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Pacific relationalities in a critical digital space: The Wellington Southerlies as a leadership experience

Kabini Sanga, Martyn Reynolds, Adreanne Ormond, & Pine Southon

Editors: David Taufui Mikato Fa'avae, S. Apo Aporosa, & Keaka Hemi

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Kabini Sanga, Martyn Reynolds, Adreanne Ormond, & Pine Southon
Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka, Wellington,
New Zealand

Abstract

Understanding, articulating and managing relationality, the state of being related, is a central feature of research, teaching and other people-centred matters in the Pacific. Although various groups in this diverse region, Indigenous and otherwise, bring their own concepts and protocols to relationships, physical, social and spiritual connection are salient. Connection is most visible between people but also extends to other entities, including land. Recent events have accelerated the significance of connections constructed in virtual space, such as through conference calls augmented to facilitate presentation and discussion. This phenomenon, relatively new in Pacific academic practice, re-draws attention to relationality in a novel context. In this article we look at one such initiative through the lens of relational leadership to understand the role of leadership in the deliberate curation of a virtual space. The setting is the inaugural Wellington Southerlies virtual tok stori. *This event, attended by over 90 students and academics from across the region, is discussed through the experiences of four of the events' instigators who were also active during the session as co-presenters, chair and* Hautohu Matua *or advisor. The discussion examines how the experience of Pacific orality affected our (re)framing of leadership in a digital space. Our learning points to ways relationality may be invoked, enabled and shaped by dialogic, relational leadership in virtual spaces so as to mediate limitations and construct new possibilities in a world where technology is fast affecting the ways we gather information and communicate one with another.*

Key words

Tok stori; relationality; Pacific oralities; virtual space; leadership

Introduction

Methodologies that rest on relational ontologies (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Kempf, 2017; Sanga & Reynolds, 2019) are structured through, and value, relationships. Aspects of those methodologies indicate, embody and develop the state of relations between people and other entities. Some writers have made links between *vā* as a relational concept and *talanoa* as a methodology (Baice et al., 2021; Prescott,

2008). However, other understandings of relationality and other oralities are also at home in the Pacific. A key aspect of many methodologies that have Pacific roots is face-to-face interaction (Affonso et al., 1996; Sanga et al., 2018; Vaioleti, 2006). Consequently, when circumstances enforce physical separation, methodological renegotiation is required in Pacific contexts. Where this is true, leadership has a role in supporting people as they navigate the shifts from established ways of being to novel experiences such in a virtual or digital space.

The Pacific region is widespread but founded on a desire for connection (Hau'ofa, 1994). Consequently, Pacific academics and others have embraced technological bridges as they have become available for navigating distance. For example, over recent years many learners in the Pacific have experienced distance education mediated through analogue (Kenyon et al., 2000) and, more recently, digital technologies (Gold et al., 2002; Whelan, 2008). Often in education and academia more generally, digital forms of engagement are blended with more personal encounters (Raturi et al., 2011). A new circumstance of enforced separation set to last for an unknown timeframe due to COVID-19 has resulted in the rebalancing of face-to-face and virtual aspects of many academic encounters. Deliberate leadership is a factor in the contextual outcomes of change enforced by COVID-19.

This article examines leadership in relation to one response to the new relational environment in this time of enforced separation: the inaugural Wellington Southerlies (WS) *tok stori*. This digital space was developed as a deliberate act of leadership to embrace the creative relational potential of virtual space at a time where other possibilities remain restricted or closed. Using an approach that leverages the anti-hegemonic and decolonising potential of autoethnography (Houston, 2007), we examine aspects of the framing of leadership in the context of trialing *tok stori* methodology, a Pacific orality, in a virtual mode.

We begin by sketching the significance of Pacific oralities before turning to the context of the inaugural WS digital *tok stori*. We then outline a position on leadership and relate this to authoethnography as methodology. Autoethnographic data is then offered through a set of five themes. Finally, a synthesising discussion of the intersections of digital relational space, orality and leadership framing is offered. This includes speculation about the way relational orality may further be fostered by dynamic leadership in these complex times.

