depth knowledge of their subject areas but they lack the skills to communicate the knowledge in such a way that students can easily grasp or understand. These are the two qualities that I believe separate a teacher from a good teacher. (S41)

But these experiences have helped me work hard not to be like the tutors which made my life hell. Because accounting in USP is already hard for most students, our job as tutors is to assist students and to facilitate the learning process. (S36)

*Teaching and learning process*

The lecturers talked about the positive effects of reflection on lectures and subject matter in their own courses. The ability to understand and apply concepts was considered important regardless of the teaching process. The teaching and learning process, as identified by the majority of students in this study, indicated a move from 'rote learning' to 'understanding' and a 'teacher-oriented' approach to a 'student-oriented' to teaching which fits with the continuum proposed by Kember (1998). The students also highlighted the different learning capabilities among students in a cohort and the need to have teaching and learning strategies in place to deal with them in a vein similar to that described by Eklund-Myrskog (1998).

Reminiscing times after lectures during my undergrad days, were either moments of pure joy or pure frustration ... thus this reflective process of learning, I believe, made me a better learner and likewise has shaped me into becoming a better teacher. (S7)

Attending the Bachelors Course is a big step for me .We were taught on reflection. I began to try to find reasons why things happened. I may say I began to widen my horizon of understanding. I reflect on my performance, learn from it and try to improve. (S1)

The reason behind my growing interest in the subject was simply my ability to understand the concept and apply it to real world situations.... While reading, I always explain whatever I have read loudly to myself, like I am conducting a class, so that whatever I have read is clear and much more understandable. Moreover while reading I always try to picture whatever I have read in my mind and somehow try to relate it to my daily life. This way I am able to understand and remember whatever I have learnt. I feel that my learning method has contributed to my ability to teach and explain well in class. (S31)

#### *Teaching and learning strategies*

These quotes exemplify the positive and negative effects of teaching at home in school and in university and how these affect their own perspectives on teaching and the strategies they use. They range from the way Dad's bedtime stories encouraged the use of anecdotes, nasty punishments that were effective, learning to speak out, and a range of experiences that they reacted against and would not use with students. Students also highlighted the effective use of multi-media and discussions to enhance interactions. The teaching and learning process, as identified by the majority of students in this study, indicated a move from 'rote learning' to 'understanding' and a 'teacher-oriented' to a 'student-oriented' approach to teaching which fits with the continuum proposed by Kember (1998). The students also highlighted the different learning capabilities among students in a cohort and the need to have teaching and learning strategies in place to deal with them in a vein similar to that described by Eklund-Myrskog (1998).

At home:

Dad's bedtime stories were an excellent educational experience and very cleverly he passed down his values, beliefs and some of his knowledge. I believe that telling stories is the best way to teach and often find myself incorporating a story into my lectures. An anecdote from a personal experience captures the students attention and I see the students refocusing and its wonderful to be able to hold their attention and to be able to give them a glimpse of the real world. (S43)

At school:

I learnt to be critical, reflect and raise questions and had to speak on behalf of the students.... I had to overcome my quietness, and begin to raise issues, discuss and interact. My horizon of education was just beginning to open before me.... Now as a teacher I try not to follow the kind of education I received whereby the teacher was talking all the time and students receiving and listening quietly. As a teacher I give articles for discussion and allow more interaction

between myself as the teacher and the students and between students and students. (S9)

I encouraged class participation and group activities which were one of the good strategies of teaching the students.... I have also used this strategy to effectively teach my students. However, I would like to say that some of the staff were not well prepared for the class and thus we found difficulties in understanding the concepts that they were trying to address. (S24)

[My punishment was] staying behind after class to clean-up and that educational experience made me a better person in terms of discipline, taking the challenges of duties that are allocated to me. (S55)

At university:

The lecturer had a good knowledge of the subject matter and always taught local examples which helped me to understand better. It was also during this time when I had actually decided to pursue a career in Food Science ... as a lecturer for Food Technology. (S42)

Reflecting upon myself as a tertiary student, I now realise that I remember more clearly the personal experiences that my lecturers shared and have used to improve my skills more than the terrible bullet points that used to get put on overhead transparencies and slides used in those days. (S43)

Through their own experiences, the need and importance of learner centred teaching was realised.

The experience of getting bored in class ... when the pace was just a bit too slow ... helped me to take a unique perspective on the way in which I conduct my classes, and the way in which I teach. I have come to appreciate the different levels of thought process which students have. I use this knowledge to try and engage different students at different levels so that no one is left behind and also so that none of the brighter ones get distracted, or bored. (S26)

Because of the challenges experienced in my studies, I am so conscious about how students should be taught in English classes.... To handle this, I usually create situations where we have language fun activities and work out other communicative strategies to create a need for talk. My other strength is viewing students as individual persons and giving praise for any effort I observe. (S48)

The culture of silence in Pacific (Nabobo-Baba, 2002) was seen by the student teachers as something that needed to change for the betterment of the students. As a result, the need for all kinds of interactions in the classroom was encouraged by the teachers in their classrooms.

My teachers imparted their knowledge.... I was taught to listen, obey and not to question anything because they were older and knew everything. (S51)

My educational experiences are driven by teachers. Due to the social and cultural background of silence and respect for elders in the Pacific this can be a strength because being students means being told what to do, to receive instructions then act. (S63)

#### *Teaching and learning environment*

This category consists of students' positive and negative experiences of learning environments, the effects it had on them and how they would behave as a result. Aspects of the environment include behaviour management, resources, and other students in school and university.

