

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DECOLONISING THE INSTITUTIONALISED APPROACH TO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A PASIFIKA CONTEXT: LEARNING FROM A 'WHOLE OF LIFE' PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

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Abstract

In promoting learning from a 'whole of life' participatory approach, this essay responds to the controlled classroom pedagogical approaches that have defined Western institutionalised theological education in Pasifika. Western theological education curriculum, theory, and practice have shaped its epistemological approach in various learning contexts, thereby downplaying and suppressing Pasifika indigenous ways of being, knowing, and learning. In contrast, learning from a 'whole of life' participatory approach involves our communities and emphasises Pasifika indigenous realities and knowledge systems as central to a decolonial approach to theological education. Focusing on relational ontology is at the core of this participatory approach. This study therefore takes an ontological turn in presenting a participatory approach to learning which allows for Pasifika relational ways of understanding in knowledge production. It surveys a possible empirical ontology of participatory learning embedded in indigenous realities and knowledge systems that provide for learning from a 'whole of life' approach. This promotes the 'whole of life' vision of Pacific Theological College, adopted from 2019 onwards, in alignment with the new Pasifika Communities University.

Keywords: decolonising, 'whole of life,' participatory learning, ontological turn, relational ontology

Introduction

This study sets forth a conceptual consideration of what could be regarded as 'whole of life' participatory learning as an approach to decolonising teaching-learning processes in a Pasifika context of theological education, namely the former Pacific Theological College (PTC), now Pasifika Communities University (PCU). Since PTC was established in 1965, institutionalised theological education has been based on the

Western “school” model. The prevailing model of theological education in Pasifika continues to grapple with this imposed mode of teaching-learning, fashioned by Western approaches to both ontology and epistemology, which excludes and marginalises traditional indigenous knowledge systems.

The epistemological assumptions that have informed instructional choices in Pasifika have been based strongly on the teacher’s aims rather than on how learning happens, or by the future successful life anticipated by students’ hoped-for transition to university. This puts the teaching-learning experience at risk, as it does not always allow for the development of participatory skills and critical thinking. Most of the learning activities adhere to controlled classroom pedagogical approaches relating to the teacher’s expertise in course content.

It follows that theological education in the region has continued to uphold the frameworks of colonialism as a consequence of “... an epistemic monoculture based in Western scientific materialism ... the imposition of Western forms of knowledge production ... [and] a Western secular cosmology [that] resists indigenous knowledges, pedagogies, and perspectives in institutional spaces” (Kerr 2014).¹ Therefore, this study takes an ontological turn embedded in the Pasifika logic of the ‘whole of life’ wherein everything exists in the relatedness upon which knowledge is constructed.

The Ontological Turn

This section “aligns with the recent ‘ontological turn’ in educational research, a movement that is re-opening ontological questions that challenge the Western philosophical foundations of teaching and learning” (Galea and Rousell 2022). The ontological turn has captivated its proponents’ attention to ontology since the early 2000s, in several philosophical and academic disciplines. In the present study, it is seen as a shift towards prioritising ontology, at times subordinate to epistemology, which has been the mainstay of knowledge production shaped by Western philosophies of education. Mainstream education philosophies often prioritise epistemology in what constitutes knowledge production, “informed by [a] prior ‘linguistic’ turn toward texts, discourse formations, social constructivism, and cultural representation, [in which] ... the focus is on the individual, the intentional ‘subject’ and host of overlapping dualisms” (Glass 2022, 1). This can marginalise indigenous perspectives on realities and knowledge systems informed by relationality, connecting the empirical and non-empirical realms, the natural and the supernatural existing in relatedness as the foundation of epistemology.

Considering the above, the proposed ontological turn is toward reconsidering the ontological basis of the Pasifika reality of the ‘whole of life’. The common approach to epistemology (knowledge) and ontology (being) is a philosophical presentation of a theory of knowledge concerning reality and existence as respective or distinct domains. “Epistemology deals with crucial questions of what constitutes valid knowledge and how one can obtain it, whereas ontology considers questions of what constitutes reality and how one can understand existence” (Weiler 2013, 1).

In contrast, this study takes an ontological turn embedded in a Pasifika worldview that is concerned with what people know about the world—that is, their logic of the ‘whole of life’ in which everything exists in relationship. This is a relational ontology encompassing epistemology. Grix asserts that “ontology logically

¹ Although he writes from a Canadian teacher education context, Jennie Kerr’s point of view on Western epistemic dominance and colonial structures is more than appropriate for our Pasifika context of theological education.

precedes epistemology and ... both are logically closely related” (Grix 2002, cited in Kant 2014, 74). The logic of the Pasifika ‘whole of life’ framework contends that epistemology is dependent on ontology.

