

# Bring only the most Beautiful: Towards Excellence in Adult Education

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## **Bring only the most Beautiful: Towards Excellence in Adult Education**

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**Abstract:** Adult learners deserve to be taught by excellent educators. This paper identifies information needs about excellence in adult education pedagogy, a model for excellence, case study, and possible ‘next steps’. The analysis arises from New Zealand citizens of Pacific Nation heritage, intentionally expanding mainstream adult education paradigms.

*Tau mai na o pua e ula, aumai na o auga o aute,  
sei mai na o muia’a o laau e osi ai le taulaga.*

*Bring only the most beautiful of frangipani, bring only the freshest of hibiscus, bring only the young palm frond. Come let us give sacrifice to the Gods<sup>1</sup>.*

Every adult learner deserves to be taught by the very best, the truly excellent educators. Alongside all other variances affecting student outcomes (peer effects, home, ability, institution, management), it is what educators know, do, and care about which is exceptionally influential on student learning (Hattie, 2002). This paper is about the characteristics of excellent adult educator practices and about how these attributes make a difference to student success in adult education settings. It is also a story of what in our educator practices might be “most beautiful”. Imagine, our love of helping others to learn and succeed being “beautiful”. Imagine. This paper is in four parts and referenced to initial teacher education. First we outline what the literature reveals as information needs about excellence in teacher education. Second, we provide a model that describes excellence in adult education. Third, we provide a brief case study that illustrates the model and the impact of excellent pedagogic practices on student outcomes. Finally we encourage the taking of ‘next steps’ towards excellence in adult education pedagogy. The analysis and model arise from the perspectives and practices of New Zealand citizens of Pacific heritage. Often marginalized or exoticised as ‘other’ and therefore of greatest relevance to ‘others’ only, this paper intentionally locates Pasifika<sup>2</sup> models and theories of best practice within mainstream adult education thinking. Philosophically our intentions are to add to collective wisdom; pragmatically, the assumption is that quality educator practices that are effective with one group are of benefit to all groups (Alton-Lee, 2003). What one may call beautiful can be appreciated and understood by many.

### **Literature Review**

Teaching adults in initial education does, in truth, sometimes lack beauty. This is a domain “whose problems have been generally well known since the turn of the century” (Lanier, 1990:527) and whose “troublesome circumstances remain basically unchanged” (ibid).

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Mary Autagavaia, July 2003.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Pasifika’ means peoples of Pacific nation heritage living in New Zealand. Like many minority groups populations, Pasifika peoples could include those recently immigrated to New Zealand as well as New Zealand residents of several generations. Pasifika peoples make up 16% of the national population and have highest birth rate of all groups. By 2030 30% of the eligible workforce will be Pasifika peoples. Overall Pasifika peoples share bottom ranking with Maori on all national social indices including education. In postsecondary education, in 2000, Pasifika peoples made up 15% of the national population, had a uniquely young demographic, and made up 4.5% of total students in post-secondary education. At all levels of education Pasifika achievement has been prioritized, along with Maori, by government policy and strategy, and operationalised on the basis of meeting identified need.

Literature on pedagogy in teacher education has been reviewed for ‘beautymarks’ of adult education, from the perspective of Pasifika peoples. What emerged were areas where more information and knowledge are needed to inform quality teaching with diverse adult students. **Information Needs Arising From The Literature: Why “beautiful” pedagogy matters in adult education.** The kind of beauty that comes from practicing excellence in our pedagogy is urgent for those who struggle to achieve in adult education. The solution from a theoretical perspective as Freire has argued (Macedo, 1997) is to simply do what we as teachers have been commissioned to do: to teach. It is not about facilitation or commiseration, but genuine teaching. From a strategic perspective it is about teacher capacity and capability raising (Ministry of Education, 2002). Students tell us it’s a matter of listening to what they have to say about what helps them learn in adult education (Airini & Brooker, 1999). And what is yet to emerge from the literature (and, perhaps by definition, may never do so) are community perspectives. All combine to enable us to ascertain the full picture of attributes of excellence in adult educator practice, to provide a basis for appropriate professional development, and a greater focus on the ways in which our adult educators make the difference where success has been limited in the past.

