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Community Resonance: Indigenous Epistemology and the Learning Community Program at the University of Hawai‘i, West O‘ahu

By Masahide T. Kato

Abstract

The paper examines the transformative potential unveiled by the integration of indigenous epistemology into an experimental learning community program in Hawai‘i. Through contextual analysis of the author’s direct participation in classroom interactions, cultural and service learning activities, the final project, and the culminating event, the paper unravels the twofold process. On the one hand, indigenous epistemology in action integrated classroom, placed-based service learning, and cultural activities into a holistic learning experience. On the other hand, it also connected diverse communities in an interdependent relationship through the resonance of its foundational concepts: shared responsibility (kuleana) to the “homeland that feeds” (‘āina) and its ecosystems. Interdependence of diverse communities and learning activities formed through such resonance provides an opportunity for transformation.

Introduction: Auamo Kuleana: Collective Transformation through Individual Excellence

As part of an effort to increase the retention of first year students from the west side of O'ahu, in 2015, the University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu implemented an experimental indigenous culture-based learning community. The original vision of the program was co-created by Dr. Melissa Saul, the director of Piko project, and Dr. Manulani Aluli Meyer, the director of indigenous education. Funded by a federal Title III grant, the Piko project supports indigenous culture-based programs for the health and well-being of the campus and community.[1] Dr. Aluli Meyer, a Kanaka Maoli (meaning "indigenous person/people" of Hawai'i) educational philosopher, offered the conceptual foundation of the program in indigenous epistemology and the Hawaiian cultural value system. Grounding in indigenous epistemology facilitated an integrated learning experience for all participants, including faculty members. These integrated learning experiences were enhanced by the resonance between classroom activities, placed-based cultural learning activities, and the larger community.

Grounding a learning community in indigenous epistemology establishes, from the very beginning of the program, resonant connections between body, mind, soul, and spirit, and between humans and nature. In contrast to the normative definition of epistemology as the theory of knowledge, indigenous epistemology actively "incorporates to the fullest degree all aspects of interactions of 'human in and of nature,' that is the knowledge and truth gained from interaction of body, mind, soul, and spirit with all aspects of nature" (Cajete, 2000, p. 64).

Indigenous epistemology involves ecological relationships as the foundation of knowing. These ecological relationships animate the overarching goals of our learning community: Auamo Kuleana (collective transformation through individual excellence), 'Ike 'Āina (the knowledge of the land), and Aloha 'Āina (love of the land).While the focus of the learning community was on reaching Native Hawaiian students in the West O'ahu region—the same basis of our Title III grant—the learning community program we designed was inclusive of both Native Hawaiian and non-Native Hawaiian students and faculty. Everyone involved in the learning community was immersed in a Hawaiian world view and indigenous epistemology.

In this paper, I will discuss the process through which resonance between diverse communities emerged thanks to indigenous epistemology in action.

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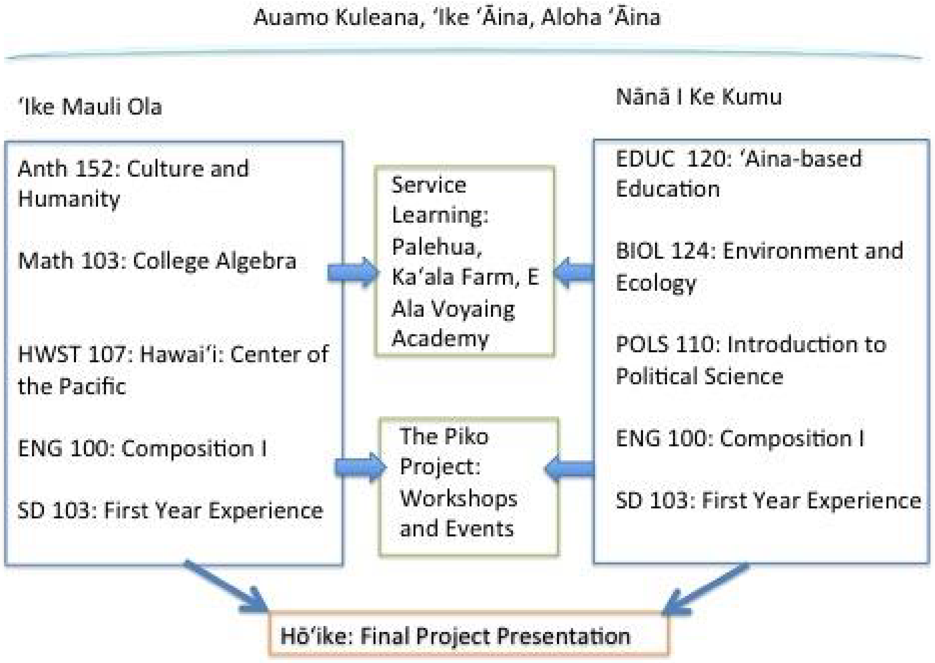
[1] The Piko project, funded by the Federal Title III Grant aimed at Native Hawaiians and Alaskans, has the specific purpose of providing educational and service programs that integrate Hawaiian knowledge and cultural values with community engagement through service learning. Accordingly, part of the project mission is to "increase Native Hawaiian/community based and integrated approaches to health and well-being by ensuring initiatives that incorporate cultural knowledge and practice into collaboration and partnership."