In a similar vein, as Sarita-Louise Kant puts it, “Ontological claims about the social and political world logically precede epistemological claims concerning what can be known about that social and political world” (Kant 2014, 74). One could argue that assumptions about ontology inform assumptions about epistemology, and both inform choices in approaches to teaching-learning. The term relational ontology used in this section implies that Pasifika knowledge systems are a unity of ontology and epistemology and are not separated in the production of knowledge.

In relation to decolonising theological education at PTC (and now at PCU), the ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach based on a Pasifika relational ontology, as a way of being, knowing, and learning amidst the counterposing educational theories and practices of Western education and the tensions between Western and Pasifika worldviews, cannot be considered neutral. It would be unwise to suggest that participatory learning could ever be neutral with regard to either ideology or tradition. Ideology or tradition places participatory learning in a socio-religious-cultural-historical context. This draws us to an important theory that comes from a Papuan Melanesian worldview, which supports a relational ontology of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning.

Papuan Melanesian Relational Ontology of ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Learning: A Digging Stick Context

This section approaches epistemology from an ontological stance emerging from a Papuan Melanesian philosophical premise that foregrounds a relational learning environment in which the likelihood for knowledge is provided in the ontology. “Papuan Melanesian” refers to indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea on the eastern half of the southwestern Pasifika Island of New Guinea, including the indigenous Melanesians of West Papua, an Indonesian-controlled province in the western half of New Guinea. “Melanesian” refers generally to indigenous people in the Melanesian region of Pasifika. The key to Papuan Melanesian ontology and epistemology lies not in the present or the future but in the past. In order to discern some of the general features and characteristics, one cannot avoid the Papuan Melanesian indigenous religion, worldview, and culture when describing their ontology and epistemology.

Scholars who have studied Papuan Melanesian religion, culture, philosophy, and theology include individuals such as Whiteman (1995), Narokobi (1985), Mantovani (1984), and MacDonald (1984), to name a few, who insist that we go back in time to formative realities from the past. This is not an easy step for our generation, as we belong to an era of tremendous scientific and technological achievements. There is evidence of an astonishing contemporary human capacity and ingenuity that pushes the frontiers of knowledge, which are expanding at an unparalleled rate. Nonetheless, several key points must be made in relation to indigenous Papuan Melanesian life.

First, the essential ethnographic data for understanding Papuan Melanesian indigenous people—their ways of being, knowledge, and achievements, which are the key to their future—are embedded in a history at least 9,000 years old, in which they have primarily been agriculturalists, shaped by a ‘digging stick’² culture with religious associations (Mantovani 1984, 53; Whiteman 1995, 90–91; Eliade 1984, 40; 1978, 40).

² Melanesian ‘digging stick’ culture refers to the traditional farming practice in which a very effective wooden tool—the digging stick—has been used for millennia to enable and sustain subsistence agriculture. The digging stick is not only indispensable for the cultivation of crops but is deeply embedded in the social and ceremonial roles of Melanesian peoples.

Within the traditional worldview and religio-cultural experience of Melanesia, the indigenous people have understood and revealed themselves, their character, and their purpose. The truthfulness or legitimacy of any alternative claim to know life and what life requires of them must be tested in the light of this shared understanding of their human history and place in the universe.

Second—and this point arises from the first—Papuan Melanesians are committed to a specific story of human history, of ontological approaches to knowing, viewing, and explaining the world. This is not just any story of human history, but the singular history of the indigenous Papuan Melanesian people whose ancestral origins date back some 40,000 to 50,000 years (as hunters and gatherers) before the appearance of agriculture and religion around 9,000 years ago (Biskup and Nelson 1970, 1–15; Mantovani 1984, 53). This collective sense of being and knowing as a religio-cultural experience is essentially that of their ‘digging stick’ culture shaped by their socio-economic order (Mantovani 1984, 53; Whiteman 1995, 90–91; Eliade 1984, 40; Radin 1957, 58). From a religio-cultural vantage point, Melanesian spirituality and indigenous knowledge are deeply embedded in this ‘digging stick’ agricultural-centric experience. As Nongkas and Tivinarlik (2004, 60) say, “In this digging stick culture, everything exists and functions in relationship to one another and is experienced as one total whole”—that is, as the ‘whole of life’. As Bernard Narokobi, one of the forerunners of Melanesian philosophy, expresses,