Pacific oralities

In recent years, Pacific academics have begun to re-balance attention to account for what is said in academic engagements and, progressively, the context in which that engagement occurs (McCormick & Johannson-Fua, 2019; Wolfgramm-Foliaki et al., 2018). This move is part of a regionally-actioned reclamation of the authority to speak in and through one's own space (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). Globally, there are many Indigenous conversational methodologies (Kovach, 2010) that invoke specific understandings of relational space, and the Pacific region is blessed with multiple relational oralities (McCormick & Johannson-Fua, 2019) capable of significant academic contributions. When appreciated, these methodologies and the spaces they invoke have the potential to re-shape academic engagement. However, inertia can clutter opportunities for innovative reclamation. The weight of academic tradition (Grosfoguel, 2007) provides a justification for examining the kinds of leadership that lead to decolonising change in virtual environments.

Tok stori as an academic form is an example of a Pacific orality being progressively accepted in academia. *Tok stori* is an oral mode of communication commonly practised in Melanesia (Kabutaulaka, 2015). It has been described as both an ontology and methodology (Sanga et al., 2018). The focus of *tok stori* is dialogical engagement (Evans et al., 2010) in a safe relationally constructed space. The general aim of a *tok stori* session is heightened mutual understanding and enhanced relationships rather than agreement. To this end, positionality is a key aspect of *tok stori*; speakers are regarded as experts on their own experiences. As a methodology, *tok stori* has been used in mediation (Brigg et al., 2015),

leadership development (Sanga et al., 2020), professional learning in education (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019), research (Davidson, 2012), and evaluation (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020).

The presence of *tok stori* has grown in formal academic engagement in the form of conference offerings. For example, at the Oceania International and Comparative Education (OCIES) 2018 conference, hosted at Université Nouvelle Calédonie, Nouméa, some sessions were constructed cooperatively 'in the round' as *tok stori* (Sanga et al., 2018). The following year at Victoria University of Wellington/Te Herenga Waka (VUW), Aotearoa New Zealand, the OCIES 2019 conference hosted a suite of '*talanoa*/*tok stori*/round table' sessions (Cobb et al., 2019; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). An aim of the much-anticipated OCIES Apia 2020 conference was to offer multiple streams of such sessions. However, because of the disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, this aim is yet to be realised. Meanwhile, as the academic world has taken a digital practice turn (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020), the potential of *tok stori* remains.

The Wellington Southerlies

Under the enforced physical separation consequence of COVID-19, we have been participants at many hastily convened digital academic encounters and applaud the leadership and vision involved in their organisation. However, the digital spaces we have experienced (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020) have tended to align with business etiquette (Montgomery, 2019) imagined as a universal set of concerns, or delivery styles that follow the usual presentation/question/answer format. This restricts conversation through concentrating power as an element of performance and runs counter to the momentum of re-placing dialogic Pacific oralities at the heart of academic engagement in the region. As an act of deliberate leadership, the Wellington Southerlies (WS) is a COVID-19 response which names virtual space in Pacific-origin ways, and means, through relational engagement, to maintain impetus towards the flourishing of Pacific ontologies, dialogical oral forms and Pacific academics. The WS series is convened jointly through OCIES and VUW.

Leadership can be viewed through frameworks from the managerial (Blakesley, 2010) to the Indigenous (Khalifa et al., 2019). Here we approach leadership from a constructionist perspective (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) that has as its focus leadership as a process. This sits well in a dialogic ontology, such as that of *tok stori*. In a dialogic understanding, the concept of leadership is concerned with influence, and is relational. Relational leadership arises through social construction at the dynamic interface between ontology and praxis (Henry & Wolfgramm, 2018), the intersection between a relational world view and the way that is made evident. In this understanding, followers and leaders are inextricably linked because they share their social situation (Oc & Bashshur, 2013), and leadership and followership are dialogically related as balanced aspects of a relational self (Ketokivi, 2010). This points attention to the "space between the leader and the followers and … the ways in which they shape each other's identities in this interpersonal space" (Epitropaki et al., 2017, p. 113). This article adopts a relational, dialogical approach to leadership in order to examine leaders' (re)framing of leadership as affected by experience of a virtual *tok stori* space.