The Learning Community Structure

The learning community was composed of two clusters of 20 students each; both clusters were organized around majors or areas of study. The health and wellness learning community ('Ike Mauli Ola) and the environment and education learning community (Nānā I Ke Kumu) shared workshops and service learning activities (Figure 1). The structures of the two learning communities varied slightly. The cohorts of the health and wellness cluster were connected through linked courses and those of the environment and education cluster through partially linked courses. While the majority of health and wellness learning community students were enrolled as a cohort in four courses, the environment and education LC allowed some students to take just one or two courses with their cohort. This flexibility allowed non-learning community students to participate in learning community activities, like service learning and workshops. Since service learning was mandatory for all courses, those students who weren't technically the member of the learning community ended up becoming active participants in the learning community.


Auamo Kuleana, ʻIke ʻĀina, Aloha ʻĀina
ʻIke Mauli Ola
Nānā I Ke Kumu
Anth 152: Culture and Humanity
Math 103: College Algebra
HWST 107: Hawaiʻi: Center of the Pacific
ENG 100: Composition I
SD 103: First Year Experience
Service Learning: Palehua, Kaʻala Farm, E Ala Voyaing Academy
The Piko Project: Workshops and Events
EDUC 120: ʻAina-based Education
BIOL 124: Environment and Ecology
POLS 110: Introduction to Political Science
ENG 100: Composition I
SD 103: First Year Experience
Hōʻike: Final Project Presentation

The health and wellness cluster was organized around the concept of 'Ike Mauli Ola or the "knowledge of this precious life" in Hawaiian language. It sought to introduce pre-nursing students to the idea of health, wellness, and well-being through linked courses in English, Anthropology, Math, Hawaiian Studies, and Student Development (First Year Seminar). Nānā I Ke Kumu, which means "look to the source" in Hawaiian, was the conceptual base for the environment and education cluster. I was part of this second cluster as a Political Science instructor. Our cohort consisted of introductory courses in Political Science, Biology (Ecology), Education, English, and Student Development (First Year Seminar). The common theme in this cluster was intricate interdependence between community well-being and the health of the environment. The cohorts from the two clusters often met together, both on campus for cultural activities based on traditional Hawaiian knowledge and at our designated service learning sites for service learning activities during the weekends. My primary focus in this paper is on the Nānā I Ke Kumu, the environment and education cluster that I was directly involved with, as well as some of the common activities.