**Pasifika models of excellence in adult education:** Educators with Pasifika expertise inspire success in ways that are smart to the modern world yet deep in world of identity. Previously connected to deficit models of development, ideas of identity held by minority groups are now being integrated into development models based on empowerment and self-determination (Matahaere-Atariki, Bertanees & Hoffman, 2001). Autagavaia (2000) has described a model for Pasifika social work practices, comprising three inter-related domains. The core is the personal domain (e.g. vision, relationships). Around this is the cultural domain (e.g. cultural identity, language, whether you are New Zealand born). The outer layer is the professional domain (e.g. competencies, policy). This model suggests that for the excellent adult educator there is no such thing as pedagogy only: excellence in pedagogy is to operate from multiple domains, both personal and professional.

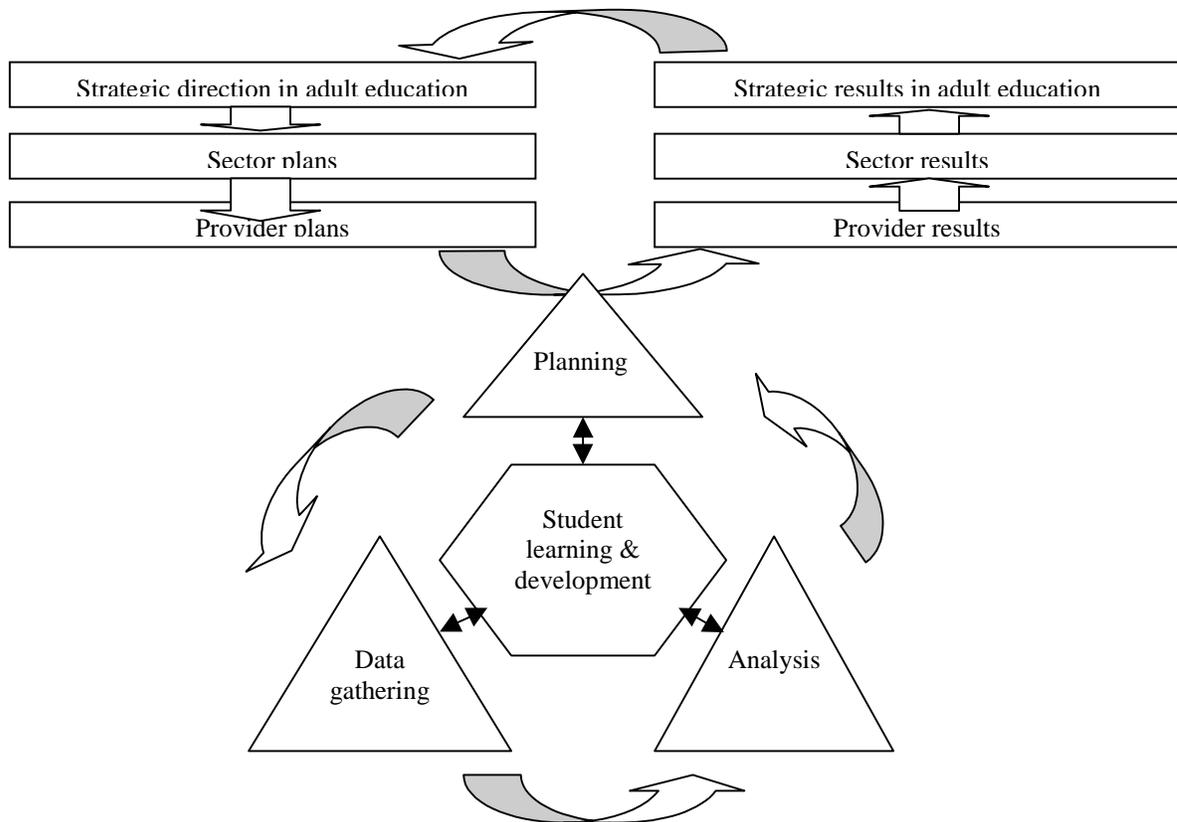
**Personal attributes that support excellence in adult education:** Literature on student thinking and learning in the classroom identifies three broad areas that educators focus on (Nuthall, 1998): cognitive, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic development. While these approaches will be present as attributes of beautiful practice in adult education, additional attributes not described in the literature may also be of significance, including:

- spirituality
- commitment to teaching as a form of service
- culturally inclusive adult education pedagogy that is supportive of professional relationships
- upbringing
- networking with communities
- leadership through effort and through coaching others into leadership roles.

### **A Model for Excellence in Adult Education**

Everything we do in education is related – to students and to wider intent. We are both personal and strategic. We meet need yet we are also nation-makers. Our model for excellence in adult education reflects Pasifika paradigms, expands current representations provided in the mainstream literature and opens the way to further exploration of adult educator roles.