Acts of leadership as expressions of praxis shaped the format of the inaugural session of the WS. The session involved: protocols of welcome from the *Hautohu Matua* or lead cultural advisor of the School of Education, VUW; a short recap of a previously circulated paper by two OCIES members; prepared responses from two invited academics; a time for storied sharing; and a further block of time signalled as less formal for continued storying. The session ended with appropriate closing protocol.

In this account, we examine the relational understanding of leadership that sits behind the initiation, structure and conduct of the inaugural session of the WS venture. We do not advocate for the efficacy of these approaches. Instead, we aim to expose the ways relational leadership can initiate, shape and operate in a digital space but also produce tensions. The overall purpose of the discussion is to draw attention to the way culture creates and configures digital space. As a result, focus is drawn away from

the technological aspects of digitally mediated interactions and towards the kinds of choices academics as leaders make and could make in framing virtual engagements. Recognising ourselves as novices in digital enterprise, we also seek to learn by reflecting on tensions in the experience as we honour the multiple thought traditions, oral and relational understandings of the region which the WS series seeks to serve.

Methodology

This article investigates dialogical, relational leadership in the context of the inaugural WS digital *tok stori*. Leadership is investigated here through the accounts of some of those involved in the inception and curation of this specific digital space. These stories, separate and combined, are suitable material for an autoethnography research approach.

Ethnography pays attention to the "cultural elements of personal experience" in which the researcher may "situate themselves, contesting and resisting what they see" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 22). Autoethnography is an approach that attempts to describe and analyse one's personal experience in order to understand the ethnographic or cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). To this end, autoethnography is a self-reflective, generally textual account (Jones, 2007) of how reported experience is shaped by ideological and epistemological assumptions as well as subjective and normative claims (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). In this case, we seek to explore the relationship between personal leadership experience and the curation of a specific virtual space through the analytical lens of relational leadership.

Many kinds of text have been the focus of autoethnographic research. These include narrative accounts fictionalised for ethical reasons (Inckle, 2010), information in an extended novel-like form (Adams et al., 2017), and transcribed oral accounts such as a *tok stori* (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019). Although most autoethnographic enterprises are solo, various collaborative methods have also proved valuable (Chang et al., 2016; Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; MacDonald & Reynolds, 2017). Research that pays attention to relationality is likely to benefit from reflexive autoethnographic texts that are examined in concert. This is because potential sources of discussion are the relationships between the people involved and the texts they produce.

In order to investigate relational leadership through an autoethnographic approach in the context of the WS digital *tok stori*, our methodology focuses on the intersection of three elements: positionality, relationality and context. Positionality foregrounds the positions of those who contribute to data. The concept of positionality can be understood in a number of ways, including through simple insider/outsider dichotomies (Merriam et al., 2001), multiple intersecting categories (Carling et al., 2014), and relationally (Crossa, 2012) Here, consistent with our overall focus, we take account of texts created through the relationships between writers as participants in the inception and conduct of the *tok stori* session, and as researchers. These texts speak of the relationships between intent and what can be learned from experience.

A positional focus feeds a second methodological element: autoethnographic sensibility. Autoethnographic sensibility involves "recognizing that clear-cut distinctions among researchers, research subjects and the objects of research are illusory, and that what we call the research field occupies a space between these overlapping categories" (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1664). In this case, we see relationality playing out in various ways: as an element in the field of leadership, as essential to the context of *tok stori*, and as a feature of our collaborative approach to the WS enterprise. This alignment supports the integration and triangulation of data offered by individuals as useful for the analysis of relational leadership because it forms an autoethnographic corpus.

Finally, context is an aspect of the methodology employed. The context, the inaugural WS virtual *tok stori*, is a response to world events in the form of the restrictions contingent on the COVID-19 pandemic. Methodological attention to context places focus on positionality and relationality as specific

to a place and time. This suggests the validity of approaching data using an approach rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), and the value of investigating the framing of relational leadership through autoethnography in a novel context.