Melanesians do not differentiate [between] religious and non-religious experience. For them, ... an experience is a total encounter of the living person with the universe that is alive and explosive. In fact, there are no religious and other experiences. An experience for a Melanesian ... is the person’s encounter with the spirit, the law, the economics, the politics, and life’s own total whole. (Narokobi 1985, 70)

It is this biocosmic religious experience of life through symbolic forms and expressions which defines Melanesian existence. Papuan Melanesian spirituality holds that people are ecologically part of the cosmos and participate interdependently in all of life, in unity with all existence. The principle here is that life is shared by all, ontologically and existentially, for it is cosmic: everything and everyone participates in it. It is a whole encounter of life, and life is the absolute concern, the ultimate and central value in the Melanesian living world of humans, nonhumans, and the whole ecosystem. This is akin to what Upolu Vaai, in *reSTORYing the Pasifika Household*, affirms in the context of the indigenous Polynesian people:

[We] are born of cosmic womb, not just human womb. I am thus a child of the cosmos. Cosmic relationality is in our blood. We came into being through cosmological relationships. Ecology is always cosmological and relational. It is not just physical but spiritual. (Vaai 2023, 77)

Therefore, the ‘whole encounter of life’ worldview recognises indigenous Melanesian people as relational eco-cosmic thinkers. Their living world’s revealed knowledge is materialised with the active participation of peoples’ intellect: physically (body), socially (interaction), emotionally (heart), and spiritually (spirit). This is an interweaving of all of the features of learning by engaging these four relational realms of knowledge, for knowledge is an act of being. As Clement states, “All true knowledge is generated in the face of problems which arise from reality” (Clement 2005, 75; see Freire 1998, 98–110, 118–119, 153).

This implies that life is a unified, interrelated experience in which knowledge is understood ontologically and experienced existentially. There is no separation of ontology and epistemology, there is “onto-epistemology”—being and knowing. Traditional indigenous ontology is a quest for meaning and purpose in nature, in everyday life, and in holistic existence. This is a relational ontology in which all

knowledge is generated in the physical and spiritual environment, arising from the learner's existential situation and critical consciousness of reality. Here knowledge is a unity of the social, economic, and religious experience of the people, because life viewed ontologically is interrelated and shared by all that lives in the material and spiritual realms. Knowing is experiential: it is embedded in practical experience as a means to achieve material and spiritual ends.

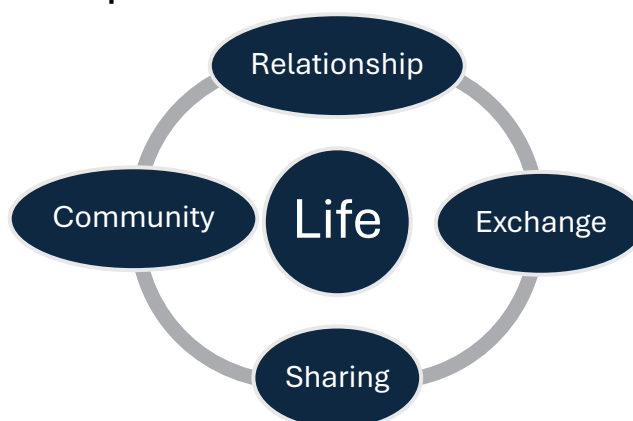
Third, in indigenous understandings of education, life is a practical process of day-to-day experiences (living) whereby the wisdom of the society is passed on to its members, while at the same time reaching out for new knowledge. Education, therefore, is practical learning of life-skill processes that prepare and equip individuals for the benefit and survival of the learner's family, clan, tribe, or community, in order to sustain, maintain, and celebrate life. In contemporary framing, "education is pragmatic and directed toward a 'better' life, meaning more opportunities and symbols for success" (Karl 2007, 39).

Education, in its various modern definitions, basically implies "the process of discovering and experiencing the meaning and purpose of human experience. ... The two queries, what and why, are always before us, goading us on" (Hunter 1978, 31). It is a powerful ontological urge at the base of the educational process within the learner: the quest for meaning and the purpose of nature, life, and all existence, that is, the 'whole of life'. Thus, education is the quest for meaning and purpose, and this means that it is a community quest, for the community is symbolic of life. The quest for meaning and the purpose of life is basic to the community and is inescapable in Papuan Melanesian existence; the community feels and responds to this pull. Thus, the people's way of knowing is their reaching out to understand life as experienced ontologically and existentially.