Figure 1: A model for excellence in adult education pedagogy



As shown in the upper ‘cycle’ of Figure 1, the pursuit of excellent pedagogical practice is understood to be linked to strategic outcomes. The beauty is in ‘the reach’ – that the efforts of one excellent adult educator may indeed influence broadly interpreted strategic results in adult education. The second part of our model focuses on the learner and the work of the adult educator to meet need. As shown in the lower section of Figure 1, a cycle of planning, data gathering and analysis and evaluation contributes to the learner’s development. While the focus may be on cognitive development, we know that the outcomes will be more far-reaching (see Nuthall, 1998), including personal, cultural and professional development (Autagavia, 2000) and may include benefits to communities. And so, learning is viewed from many perspectives: qualitative and quantitative data, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, formative, summative and ipsative assessment; ‘objective’ and culturally attuned evidence. Ultimately the philosophy imbedded in the second cycle is one of service to the learner. This is not the same as servitude. This is about the beauty of being willing to give one’s best as an educator in service to the learner and their community. Just as one once received the opportunity to learn from another, so, in the spirit of reciprocity comes the time to return that gifting.

Taken as a whole, the two components of this model combine to illustrate the significance of the work of the individual adult educator – at both the individual and the strategic levels. Beautiful pedagogical practice is about relationships: educator to learner; plan to learning; strategy to plan. It begins with the student and spins onto fulfillment of blue-sky aspirations – some personal, some communal, some national. In Pasifika terms the adult educator is motivated by being part of a greater cause, expressed through the accomplishments of few and then many. Education is not a hobby. Education is about the advancement of peoples. Adult education pedagogy is beautiful when it accepts this role, and respects and enacts it with wisdom.

#### **Case Study: “She is Beautiful”**

This narrative is from a staff member who provides academic support for Pasifika

students in an initial teacher education setting ('College'). The story is illustrative of the model for excellence in adult education pedagogy. At a strategic level 'Sila' is part of the wave of ECE teacher education students entering teacher education across New Zealand. Government policy now requires that by 2005 all educators in charge of ECE centres must have a minimum of a diploma teaching qualification. All ECE educators are to be so qualified by 2012. A particular area of concern is increasing Pasifika participation in ECE. The recruitment of teacher trainees with Pasifika expertise has been a targeted with some success. At 'College' the latest intake for Year One students in ECE Pasifika teacher education exceeded projections by 115%. A student came to me one day who had been in College for only about three weeks. She had enrolled late and by the time she came to see me she felt alienated by the enrolment as well as by people in her class who had already started to be in groups. And she just wasn't understanding the lecturing because it was in English, when her first language was Tongan. She came to ask me for the papers to fill out if you want to resign. I found out her name and immediately started on building a relationship. We spent some time first of all asking questions about what were the issues that made her want to resign. The next thing we did was just re-look at the reasons and motivation that brought her to school in the first place. What it did include was looking at how her family would see her if she resigned, and how her church would see her (she planned to teach at the Tongan ECE Centre attached to her church). So that was an important part of building her confidence back up, while also doing what would be classically called a 'needs assessment'. Is this experience any different than for palagi<sup>3</sup>? Where it is different is in the nuances. The things she says to me are the voices that are behind her.

*I made a suggestion: what if we plan to work through the assignments she didn't understand in English and put a time aside each week so that we could focus back on the task, and on the reasons she came here, even if she didn't like the class situation right now. At the end of the first semester we would re-evaluate what that had done for her. So we just started on the plan which was meeting at least once a week for an hour. At times that would increase to two times, depending on the task. In that time there was also the added tuition around computer skills. At the end of that first semester it was very clear that her confidence was up, her assignments were on time, her grades were high, and her attendance was regular. And the biggest thing was she stayed at College. In the second semester Sila, at her choice, reduced her one-to-one intense support but began to bring her tasks and draft copy to one of the team to check. In that time there were still things to change and edit, but there was a big shift from, "Tell me what this assignment task means," to, "Here is what I have done. Tell me if I am on track". Sila would work on the computer at home and then bring the disc though to the team to have it looked at for spelling, grammar, content. By the end of that year her confidence had just gone sky high. Her enthusiasm for attendance was over the moon. She was just everywhere on campus. Her grades were 6 As and 4 Bs for that semester. From her own lips it was a successful first year and in my view she was well on the way to becoming an independent learner. This had been part of the planning all along –that over time she would grow to be confident and independent as a learner. In the first semester of her final year Sila brought a marked assignment through to me. She had completed the whole task on her own, including the research, write-up, and formatting on the computer. The assignment had been marked by a lecturer new to her work and Pasifika perspectives. Her mark? 43/50. Her words? "This one I did on my own. I still come by and see you all and remember, but it is all my own work this time." It's a great*