In order to investigate leadership in the context of the inaugural WS virtual *tok stori* through autoethnography, we devised a method that embraces the dialogical aspect of relationality and the multiplicity of our positions as instigators, actors and researchers. During and following an over-coffee debrief after the first WS *tok stori*, as researchers we discussed prompts to generate text from our participant selves. These prompts were then responded to individually over the course of about a week. From the initial responses, two of the four authors produced follow up iterative prompts to further investigate aspects of leadership. Further individual production of text followed.

Analysis was conducted using an adapted Informed Grounded Theory (IGT) (Thornberg, 2012) approach. IGT involves iterative coding informed in advance by sensitising concepts, in this case nodes of positionality, relationality and leadership. Through coding, leadership emerged as the most productive node and thus became the organising strand of this article. The analysis, performed by one of the authors, was member-checked and negotiated with the others.

What follows is a thematic presentation of the results of the IGT analysis of ethnographic data produced following the inaugural WS virtual *tok stori*. Individual attributions of the data are not given because our focus is on forms and acts of relational leadership rather than on leaders. However, some aspects of positionality rendered in the data provide steerage for those more interested in this aspect of the autoethnographic accounts.

Discussion

Five themes are presented in this account of dialogic, relational leadership in the context of the inaugural Wellington Southerlies digital *tok stori*. These are leadership as crisis response, leadership as deliberate shaping, leadership as conscious decolonisation, leadership embodied in process, and leadership as learning. Following the presentation of these themes, a more general discussion regarding leadership, digital space and Pacific oralities is offered.

Leadership as a crisis response

This theme is centred on WS initiators' understandings of leadership as a response to the restrictions placed on academic activities in the Pacific region due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To the initiators, various members of OCIES, VUW, or both organisations, the core of the crisis response was to seek an opportunity to create a new space in which to continue the development of Pacific oralities in academia. In this thinking, speed and deliberateness are central to leadership in the face of existential threat:

> We initiated the WS and implemented it very quickly during a time of crisis, the globally paralysing COVID-19 pandemic.

> COVID-19 had threatened every aspect of our professional lives … OCIES was reduced to a professional community without our usual annual professional conversations … OCIES was faced with a situation requiring important and crisis-oriented leadership.

To unpack understandings of leadership as crisis response further, one WS instigator theorised three contextual dimensions of leadership in the WS development, as response to critical, creative and cohesive tensions. Leadership responds directly to the adverse circumstances of the pandemic through a clear focus on the tension created by threat:

> The WS was our critical response to a critical tension … offering an example of maintaining community conversations adaptively, even in crisis times.

This leadership is rooted in circumstance, practice-based and necessarily reactive.

As described by the same initiator, relational leadership creatively responds to the emotions produced by a critical situation. Creativity in this case involves looking for resources with which to bridge the gap between circumstances and vision. The vision of the WS was framed in association with the relationship-focused vision of OCIES as a society.

> We saw the gap between the OCIES relational vision for professional conversations … in the form of face-to-face conferences and the reality of isolation. Our realisation … created in us an emotional and energetic tension. For us … the only way to relieve this tension is to initiate and implement the WS …

In this view, leadership that responds to creative tension takes account of the past but uses resources to move forward in vision-orientated ways. The actions that arise from critical leadership are creatively configured by the framing of the vision.

The third facet of responsive leadership responds to the need to create cohesion. Cohesive leadership sees disruption as a force that makes visible pre-existing divisions. Where these are seen, opportunities are sought to deliberately enhance cohesion and to exceed that encouraged through previous practices.

> Tensions can be understood as opportunities for and means of building newer communities. Harnessing tension cohesively … brings and holds people together. I wanted to use WS as a launching pad to demonstrate leadership by mediating tension intentionally and purposefully. I wanted OCIES and Vaka Pasifiki, VUW and Solomon Islands Research Mentoring group to enlarge their embrace of my other professional networks as actions of leadership which are needed in these new times.

As described here, leadership that responds to cohesive tension has high tolerance of open-ended or unresolved situations. It involves looking at the limitations of contexts, practices and visions as areas that can be re-thought and positively addressed through new developments.