Fourth, the Papuan Melanesian people have always had a tightly knit community life. This life orientation is kept intact through a web of relationships. These relationships build the community and both create and sustain life. Knowing interacts with existence in the community, and the knowledge of life is translated pragmatically via socialisation and enculturation. Pragmatic interactions are initiated. Relationship and exchange (reciprocal sharing) is the most crucial interaction of Melanesian society, and it radically affects the way people think and are thought about, and their response to knowing and learning.

The three interactive components of Melanesian society—community, relationship, and exchange (reciprocal sharing)—have been given, through participatory learning, a definitive and unique expression. This is because they are not only cultural values fundamental to society but patterns and characteristics of social life which involve (or provide) participation and dialogue, and thus guarantee 'whole of life' participatory learning as a relational approach to knowing and learning. There is in education, therefore, community as well as relationship, exchange as well as sharing, participation as well as dialogue.

Papuan Melanesian Existentialism



The societal embodiment of these Papuan Melanesian patterns and characteristics underlines a reciprocal interaction that is basic to the pursuit of life for survival and existence. If the key traditional value is life, and it is found, expressed, and nourished in the community, then the wellbeing of the community is defined by good relationships and sharing. These are relationships that are built through exchange; it is reciprocal giving and receiving that expresses relationship.

In other words, being, knowing, and learning arise through relationship, exchange, and sharing. This is an interactive way of knowing, in which knowing happens in community within a traditional relational ontology. The Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology (being and knowing) is relational and implies a system of knowing that is linked to community and its social structure, around which all other activities revolve. The social structure of the community leads to participation by people who share and relate what they know and believe and its implications for everyday life.

In contrast, an onto-epistemology which is academically abstracted from the interpretive context produces a community that does not have the qualities foreseen in ‘whole of life’ participatory learning, and such a separation can only be achieved at the cost of the community itself. The Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology is well illustrated in the very nature of community and its interwoven relationships. Once one has understood this underlying foundational conviction of the Papuan Melanesian onto-epistemology, several implications for knowing and learning follow.

Implications for Knowing and Learning

Given the ontological assumptions of the way people come to know in the Papuan Melanesian religious worldview and cultural values, it becomes clear that learning through a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach has the potential to offer something of worth. Apart from the ‘digging stick’ cultural background, the concept of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning would be non-existent for Papuan Melanesians.

An analysis of Papuan Melanesian religious dynamics reveals that it produces a worldview that is productive of relationships in the community and the living environment. Here, reciprocal relationships based on the concept of exchange are vital for sustaining, maintaining, and celebrating life in the community. I am attempting to incorporate the religious implications of community, relationship, and exchange into an educational perspective rooted in the Melanesian religio-cultural worldview, one which “transforms individuals into something new, into what is experienced as the only way to ‘life’” (Mantovani 1995, 202).

This educational perspective emanates from how Papuan Melanesian people come to know through their relational ontology, that is, their way of knowing based on community, relationships, and sharing, which

can effectively and creatively be the means for relating formal and informal learning, providing an integration of both. This understanding of community and relationship provides the integrating centre that is embedded in ‘whole of life’ participatory learning. This learning approach is the cornerstone of theological education in the School of Theology and Ecumenism (SOTE) at Pasifika Communities University (PCU).

Implications for Learning from a ‘Whole of Life’ Participatory Approach: Pasifika Communities University

While recognising the considerable diversity amongst indigenous Pasifika peoples, ‘whole of life’ participatory learning is a common relational approach that is manifested naturally in Pasifika indigenous worldviews and is preserved and fostered through human work and activity. It is an indigenous participatory philosophy in which the experience of life permeates everything in the empirical and non-empirical realm of the Pasifika universe. This has led to a reconsideration of teaching-learning at PCU, having transitioned from PTC to SOTE. Setting forth the ‘whole of life’ relational ontologies of being and growing with communities is not simply a matter of intellectual satisfaction or an object of gaining and transmitting knowledge about communities; it is something that must take concrete shape in learners.