Conceptual Foundation in Indigenous Epistemology

In order to fully unravel the meaning of our learning community's three overarching goals—Auamo Kuleana (collective transformation through individual excellence), 'Ike 'Āina (the knowledge of the land), and Aloha 'Āina (love of the land), I need to first provide historical and cultural context. Two of the overarching goals—Aloha 'Āina and 'Ike 'Āina—derive from Hawaiian cultural values that are rooted in the Hawaiian cosmogony. One of the major Hawaiian creation chants, Kumulipo, traces the origin of life from the time of primary darkness, out of which micro life forms sprang and became plants, animals, gods, and humans. The latter part of the chant includes the birth of Hawaiian islands through the union of sky father (Wākea) and earth mother (Papa), the birth of their staple food, kalo, and the birth first human through the union of sky father and heavenly star maker daughter (Ho'ohōkūikalani) (Beckwith, 1970). Hence, in the indigenous belief system, one's relationship with the 'āina, plants and animals, is kinship-based. This sense of ecokinship connects Native Hawaiians, or Kanaka Maoli, with the land and ecosystems in a reciprocal manner. Thus, love of the land and knowledge of the land are central to the realization of the well-being of the community of both humans and nonhumans.

The third concept—Auamo Kuleana—hearkens back to an ancient governing system called Aha Moku, which was integrated into chiefdoms and later a unified nation state under Kamehameha I (Bailey, 2002; Kamakau, 1992). In this ancient system of governance, experts in farming, fishing, medicine, and other areas of natural resource management were brought together to form a council. The council facilitated the integration of knowledge and observation of the experts for sustenance of natural resources as well as community well-being. In this sense, Auamo Kuleana has been the core of enduring ideas that have sustained the indigenous community from the ancient time to this day.

At the first joint faculty and staff meeting of the entire learning community, Dr. Aluli Meyer carefully and yet joyously unfolded the common conceptual foundation for the entire learning community. The central concept of the program was Auamo Kuleana, which literally means to "carry the responsibility." Auamo is a "pole or stick for carrying burdens across the shoulder" (Pukui, 1986, p, 30). In traditional Hawaiian society, auamo was used to carry the staple food, kalo or taro, which is a common ancestor to Kanaka Maoli in their cosmogony. While kuleana has many meanings other than responsibility, for instance "right," "privilege," or "concern," Aluli Meyer (2003) defines it as an interdependent relationship between individual self and collective self, facilitated by the understanding and implementation of each person's excellence, interest, and responsibility:

> Understanding our kuleana develops our human potential because it ties us to our function and our function ties us to our people. It is this sequence because we value what we must do in order to continue to steward our language, our oceans, our lands. We must because we have that responsibility. Knowing who we are, then, becomes a pre-requisite to know how best we can serve (p. 13).

Accordingly, Aluli Meyer translates Auamo Kuleana as "collective transformation through individual excellence." In order to relate this concept to the integral state of harmony between mind, body and spirit in Hawaiian cultural context, Aluli Meyer explains it in terms of its affective/spiritual dimension, a collective "orgasm" that leads to the "procreation" of a new state of being.

The other two conceptual pillars for our learning community, 'Ike 'Āina, the knowledge of the land, and Aloha 'Aina, love of the land, are relatively easy to grasp since they directly relate to our cohort theme of ecological integrity and community well-being. Aluli Meyer (2003) elucidates the link between these two concepts: "We will heal and we will be educated by 'Āina. This is key. We will, once again, be 'fed' by the tides, rains and stories of a place and people made buoyant because this is how culture survives" (p. 59). The 'āina, according to Pukui and Hardy, means "homeland that feeds" (1972, pp. 2–4), which, as Aluli Meyer points out, binds humans in a reciprocal and harmonious relationship with the environment and ecosystems. These 'āina-based concepts are designed to facilitate the integration of class room learning, cultural activities, and service learning activities into a holistic three-dimensional learning experience.

Service Learning as an Expression of Indigenous Values

The service leaning activities were co-coordinated by Piko project staff and Dr. Michal Hayes, Education professor in the Nānā I Ke Kumu cohort. Our coordinators chose the service learning sites from among local community organizations that manage these historically significant sites and provide cultural learning activities in our service area. The Wai'anae district, where the two service learning sites are located, has the highest concentration of Native Hawaiians in the world.[2] It also has the highest concentration of successful community-based programs to improve the socio-economic well-being of the indigenous population on this island. In order for students to experience the traditional Hawaiian ecosystems, the sites were aligned according to the mountain-to-ocean watershed system: the mountain area (or uka), the middle area (kula), and the ocean side (kai). This traditional watershed system is called ahupua'a.