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<sup>3</sup> Palagi – Samoan term for non-Pasifika person, usually of European heritage.

result. Sila has become proficient academically and in English. Now we see Sila tutoring her peers – helping, while encouraging them. [Laughing] She is so intolerant now of anyone who is being pathetic. She is beautiful eh? It's not that she has forgotten. It's that she has come so far in such a short time.

The pedagogical mood in Sila's story is essentially one of optimism. This then, against waves of cynicism about the transformational potential of education, and the habit of mind of people coming to know life as what is done *to* them and *for* them (Greene, 1988). As a counterpoint, Sila's story is about advancement, effort, choice, and service through adult education. It is about those who aspire to transformation – social, economic, educational – and who do so through being secure in personal identity, histories, and day-to-day living. In this way elements of excellence are illustrated in this story. As Table 1 shows, the pedagogy has a range of results – personal, cultural and professional – often with more than one dimension occurring through the same event; and often outside any regular sequence. Most interactions are focused on results to do with professional development. Yet, none of that is possible with out attention to planning and data, plus personal, cultural and professional needs. Like life itself, beautiful pedagogy is a pastiche of moment and imagination, content and clarity, individual and social.

Table 1: Analysis of elements of pedagogical excellence

Event	Pedagogical intent	Result areas					
		P l	D G	A & E	P s	C u	P r
Find out the student's name & build a professional relationship	Planning for authentic assessment of need; develop trust; establish immediate long-term focus.	✕			✕	✕	✕
Check motivation for coming to school.			✕	✕	✕	✕	✕
Plan to work together regularly & implement plan.	Focus on the task not negative feelings such as alienation; establish routines; provide intense academic support.	✕	✕	✕	✕		✕

Key: Pl: Planning; DG: Data Gathering; A&E: Analysis and evaluation  
 ✕: Result area (minor); ✕✕ Result area (major)

### Concluding Thoughts

Excellence in adult education pedagogy is about expansion and modification, not invention. We have reviewed aspects of the literature to find what more could be present, from Pasifika perspectives. We have proposed a model for how we might best understand our work as adult educators; a model that is not surprising in its parts, yet when implemented can be beautiful in its results, strategically and personally. And we have brought forward the story of Sila as an example of how excellence may take shape and lead to success. Sila shows us all what can be made possible. We have nothing but respect for her.

There is a need now to continue to expand and modify the body of knowledge around adult education pedagogy. Already at 'College' there is evidence of the potency of the model proposed as student participation increases, yet numbers of at-risk students in that same cohort decline rapidly. Data and stories are needed from those places where success in adult education is happening. These should include student reflections on what pedagogical approaches help them to learn in adult education settings; as well as quantitative trend patterns. But ultimately we are only interested in the best kind of evidence – that which is focused on student outcomes.

The development of personal attributes that support excellence in adult education pedagogy, and of Pasifika models for excellence, only matter if they lead to improved student outcomes.

Our words to you come from the knowledge and perspectives of peoples of once-migrant and still predominantly working class histories, from situations in which diversity within groups is often greater than diversity between groups; where there is a gradual national warming to language and cultural diversity; and where support for Pasifika peoples' inclusion and development is one government policy priority area, as a strategy to reverse longstanding negative trends in social, health, education and economic indicators. Perhaps (and we hope so) you hear echoes of your own land and peoples as we speak from ours. We wish you pride in the very best senses of empowerment and service. We wish you were here to see us and stand alongside us: Pasifika – that collective of culturally and linguistically diverse peoples who rise to challenges, and rise and rise. We are people whose elders sailed the greatest ocean on this planet, intentionally, repeatedly, and intelligently. Our elders show what people are capable of with opportunity and access to learning with excellent educators. These were, after all, the kinds of teachers who changed and saved lives. Imagine the beauty that would come if we, with all our smarts, and all our dreams, would do so too. When will we all, and you, offer up our most beautiful practices as adult educators?

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