Going into secondary school was a different experience altogether because it was an all girls' school and surprisingly the competition was not about academic achievements alone. It became about netball, basketball, tennis, swimming and athletics, at none of which I was any good. So ultimately I focused all my energy into being a better student. It is at this point in my life that I began to realise the importance of being a good teacher. (S54)

At that time our nurse educators wore white uniforms to lectures and we were dead scared of them. They were regarded as a different level than students. We were afraid even to go to them if we had queries. Whatever they taught us we believed it to be the truth and did not argue or disagree. Another deficit in our learning were the lack of resources, we did not have many text books and computers to help us. Lesson time was spent copying notes from the blackboard and exams consisted of a mid semester and end of semester exam. (S53)

This was a challenge because Indian students were kind of naturally hardworking whereas for us Fijian students, we are used to taking things easy. This experience had a positive effect on me because I learnt to strive to attain something good or qualify for higher education. (S32)

As a Pacific student foreign to Australia, I was awed at the assertiveness of Australian students. I was able to learn from them and adapt over time. A weakness I experienced was the fact that I was a Pacific student who was not taught to be assertive or to express my opinion (S48)

## **Discussion**

The research question was to try to determine how beginning lecturers' own educational experience influenced their beliefs and hence teaching and learning practices in higher education in the Pacific. Student-lecturers described a range of influences and experiences that shaped their ideas and beliefs about teaching and learning. These included realisations in the critical moments about the need to work harder and know more. The experiences

of teaching and learning indicated their beliefs in the importance of independence in learning, support systems, appropriate curriculum, qualities of a teacher, the teaching and learning process, teaching and learning strategies, and the teaching and learning environment. These were all factors which were critical in informing their pedagogical beliefs and practices. Unfortunately there were no direct statements in the essays that defined what students believed learning was. However some of their conceptions could be deduced from what they said about their own learning and that showed that some of them were realising that they needed to understand and apply knowledge. That is they were moving towards higher qualitative conceptions of learning and teaching.

There was no mention of the use and effect of ICT on their learning. This is probably because the use of ICT in the lecturer-students' school years was very limited or non-existent and also because only some courses at USP are currently online. Most of these lecturer-students were about to experience it for the first time in the course for which they were enrolled.

Some of these students had realised from their own experiences that taking control of their own learning and becoming independent learners was satisfying and effective. Some had also experienced problem based learning and benefited from it. Those lecturers, as far as possible within the transmission teaching context of USP and their other institutions, should be influenced by the content of this course advocating constructivist teaching.

The content of the curriculum was questioned by some. This was an issue raised by Nabobo-Baba (2002) and other Pacific educators (Thaman, 1991, 2001, 2009). They also noted that Fijians are more likely to learn well through communal activities. This can lead to a mismatch of students' cultural norms and university teaching. If more group activity and independent learning is encouraged it could mitigate such a mismatch and overcome some of the culture of silence by allowing students to talk and negotiate in small groups. Whilst Indo-Fijian students are more likely to accept a transmission approach to learning, group work and discussion should also help them to understand concepts and their application before committing them to memory.

Teacher qualities were important in the lecturers' own learning. This is even more critical in online courses. The lecturers need to be open, encouraging, knowledgeable and ready to support students depending on their individual needs. This requires experienced staff who have a deep understanding of the content and theoretical underpinnings of the course and who can help students to construct knowledge and apply it for their own needs. It is also important to encourage online discussion between students and, despite the difficulties of distance and IT problems in some of the nations, to encourage them to undertake some collaborative work. The digital access and experience of learners at post graduate level is above average (Raturi, Hogan & Thaman, 2011) which will influence the teaching and learning environment in a few years' time. It would be worth investigating how ICT shapes learning and teaching beliefs; perhaps this is an area for future work.

Most of these students will not be working in online teaching initially so it is important to assist them to describe good practice in teaching and learning in their own discipline areas

in various modes and how they can implement this within the context and restraints of their positions in their institutions. They will be more successful in this if they have good knowledge of current thinking in the area and can make a good case, as a result of their study, for making some changes in their teachings

## Conclusion

Lecturers and tutors are important agents of change and play a key role in influencing the dynamics of the classroom and learning environments. Therefore, the learning and teaching beliefs that the cohort presented in this study are critical in terms of their further development as lecturers. Some of the ideas they expressed are evidence of core as opposed to peripheral beliefs and these are very difficult to change (Brownlee, 2001; Schommer-Aikens, 2004). Their beliefs have been learned and shaped by life experiences and education in their previous environments. The course that they are enrolled in encourages these lecturers to rethink and modify some of their peripheral beliefs at least to become more effective tertiary teachers. They were encouraged to read, make sense of and describe how they would apply the critical ideas in their teaching.

Learning and teaching is the researchers' core business and so it was for the students in this course, the students reflective journey not only helped them but also the researchers; this essay indeed united researcher and student in a shared quest and enabled both to inform their teaching practices (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013a). In the light of 're-thinking education' in the Pacific (Nabobo-Baba, 2002; Puamau, 2005; Thaman, 2009; Tuimaleali'ifano, 2009), this research will help educators and policy makers understand what lecturers believe about teaching and learning, how these beliefs developed, what they 'want' in their teaching, and how 'prepared' they are as teachers. It will allow better matching of courses for beginning lecturers to their experiences and beliefs.

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