For the mountain area (uka) site, we worked with the Gill-Olson Joint Venture that manages the Palehua Forest Reserve. Located on the mountain ridge up above our campus, the Palehua Reserve consists of 3,700 acres of agricultural and preservation land. The Gill-Olson Joint Venture acquired the land from the Campbell Estate in

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[2] Unlike urban Honolulu and its outlying suburbs, Wai'anae is blessed with natural beauty, farms, historic and cultural sites, community leaders, and cultural experts. Half of the population is Kanaka Maoli, the highest concentration in the world (Fermantez, 2012, p. 130). As a result, the Waianae district has continued to be a "refuge of traditionalism and self-reliance" with strong cultural pride for Kanaka Maoli (Fermantez, 2012, p. 100). The prevalence of cultural pride and traditional knowledge in the Wai'anae community may stem from having been the capitol of O'ahu until 1450 when the ruling chief moved the capitol to Waikīkī. However, it is also a struggling community in terms of socioeconomic well-being: "The Wai'anae area ranks poorly on many measures of child and family well-being, including unemployment, per capita income, children in poverty, child abuse rates and school safety" (Fermantez, 2012, p. 101). The presence of O'ahu's sole coal fired power plant and landfill in Wai'anae indicate its marginalization. Wai'anae presents the quintessential story of an indigenous community faced with displacement and marginalization and seeking alternatives through culture and community-based networking.

2009 and began implementing their 150 year native forest restoration and providing educational programs for the community (Fleck, 2015-16). Their full-time ranger and cultural guide, Thomas Anuhealii, had already played a critical role in our service learning program in the past by sharing his expertise in indigenous cultural values and traditional ecological knowledge with our students. At the reserve, students worked to remove invasive California bunchgrasses from one of the mountain top cultural sites used for navigation trainings and celestial observations in traditional Hawaiian society.

The Ka'ala farm cultural educational center in the Wai'anae Valley, located in the middle or kula part of the watershed system, provided an opportunity for students to work in the traditional kalo (taro) terrace, also known as the lo'i, which was made from the ancient stone structure. At the farm, students worked on the lo'i kalo, planting their feet into the muddy water to remove the weed just as their ancestors had done. Butch Detroye, the cultural guide at this site, helped us reflect deeply on the meaning of working collectively in the muddy lo'i.

The third location, the oceanside or kai site, was the E Ala Voyaging academy located at the Waianae boat harbor. The academy's director, Kaina Nakanealoha, a seasoned expert in traditional wayfinding and traditional ecological knowledge, has been spearheading the restoration of the E Ala Voyaging canoe, which was berthed in the Waianae community in 1981 (Terrell, 2015). Here, students helped with the reconstruction of the traditional canoe.

At all three sites, the traditional protocol was observed, and the activities were contextualized in the traditional Hawaiian cultural values. Students also had a precious opportunity to learn from Hawaiian cultural practitioners at each site about traditional ecological knowledge that has sustained the ahupua'a ecosystem. Service learning activities served as the experiential base of the overarching learning goals (Auamo Kuleana, 'Ike 'Āina, Aloha 'Āina). Accordingly, the service learning experience itself provided a space for both students and instructors to reflect on a holistic view of the learning community, its overarching goals, and its diverse disciplinary means to attain the goals.

In addition to these service learning activities, students were also provided with ongoing cultural experiences on campus through Student Development courses. Staff and faculty who are well-versed in Hawaiian culture conducted a series of workshops at the traditionally constructed hale or the community hall, named Kuahuokala, adjacent to the organic garden. The mini workshops featured traditional cultural knowledge such as herbal medicine; lomilomi (traditional massage); lashing; and medicinal, ritual, and other traditional uses of maia (banana).