The Backdrop

The theological education provided at PCU examines the broader context of the Western colonial educational approach through a decolonial Pasifika lens. One of the problems with the Western education system is that it has defined how education should function in the rest of the world, in diverse fields of studies including theology. Although it may contribute to social change and economic development, Western education can also negate the cultural values and traditional indigenous knowledge of Pasifika societies that could have been preserved and integrated into the formal education system. This inherited foreign educational system lacks the widespread participation of those who will implement such change (e.g., teachers), of those who will experience its effects (e.g., students), and of those who will experience its impacts (e.g., communities).

As a consequence, the Western school-based educational orientation imposed on Pasifika has, from its very beginning, resulted in a passive approach to learning, or, as Freire puts it (1997, 62), a “banking” approach, in which all-knowing teachers “deposit” knowledge into the passive minds or “bank vaults” of students. This passive learning embedded in the imported educational system and its operational structures is a hindrance to participation and meaningful change. This Western educational model has shaped the epistemological approach in various learning contexts, in the process trivialising and suppressing indigenous ways of being, knowing, and learning. I therefore propose making use of ‘whole of life’ participatory learning as an approach to decolonise the institutionalised teaching-learning in the Pasifika context of theological education.

This decolonising project is “a reaction to the way that most explanations for the rise of capitalism and world empires in Western Europe ignore and downplay non-European people and places” (Rees 2020). Decolonising entails unbuttoning the twentieth-century ethnocentric approach to traditional residential theological education, clothed in Western culture and introduced during the missionary and colonial era. This type of theological education was inherited from Western Christianity and culture and is now embedded in twenty-first century neoliberalism, a political reappearance of nineteenth and twentieth century ideas relating to free market capitalism (Blum 2025, 1–3). As an economic philosophy, neoliberalism permeates every aspect of society and institutions, including education.

Undeniably, decolonisation poses challenges because of the complex nature of colonial structures and systems that have become part of Pasifika societies. “The legacies of colonialism have had lasting impacts on social and economic structures in the region.”³ Viewed from a postcolonial vantage point, political and other forms of decolonisation have been explored and implemented in our current and evolving structures at SOTE. This process acknowledges that what is needed is an alternative approach which can truly decolonise the theological education legacy in the Pasifika context.

Decolonisation and decoloniality are both commonly used terms in the discussion of attempts to undo the colonial infrastructures that have governed knowledge, culture, and bureaucracy in previously colonised societies. Decolonisation is typically framed as “a path forward to creating systems which are just and equitable, addressing inequality through education, dialogue, communication, and action.”⁴ Decoloniality seeks to understand the “close-knit relationship between the colonial condition and the imposition of a Western logic of ‘modernity’ as a consequence of colonialism. [It] is not so much a political project [as] an epistemological one: to ‘delink’ ourselves from the structure of knowledge imposed by the West, and then to ‘reconstitute’ our ways of thinking, speaking, and living” (Tsang 2021). Each of these terms has its own distinct emphasis, but both are concerned with the interaction between postcoloniality and decoloniality. Understanding decolonisation and decoloniality is crucial to the process of restructuring learning as a ‘whole of life’ participatory process. This has far-reaching implications for theological education at SOTE. Facilitating the process of decoloniality involves the transition to new ideas, concepts, and learning approaches that embrace ‘whole of life’ participatory learning. At PCU, both decolonisation and decoloniality concepts arise from the postcolonial critique which began after political independence for most Pasifika countries in the 1960s and 1970s, and are an ongoing process.

This means that decolonisation must continually be reflected on in specific educational settings and contexts. My purpose here is to show its connection to ‘whole of life’ pedagogy in the institutionalised theological education setting in Pasifika. Focusing on relational ontology is at the core of this participatory method. It calls for refashioning teaching-learning in a way that finds expression in a relational ontology of being and emerges with a relationally shared process of engaging “place”—that is, the communities displaying the characteristics of Pasifika ‘whole of life’ onto-epistemology. This is a process of translating Pasifika ways of being and knowing into the practice of theological education, which entails making connections between how Pasifika indigenous people know and how that relates to theological teaching and learning.

In the PCU and SOTE context, we must therefore ask certain core questions: Who is theological education for at PCU? What instructional approach is efficacious? Whose knowledge and ways of being and knowing are given priority in curriculum development and teaching? The future of theological education at PCU is not about finding ways to keep its aging classroom pedagogy educationally viable, but about replacing this pedagogy with new learning strategies that can provide teaching-learning reliability and participation vigour. The intention is to enhance learning satisfaction by using a different approach of place-based learning through community engagement with local culture, history, and natural surroundings.