Turning to digital space, leadership as response to crisis involves mediating between vision-framed relational practice, the desire for enhanced cohesion and potential resources. Virtual space is one such resource. Calling a virtual relational space into being through an invitation is an act of creative leadership. One instigator understood the virtual world in this way:

> There are many rooms that we could visit but we only come to be in the ones where we open the doors. So, it's as if we conjure a space into being from its potential state to an actual state through the magic of an invitation, an agreement to meet, a connection and so on. Then the potential becomes as actual in the virtual.

An invitation to virtual space is designed to leverage the bridging potential of digital activity. It initiates shared space so that a wide range of people can

> learn from each other, develop closer relationships with each other, focus on commonalities in relation to distinctiveness, and gain confidence in themselves as people, in their cultural wealth within the academic world, and through the enjoyment of challenge.

To summarise, in the experience of the WS initiators, leadership as a crisis response in the context of COVID-19 includes the following: taking timely action in the face of an existential threat, identifying and responding to the various tensions produced by circumstances, and offering an invitation into a virtual space of relational collaboration that reflects the relational cohesion previously pursued in physical spaces.

Leadership as deliberate shaping

The theme of leadership as deliberate shaping focuses on the WS initiators' explorations of the kind of space required to pursue an inclusive, relational vision. This theme is premised on the idea that potential virtual spaces are value-less, but become value-soaked when actualised. The theme draws attention to the ways values can be made apparent in the leadership-followership relational space. Three aspects of leadership as shaping are presented: inclusiveness, naming and relationality.

One aspect of leadership as deliberate shaping is visible through the way the instigators reflected on ethnicity and inclusiveness. The broad terms Melanesian, Māori and European give a sense of the varied origins of the WS instigators. The relevance ascribed to ethnicity by one WS instigator is as follows:

> I take the position that ethnicity/race/culture/nationality, whatever the person wants to name it, is still significant inside or outside the digital space because it shapes the person that is coming to the digital space.

In the inaugural WS session, the instigators were aware of the potential of making their varied origins a visible part of the WS:

> The inclusion of a multi-ethnic team 'fronting' the WS [is important] … given the significance of the ideas that: plurality is valuable; positionality is significant; but coming together as a community is the way we wish to navigate into the future.

A second aspect of shaping present in the data involves naming. In the Pacific, naming is significant for the way the stories, intents and vision of those who gift a name remain present when it is used (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017). Naming the WS space as *tok stori* was perceived by the instigators as a space-shaping mechanism to advance a particular kind of relationality.

> Tok stori space is relational. People centred … Everybody who came in was welcome. Everyone in the space was a legitimate participant. We were committed to being good stewards of people in acknowledgement and honouring their wisdom and contributions. We wanted to focus on people and not on the knowledge content of our webinar topic.

As implied in the naming, the premise of the WS space anticipates relational commitment:

> I saw it as an opportunity to be with people that uplifted, were committed to their community and elevated each other … it was mainly the spirit of the people that attracted me. I wanted to collapse our difference … [to focus on] our cultural commonalities because I knew together, our worldviews would support each other and make our argument and contributions richer, stronger and deeper.

This account ascribes value both to position and to the commitment of participants to pursue a spirit of mutual support and shared exploration.

The WS instigators framed their leadership in response to the WS opportunity as deliberate shaping and hope that would operate in the leadership-followership space by the signalling of values such as inclusiveness and the prioritising of relationality, and through the power of naming.

Leadership as conscious decolonisation

A further element of leadership present in the reflections of WS initiators involves conscious decolonisation. This is a specific aspect of how virtual space can work to support or undercut hegemonic practices (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020). An overall aim was the advancement in academia of Pacific oralities as elements of dialogic, relational ontologies. The reflections of instigators make clear the leadership value afforded to deliberate decolonisation strategies.

One way the WS instigators conceptualised conscious decolonisation is to imagine virtual space as responding to local realities. For example, instigators explored the WS space as anchored in the cultural space of Aotearoa New Zealand, marked by opening and closing protocols.

> I view this type of intellectual activity as decolonisation transformation … Protocols were mainly drawn from chairing academic sessions and working within the Māori community … from my own community where we organise and hold ceremony and activities that call for a sense of presence, reading what the situation requires as it unfolds and adjusting to it as is necessary …

Viewing digital space as anchored undercuts universalist thinking that erases the cultural decisions sometimes portrayed as business-as-usual in the digital realm (Montgomery, 2019).