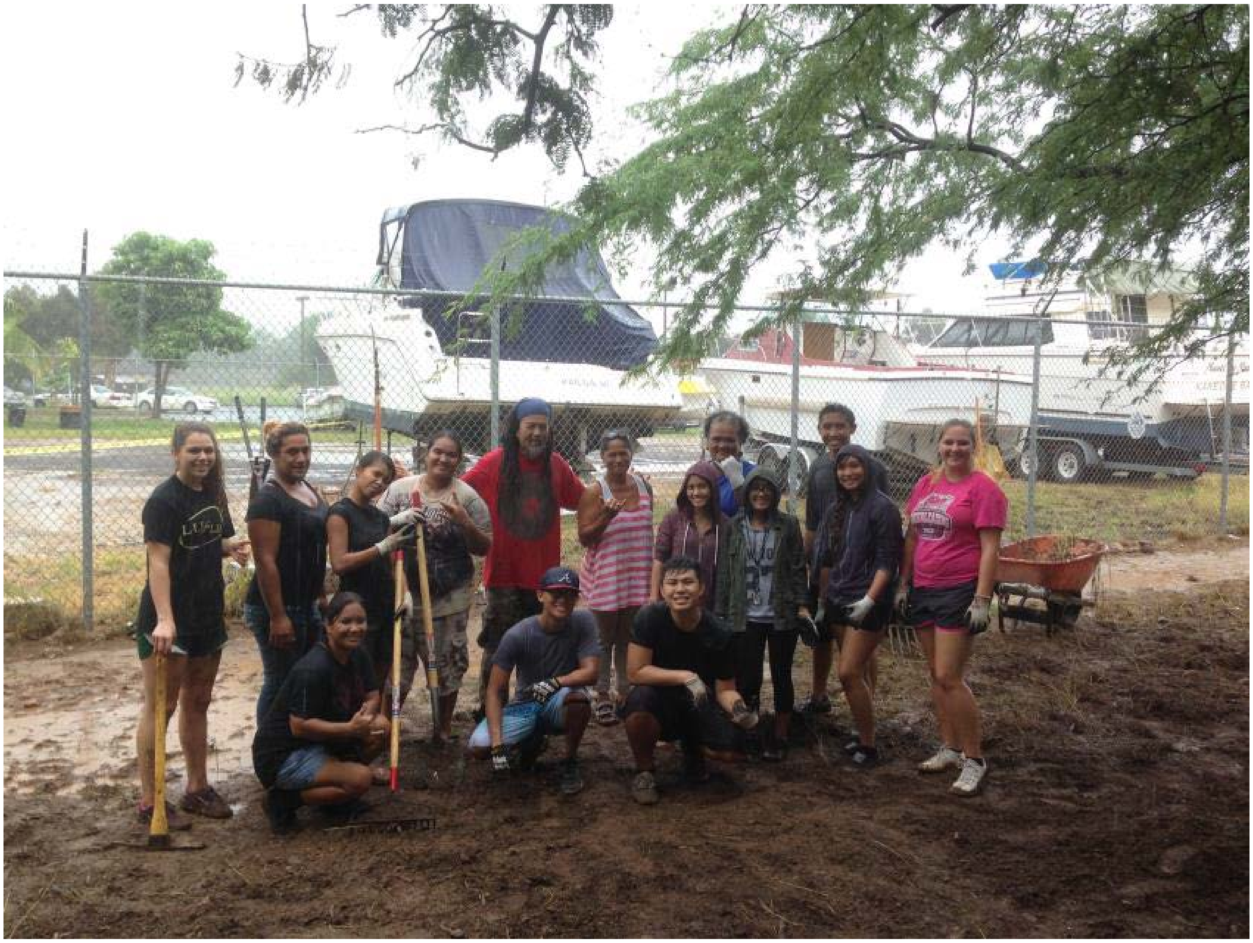

Figure 1. Service learning work at the Puʻuhonua community.

Photo by POLS 110 Media Team.

Classroom Community

In order to trace the process by which the resonance from the classroom and learning community came to reverberate with that of the larger community, I turn to my field notebook. For the first two weeks of the learning community, students seemed to cluster around the sub-groups of their cohort with a clear demarcation between the learning community students (15 students) and non-learning community students (4 students). One of the major factors that broke the ice was the presence of two (male and female) non-learning community members who were military veterans in their fifties. Their enthusiasm for learning resonated with the brand-new enthusiasm of the first-year learning community students. As they naturally played the role of mākua ("parents" in Hawaiian) in the class dynamics, classroom interactions came to resemble the indigenous notion of an extended family called 'ohana. Etymologically, 'ohana is from 'oha which means a "sprout" or "offshoot" of the kalo plant; structurally 'ohana is an "all inclusive" extended kinship by "blood, marriage and adoption" (Handy & Pukui, 1972, pp. 2–3). When the multigenerational class structure was contextualized in the indigenous cultural values, it became natural for us to follow the 'ohana model.