This kind of theological education at the tertiary level is not anti-intellectual; it simply needs to be closely related to the people for whom it is produced. From its establishment in 1965 up to 2024, PTC worked

³ “Decolonization Resource Collection: Pacific,” National History Centre, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://nationalhistorycenter.org/decolonization-resource-collection-pacific/>.

⁴ “What is Decolonization, Why is it Important, and How can we Practice it?,” Community-Based Global Learning Collaborative, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://www.cbglcollab.org/what-is-decolonization-why-is-it-important>.

hard for over fifty years to provide theological education consistent with training for pastoral leadership. In considering the role of PCU since PTC has transitioned to a university, we now understand that we need to work smarter, not harder. We need to work smarter in constructing a decolonising theological education that is consistent with training for leadership for both justice and care ministries, and that connects the university to communities by re-establishing and strengthening links through a ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach. What follows are highlights of PTC’s and PCU’s visions for theological education, and how this evolved into a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach.

Visions for Theological Education: From Pacific Theological College to Pasifika Communities University

Writing about the “University Mandate” in the 2024 Pacific Theological College Report to the Special PTC Council Meeting (April 22–24), Upolu Vaai made this historical observation:

The first ecumenical meeting held in Samoa in 1961 recognised the need for a central institution which would provide theological education at a higher level than was available ... at that time, an education which in a number of ways would better prepare leaders for the churches in the new Pacific that was coming into being. PTC was established in 1965 at its current location. It was the first degree-offering institution in the Pasifika region, with its Bachelor of Divinity, since 1966. (Vaai 2024, 1)

This brief historical account refers to the establishment of PTC at its current location in Suva, Fiji. PTC developed steadily from its initial Bachelor of Divinity programme, offering its first Master of Theology (MTh) degree in 1987, a Postgraduate Diploma (PgDip) in 1993, and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in 2004. The latter was initially established in partnership with Charles Sturt University in Australia (2004–2008), but this partnership was discontinued when PTC introduced its own PhD programme in 2008 (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024a, 14).

In 2010, it was resolved by the PTC Council to transition the college to a university, and the Strategic Plan 2020–2025 was developed in 2019 to guide this transition (Vaai 2024, ix). PTC as a higher education provider offered undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for approximately 58 years, from 1966–2024. This indicates the continued existence of an ecumenical and regional theological education vision, grounded in the founding vision that PTC would be “an education which in a number of ways would better prepare leaders for the churches in the new Pacific that was coming into being” following the colonial and missionary era (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024b, 10).

Paralleling the initiative to move toward university status from 2019 onward, the time was clearly ripe for intensive in-house revisions of theological education programmes at PCU. Such revisions acknowledge the need to redefine competencies, especially in relation to courses, teaching-learning paradigms, and administration. This research on developing new academic programmes and courses has a potentially significant contribution to make in the area of teaching and learning for contemporary Pasifika communities’ ministries in church and society. New theological education programmes afford students the opportunity to critically connect and integrate leadership for justice and Christian ministry.

This integration process requires a high degree of interaction and organisation with local communities if the training programmes are to progress smoothly as they explore issues of justice in relation to social, political, and economic development. Those involved in theological education programmes for pastoral leadership at PCU need to explore such issues of justice in terms of the wider context of the Pasifika

region and beyond. This approach aligns with the renewed vision “to develop PTC [now PCU] as the premier regional theological institution for leadership for justice” (Pacific Theological College Handbook 2024c, 9). It is believed that students or ‘pastor-leaders in training’ will benefit considerably in their professional and faith development from this new vision.

From 2019 onward, PTC made adjustments to the vision to transition to a new university. As Vaai noted, “In ... 2019, the College’s first-ever Strategic Plan was developed under the vision ‘Towards Excellence in Theological Education for Leadership for Justice,’ which was unanimously approved by the PTC Council meeting at the end of the same year” (Vaai 2024, 1). This renewed vision necessitated an educational mission to establish a new School of Theology and Ecumenism (SOTE), one of the three schools in the new university, that could guide academic and theological reflections on ethical issues and national/regional values in Pasifika communities.