A second strand of decolonisation is portrayed in WS instigators' accounts of the shared ownership imagined for the virtual *tok stori*.

> Because the WS was focussed on Oceanic relationality, we were democratising the space. We were making that space as accessible and as fair as possible to everybody; allowing people to be themselves and participating confidently, freely and authoritatively from their own experiences.

> The WS space is anchored in the intellectual tradition of tok stori: storied engagement through which learning may take place. The content of the session as well as its mode privileges orality and attempts at moderating pre-existing hierarchical relationships in digital spaces.

By framing the inaugural WS session through a discursive Pacific oral form, *tok stori*, an intention of the instigators was that the overwhelming allocation of time, representation and power to certain people, the basis of some other academic traditions, could be superseded. Consequently, the audibility of multiple voices could erode hegemonic perspectives. Although not guaranteed, the instigators hoped that an expectation of participation would come with attendees as a result of the signalling involved.

A third strand of decolonisation is the admission of emotion as a valued and planned aspect of the WS encounter. This intent was described by an instigator thus:

> People could be as natural as they wanted to, repeating themselves in their accounts, bringing humour, making people laugh and cry and or receiving spontaneous feedback freely from others.

Storytelling invites the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental (Thomas, 2005). In *tok stori*, because a story, narrative or otherwise is a personal account, emotion and enjoyment are key aspects (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019; Van Heekeren, 2014). At times, academic encounters privilege notions of objectivity that discount the significance of emotional engagement (Smith, 1999). However, the WS session was intended to involve

> hearing the way you experience the world validated, watching and learning from scholarly articulation of ideas that questioned and challenged dominant western viewpoints.

Validation occurs when experience is revisited through the positional accounts of others. Feeling validated is emotional because feelings are essential to how we experience connection in a relational ontology (Fasavalu & Reynolds, 2019).

In the accounts of WS instigators, leadership framed as decolonisation involves deliberate shaping to model inclusiveness, encourage shared ownership and privilege emotions in relational encounters. These aspects of the WS were intended by the instigators to undercut notions of universality, objectivity and exclusivity.

Leadership embodied in process

In the accounts of WS instigators, the procedure of the inaugural WS session included aspects of relational leadership intended to embody a safe, inclusive, virtual *tok stori* space. Some aspects of the WS process have already been touched on. These include protocols of welcome also mirrored by protocols of closure, reflecting the *manaakitanga* (care) of the Indigenous community of the co-hosting organisation, VUW. The care for names is an element in this:

> I practised the names of the various people for days before, so I would say them right because I didn't want to dishonour through botching anyone's name and have this seen as a sign of not taking time and effort.

In addition, timing and general conduct are aspects of the WS process understood by initiators to embody the spirit of *tok stori* as a Pacific relational ontology as a frame for a virtual encounter.

The WS instigators reveal awareness of the potential of digital technology to exercise tight control over discursive proceedings:

> We have some control over digital rights—who is muted for example, over protocol, for instance by setting out an agenda and inviting people to speak in a particular order, and in how we start and end.

As discussed above, instigators understood the way they used this potential to prepare an interactive, inclusive space in which to value storying, position and Pacific intellectual traditions. An aspect of this deliberateness was to allocate limited time to those whose paper grounded the discussion. In a context where the instigators had experienced virtual spaces run on different lines, this involved

> the removal of the need for a presentation that concentrated time and power in the hands of authors [and was] … achieved by a flipped classroom model.

As a consequence,

> as presenters … we used as little time as possible to talk about our topic in order to allow for others to participate. We encouraged different people to speak.

The result was experienced by an instigator as follows:

> Time was centred on the community responses. This seemed to me to be a way of looking to the community for their thoughts rather than elevating the writer of the paper. I enjoyed that aspect of listening to the thoughts of the wider community.

Further, as indicated through the name *tok stori*, the instigators aimed procedure to embody a discursive approach to life in the encouragement of participating as storying in

> a move away from academic question and answer formats.