About a month or so into the semester in early October, there was a "crisis" in our class community. One of the regular class activities is "current news," during which students take turns presenting the latest news related to issues of sustainability, climate change, and community-based governance. It was Ms. O's turn that morning, and she brought up news about a Sudanese American high school student who was arrested for showing his homemade digital clock to his teachers. Her main point was a rhetorical question: how can we as humanity combat climate crisis if we are divided due to lingering prejudices and stereotypes? But the subsequent discussion split the class along the lines of military experience. The veterans and the students from military families expressed deep-seated anxiety based on their own or their family members' frontline experience. Their heightened emotion was so overwhelming that at first my repeated attempt to remind them of Ms. O's original message did nothing to quell the intensity. During this experience, the class truly became an 'ohana in the sense that, when we did get Ms. O's message, we moved from our superficial amicability to a deeper bond as a community. Ultimately, we all got the message that Ms. O was conveying: if we can't transcend our differences how can we form a community?

In hindsight, we realized that the significance of the episode was twofold. First, it showed the power of a genuine learning community to neutralize potential divisions due to students' diverse background and life experience. And second, Ms. O's point resonates with indigenous epistemology and the main learning goals for this learning community, which is to support the intertwined relation between ecological and community well-being. Combatting the climate crisis requires humanity to come together by transcending differences and also by redefining our individual and collective relationship with mother earth. What we were trying to achieve in our learning community is a micro and local level version of what Ms. O was seeing on a planetary scale.

Experiencing community in this way resonated with concepts we were studying. What really struck a chord with the students was understanding the fundamental principle behind the traditional watershed system called ahupua'a, a “self-sustaining environment, extending from the mountain to the sea with productive interdependence of all life forms” (Blaisdell, Lake & Chang, 2005, p. 373). Written by well-respected Kanaka Maoli kupuna (elder) physician, biologist, and kumu hula (hula teacher), a short academic article entitled “Cover Essay: Ka Ahupua'a” provided students with a vital key to the understanding of the totality of the ecological governance that once permeated every facet of life in Hawai'i. For our students, one major takeaway from this article was the traditionally held belief that the 'āina is alive. As Dr. Hayes communicated to me, they often referred to the concept in his class as well as in their service learning activities. Students held on to this concept for the remainder of the semester as it provided a vital link between classroom learning, 'āina-based service experience, and our three overarching goals. In other words, students seemed to be able to apply the concept to integrate diverse aspects of the learning community into a coherent whole.

The Final Project and the Hō'ike

As the semester progressed we began to focus on the final project. The central theme of the final project that culminated in the public presentation, Ho'ike, was for students to demonstrate their attainment of the three main learning goals: Auamo Kuleana, 'Ike 'Āina and Aloha 'Āina. Thus, the indigenous core concepts essentially defined the final project. Since each faculty member of the cluster calibrated their own disciplinary learning goals with the indigenous epistemological overarching learning goals, all students had to do was to apply what they had learned in each discipline to the realization of the main indigenous learning goals.

At our cluster faculty meeting, we came to a consensus that the final project should involve the idea of giving what we have gained back to the larger community and that it should be a student-driven project. One of the social problems that students took interest was the issue of homelessness. In early October, the learning community students had a very close look at a homeless encampment when they visited the University of Hawai'i medical school adjacent to the Kaka'ako park in the urban Honolulu area. The stark conditions in the encampment were quite unsettling to our students. Subsequently, they encountered another homeless encampment adjacent to one of the service learning sites, the E Ala Voyaging Academy, at the Wai'anae Boat Harbor. This encampment, comprised of over 200 people, was self organized under the leadership of a Kanaka Maoli mother, her 'ohana and associates. Students were struck by the fact that that this encampment, called Pu'uhonua O Wai'anae (which means the "city of refuge of Wai'anae"), had strong community cohesion, which made it very orderly and organized compared to the one in urban Honolulu. Students decided their final project would center around their efforts to help establish a community garden in the Pu'uhonua community. Thanks to the suggestion and guidance of the director of the E Ala Voyaging Academy, we modified this ambitious idea and settled on the installation of sweet potato mound baskets.