The year 2019 thus began with a restructuring of the traditional theological education programmes, with a new focus on promoting communities-engaged learning in terms of content, curriculum, and language, in order to prepare students for participation in cultural and communal life at the local and national levels. This vision envisages a ‘whole of life’ approach which “[t]ransforms the compartmentalised narrative that splits, extracts, and removes lands, oceans, and peoples for profit, and tears apart the integrated and interconnected life of the Pasifika household of God; [it] challenges the colonial idea of a split between theology and society, sacred and secular, church and the world” (Vaai 2024, 5).

While the establishment of a university is the focus of the new vision concerning ‘whole of life’, it is crucial to understand that PCU does not function as an island. Rather, it is part of the process of educational change that has been occurring for some time within the Pasifika region. It is important that any changes suggested for the better functioning of theological education should be of such a nature as not to alienate its educational stream from the education policies of the national governments of Pasifika.

In this new visionary environment, theological educators must assess the extent to which their previous classroom teaching approach distances students from their learning ecology, negatively affecting educators’ ability to communicate with and guide a group of learners. At present, few if any established teaching approaches afford students the opportunity to critically explore the integrated and interconnected life of the Pasifika Household of God, in terms of the wider contexts of community learning that inspire and enable a participatory approach to learning.

The participatory approach draws inspiration from a commitment to “whole of life learning, indigenous community wellbeing, grassroots communities’ delivery, and community shaped curriculum” (Vaai 2024, 6). Vaai further emphasises the need to highlight “the role of morals, ecumenical values, and spiritualities sidelined by the mainstream education narrative throughout its curriculum and educational structure and operations” (2024, 5). These statements imply an intentionality regarding embodying Pasifika cultures, languages, values, beliefs, and ways of comprehending life in our approaches to learning.

In other words, the “whole” in ‘whole of life’ expresses an absolute commitment to a total encounter with “life” that encompasses an ultimate experience of life, for life is shared by all humans, non-human others, and creation itself. The ‘whole of life’ is a web of interwoven systems that arise from the engagement of persons with their personal, socio-political, physical, and spiritual environments. ‘Whole of life’ learning assumes a holistic philosophy of life, an integral relation with the universe and with the development of Pasifika people, for there is no distinction between the religious and secular aspects of Pasifika life.

The ‘whole of life’ approach to participatory learning does not sideline the ancient ontological-empirical knowledge systems of Pasifika that were fully unified with the ‘whole way of life’ of the people. For example, Pasifika peoples have always “constantly associated living life with nature on all levels, and in turn, they developed detailed empirical knowledge about island ecology” (Dickie 2005, 8). The “digging stick” culture of Papuan Melanesians enabled such knowledge. It follows that learning is a life-long process and the by-product of living in communities as “places” or geographic locations in which “issues and interventions are concentrated and change is intended to occur” (Burns, Cooke, and Schweidler 2011, 6).

Making the change toward decolonising institutionalised theological education calls for a different approach to learning, shifting our understanding of theological education to a ‘whole of life’ participatory pedagogical approach of shared learning in the context of communities. This approach is chosen in order to bring theological education into the centre of the thinking, learning, and acting patterns of the people in their communities, where it rightly deserves to be. As Galindo and Canaday point out, “Shifting our understanding of Christian education toward formation in a faith community context calls for a shift in our educational approach. Theological educators have been calling for a more authentic, meaningful, corporate, and communal way of doing Christian education ... for decades” (Galindo and Canaday 2010, 21).

If PCU aspires to realise its move to ‘whole of life’ participatory learning, theological education training needs to transform its entire educational structure and approach. The transition to a university has been directed toward realising this vision. The ‘whole of life’ participatory learning approach starts with a renewed vision that emerges from who we are as Pasifika peoples. Viewed from the PTC “Transition to University Strategic Plan” vantage point, the teaching-learning process essentially involves catching the vision for what learning from a ‘whole of life’ participatory approach can do for Pasifika communities today.

Conclusion

The Pasifika relational ontology, in which knowledge is an act of being, has real relevance for epistemology. It is undergirded by a unity of ontology and epistemology, which are not separated in knowledge production. It thus finds expression through an affirmation of Pasifika Communities University’s ‘whole of life’ vision as a way of decolonising the inherited Western institutionalised approach to theological education. This requires shifting our understanding of theological education toward a ‘whole of life’ participatory pedagogical approach of shared learning in the context of communities. The presupposition is that learning from such an approach presents more than an alternative direction for theological education at the School of Theology and Ecumenism in Pasifika Communities University. Fundamentally, this approach enunciates a worldview of indigenous being and knowing which empowers Pasifika peoples to meet, interpret, and integrate reality in their communities.

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