This shift was intended to

> respect tok stori as a form of engagement—moving away from Q and A to storying—especially enhanced by 'informal' continuation section.

This final section of the inaugural WS virtual *tok stori* took place after the formal closure to accommodate any potential reticence of some attendees, perhaps students or junior academics, to be active participants during more formal segments. In the event, this less formal section remained well attended.

Finally, the instigators understood leadership re-framed in a virtual context to include the significance of inclusive language, paying respect and inviting diverse groups to participate using some of the possibilities of the digital platform.

> From our opening words, all our body language, and from the beginning of the WS, we kept repeating ourselves that everybody who came in were important**.**

> I understand that the way one dresses, speaks and addresses those within the session all contribute toward creating a situation of trust and honouring the knowledge been shared

> Diversity was addressed by the origins of those involved: Māori, Solomon Islands, Australia, Tonga. Also, attempts were made to have among speakers and story tellers, males and females, established and emergent academics, Island and metropolitan domiciled.

In the context of the inaugural session, WS instigators understood leadership embodied in process to include the way time is allocated, language is used and care is expressed as they relate to how relationality is framed.

Leadership as learning

Relational leadership is dialogic by nature. Intent sits behind acts of leadership as response to crisis, deliberate shaping, decolonisation and embedded in process. In a relational enterprise, risk-taking and vulnerability accompanies the relinquishment of the kinds of control that habitually structure academic encounters, such as conference presentations. Relational leadership involves welcoming the tensions and discomforts involved in new negotiated situations as much as the joys and affirmations that also come. In this section, the reflections of WS instigators provide a ground for the discussion of tensions inherent in an endeavour such as a virtual *tok stori*. Three tensions are discussed that relate to inclusivity/exclusivity, being known/unknown, and face-to-face/virtual *tok stori*.

As discussed above, the instigators sought to signal inclusivity by making visible the broad range of ethnic identities of the WS instigators in the inaugural WS virtual *tok stori*. Inclusivity was value that also called for invitations to be sent through a range of avenues to academics across the region (and beyond) notwithstanding any institutional or society-based allegiances. Consequently, it was not clear who might feel at home. This applies to instigators:

> In meeting a community I did not know, I had imagined that I would sit on the outside of it and observe as an outsider …

> Perhaps with those … who may have had experiences of judgemental or impatient Palagi perspectives, being 'white' may have been an issue. I certainly felt this possibility.

However, the WS instigators also felt this as a possible tension for participants:

> Given the focus on Oceanic orality and the located topic of the day, I imagined that the Australian and New Zealand participants might not be really free to engage. I had thought that some might even feel out of place. I never knew if my doubts were affirmed.

> During the WS there seemed to be an Indigenous/non-indigenous binary underpinning some comments … in the end I resolved this … with the help of a wantok's comments about 'we are us' by thinking that we were the WS through presence and contribution of time and willingness to listen and learn.

This tension reveals that leadership that aims at inclusivity based on relationality can be in tension with exclusivity based on categories of one kind or another. However, balance is provided in instigator's reflections by feelings of belonging. For instance:

I found myself drawn in, listening to the experiences people were relaying … The stories of sharing were intriguing, and I related to them easily and their stories resonated with me.

A related tension is that of safety/vulnerability. *Tok stori* involves a space intended to be safe, but can a *virtual tok* stori provide this? One instigator reflected:

I asked myself, "Would all participants feel free in the WS tok stori space?"

The emotions promoted by this tension were balanced for instigators by overall experience:

My thoughts were that I had been in the company of wholesome people that were committed to their culture and community … People seemed to speak without personal ego, generosity of spirit and honestly.

Safety and formality can be related to safety. The difference between the formal initial and the less formal concluding sections of the programme can be thought of as two levels of *tok stori*, organised to provide a step-down to enable some attendees, such as students, to become active participants:

I had anticipated the majority of participants to leave at the hour mark and only 'friends' to remain for a bit. I had also expected that new space to be generally silent during the open tok stori time and later that people would engage easily or freely.

In the event, the instigators found that the session extended beyond the dual time frame as positive relationality developed:

The session went an hour over the time it was meant to finish, and I was comfortable in letting it do that because I felt at ease with those who I did not know but felt some kindred purpose with.