The workday was set up a few days before the Thanksgiving holiday. Despite the occasional heavy rain, eleven students turned out to help clear the area for sweet potato mound baskets and to conduct interviews for their mock news video. Several youths from the Pu'uhonua community joined in with the work, and friendly interactions between them prevailed. The most memorable moment for our students was when the Pu'uhonua youths offered their towels for the soaked students as their gift. This act of aloha deeply touched their hearts.

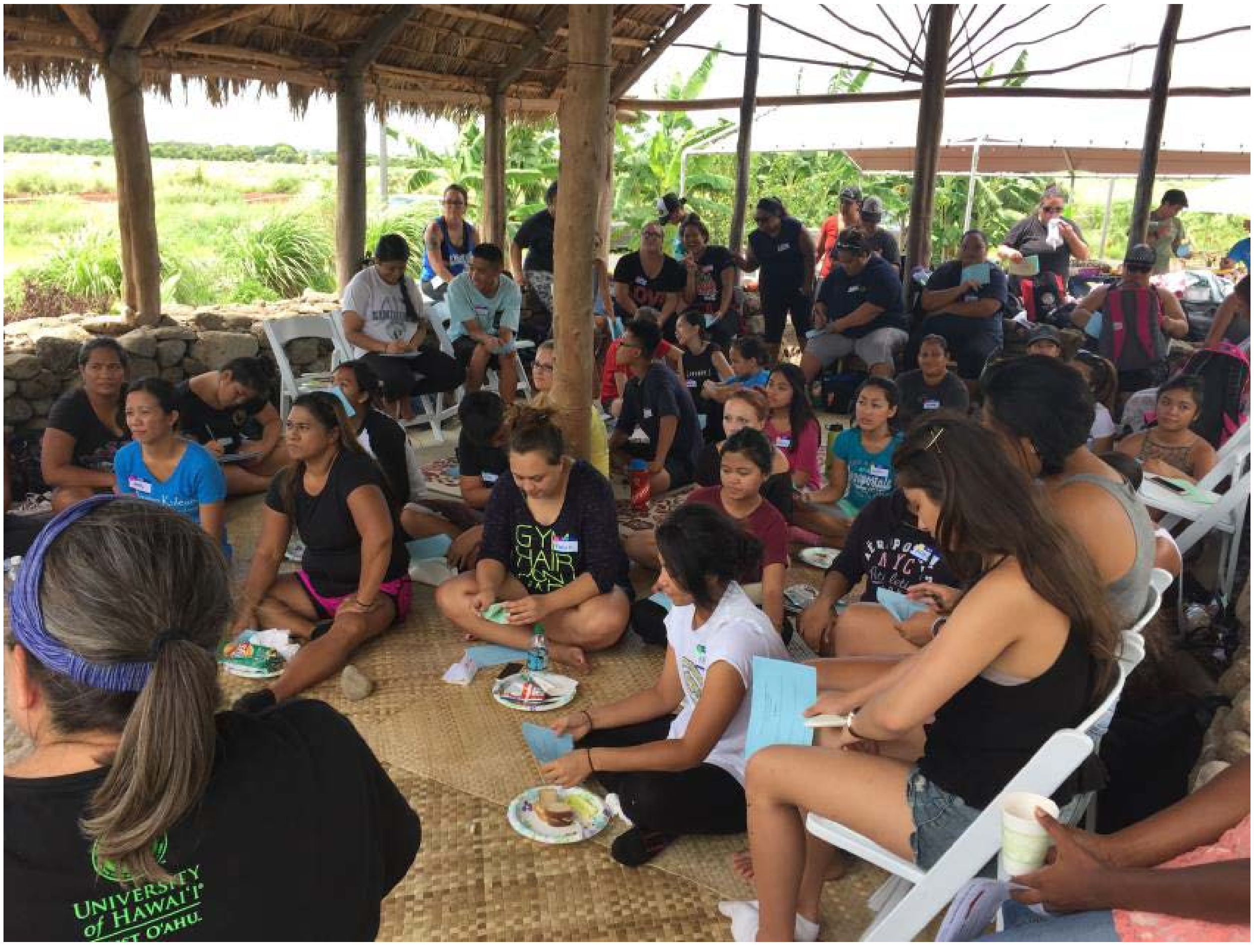

Figure 2. Cultural learning activities at the Kuahuokala community hall.