A third tension, between face-to-face/virtual *tok stori* is also present in the reflections of WS instigators. This can be seen in procedural details:

One experienced tension for me related to the Chair's calls, shortening the tok stori of two prominent Pacific leaders … In a face-to-face tok stori, doing so would have been a little more difficult to execute. In a digital space, it did happen.

However, the tension was also felt more generally:

This tension is primarily promoted by what is missing: eye contact, acceptable lengths of silence, closeness … This tension is as if we are attempting to keep the spirit of tok stori alive in a situation where key ingredients are missing.

I felt tensions relating to our lack of experience in this unexplored space; our unclear rules to follow …

When considered by the WS instigators as leadership, these vulnerabilities provided learning about the self as a relational being and about *tok stori*:

We learnt not to prescribe any modus operandi that was based on a face-to-face tok stori space. Virtual tok stori is an open space.

We had learnt to adapt our engagements … It was easier to collectively own the new space. We allowed ourselves to make mistakes. We did not even call these mistakes. We referred to these as lessons for learning.

As is clear from this account of leadership (re-)framed as learning in the context of the inaugural WS *tok stori*, not all the intents of the other four aspects of leadership discussed above were resolved clearly and positively for the WS instigators. However, consistent with a dialogical, relational ontology,

ideas, people and practices emerge from the instigators' reflections as transformed as a result of deliberate actions, the willingness to be vulnerable, and a desire to embrace and learn from tensions. The benefits of this posture can be great:

> [We experienced] the ways tok stori can adapt and take on new forms in the digital space [and] the transformation of the world through making a Pacific understanding of the world more accessible, available and legitimised.

Concluding comments

In conclusion, we offer three responses to the question: How has the WS experience of Pacific orality affected our (re)framing of leadership in the virtual space?

First, by highlighting orality, we have countered the apparent paramount status of written knowledge in leadership discourses. This has the effect of exposing a hegemonic perspective of the expert (on leadership) as a meritocracy, the prerogative of certain individuals to the exclusion of others. Further, we have been able to offer approaches towards the flattening of relationships between leadership actors, affirmed individually and together. As a result, leaders are encouraged to engage together by embracing emotion within in the digital space through their storied lives as leaders.

Second, the WS experience has reaffirmed our understanding of leadership as creative and emergent. These are natural properties of any human relationships. By using critical tension creatively, intentionally and in a timely manner, we sought to counter the leader-follower hierarchical relationship so common in the academy. As a countering move, our focus on embedding people as people through their own leadership stories encourages people to be experts and to embrace the creativity that can result. We experienced leadership encounters as authentic, storied and subject to multiple and rich expressions.

Third, the WS digital experience points to the importance of understanding more fully and deeply the process of leadership. Although some writers have paid attention to the digital space through the concept of *vā* (Enari and Matapo, 2020), *tok stori* and leadership provide the context here. The shift to digital space made increasingly apparent the oral, informal, multiple and communal aspects of the *tok stori* process. As a consequence, we could more easily see what stages or which aspects of the leadership process were being applied by us and others as tools of domination or enablement. These observations helped us to deliberately (re)shape leadership norms. In our case, we highlighted inclusivity, naming as *tok stori* and relationality. This commitment to the process of leadership supports a framing of leadership which tolerates uncertainties, tensions and complexities because it sees leadership as learning.

As time goes on, Pacific academics might expect to invest more time in virtual encounters. In turn, where leadership is understood as a process, virtual spaces are likely to grow in significance as leadership-followership relational spaces. As a consequence, the thrust of this article, that deliberateness and self-examination are significant elements in the framing of leadership as it configures virtual spaces, gains salience. As academics we must continue to seek ethical ways to progress our goals. In a Pacific context these include valuing Pacific oralities, enhancing people as people, advocating for the centrality of relationality in academic encounters, and decolonisation more generally. We invite others to build on this initial tentative theorisation of leadership (re)framing in virtual space through their own inventiveness, creativity and celebrations of what our communities have to offer. The potential of the digital practice turn (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020) demands our commitment and attention.

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