Photo by the Piko Project.

The culminating event for the learning community, the Hō'ike was held on Friday evening after the last day of instruction as the final culmination event for the entire learning community. The Hō'ike, which literally means "demonstration," was contextualized in the concept of Auamo Kuleana whereby students' presentations were offered to the entirety of the learning community. Thus, the campus ballroom filled up not only with the learning community students, faculty members and staff but also with non-learning community students, students' families and friends, and the people from the community organizations. While the 'Ike Mauli 'Ola cohort presented their projects in the poster board presentation, the Nānā I Ke Kumu cohort showed their mock news video and held a Q&A session. It was a spectacular sight, with a multitude of local families, students, faculty members, and staff sharing food, stories, and the joy of togetherness under the umbrella of the learning community. At the

Hōike, Auamo Kuleana finally became visible as a physical pattern of interdependence. The message was as loud as the sound and noise that filled the ballroom and the hallway: through our kuleana to the 'āina as a living entity, our immediate community (family and friends), learning community, community organizations, and the diverse life forms of the 'āina are all symbiotically connected with each other.

Conclusion: "Ma kēia 'āina pulama mai i loko ku'u na'au:" The land which has nurtured me in its depth fills my heart

The resonance generated between diverse communities in the learning community is amplified by the synergy between the foundational concept of kuleana and the 'āina, the "homeland that feeds," as a living entity. Just as the participants became more in tune with the 'āina and with each other after chanting and performing traditional protocol together, the resonance occurs in our direct relationship to the 'āina and its ecosystems both at the individual and collective levels. Perhaps the resonance can also be attributed to an immersion into indigenous cultural knowledge that facilitated cultural assimilation for non-indigenous students and some of the indigenous students alike. Indigenous epistemology in action, however, had a much more profound transformative effect. One of the students in our cluster expressed this transformative effect in her reflection paper: "In this class we all grew as individuals and came together with all of our ideas that we gained from the knowledge that were instilled in us. Together we learned that changes begin with us."

Furthermore, the resonance has helped reset the sense of who we are in our interdependent relationship with the 'āina and its ecosystems. The synergetic resonance between communities thus entails a redefinition of humanity according to, what Gregory Cajete (2000) calls the "mutual, reciprocal principle of Native science" (p. 101). The concept of kuleana situated in an ecological sense of interdependence may provide some answer to Ms. O's question discussed earlier. We can come together as humanity if we relate to each other through our kuleana, our shared responsibility, to our mother earth, who is alive. This new sense of identity based on the kuleana is most cogently expressed in one of the cluster student's reflection: "Although my classmates and I may not share the same views, I feel that subconsciously they know and I know that what we learned in this class can be used to push us in a way that involves alleviating the problem because we can be the generation that will change the way future generations see life as on Earth is."

Postscript

As I mentioned in the beginning, the practical goal of our learning community was to raise the retention rate among the target student population. However, towards the end of the semester it came clear that the retention problem is situated in a much larger socio-economic context. During the semester two Kanaka Maoli students (Ms. O was one) had to drop out the school to work full time due to the financial crisis that their parents suddenly faced. As some of the feedback from students clearly indicated, the learning community motivates them to stay in school. Nevertheless, we are confronted with the harsh economic reality that plagues the target population.

A new administrative leadership (started in 2017) launched the Institute for Engaged Scholarship. Thanks to the Institute's initiative, other faculty members and I have been involved in the joint university and community organizations research project based on the Wai'anae district, an effort that I am hoping will provide a more holistic picture of our target communities. In addition, through the faculty senate, we are currently working to institutionalize service learning as part of the course designation and requesting the permanent office for the service learning. With these new initiatives, the infrastructure is being laid down to host our indigenous based learning community program permanently on our campus.

Acknowledgments

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