

PROJECT
REPORT

Media Arts on a Marine Research Station: Reflections on a Storytelling Course in Support of Native Hawaiian Communities

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Abstract

Storytelling via digital media can effectively spotlight pressing societal and environmental concerns. In Hawai'i, these issues encompass addressing climate change impacts and amplifying Indigenous viewpoints within academic contexts. This report discusses "Communicating Creativity," a course offered by the School of Communication and Information at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. This four-week summer intensive course was part of Nā Ko'oko'o, a Hawaiian leadership program for Native Hawaiian students and other students with strong commitments to Native Hawaiian communities. Students enrolled in the course spent one week at the

Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology (HIMB) on Moku o Lo'e, Kāne'ohe Bay, O'ahu. The course aimed to guide students in creating media content (filmmaking) rooted in Hawaiian epistemologies and praxis, bridging Indigenous knowledge with Western scientific perspectives through art, creativity, and visual communication in order to promote interdisciplinary dialogue. Additionally, it featured "talk story" sessions with Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners and HIMB faculty and students, exploring the interface between traditional knowledge and conventional science. This report reflects on lessons learned during the course and underscores the potential of experiential learning to drive socio-ecological change.

Introduction: "Communicating Creativity"

The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's (UHM) College of Social Sciences Native Hawaiian leadership initiative, Nā Ko'oko'o (College of Social Sciences, 2021), offered an experiential learning course in Summer 2022 titled "COM 489: Communicating Creativity." The Nā Ko'oko'o program started in 2016 and is designed for Native Hawaiian students and other students with strong commitments to Native Hawaiian communities. "Communicating Creativity" was the second of two courses chosen for this cohort offered through the School of Communication and Information at UHM—their first time hosting this program—and was open to all College of Social Sciences students. This class aimed to explore the role of creative visual storytelling in cultivating connections to Native Hawaiian perspectives, as a way to effectively communicate alternative means of solving important challenges we face as a society today. "Communicating Creativity" was designed by Professor Patricia Amaral as part of Nā Ko'oko'o's mission to "clarify their *kuleana* (responsibility, privilege) and to see their education in the context of uplifting the land and people" (College of Social Sciences, 2021).

To incorporate diverse perspectives, the author list for this report includes Patricia Amaral, the instructor for "Communicating Creativity" and Program leader of Nā Ko'oko'o 2022, Reanna Salvador, a graduate student participant of the course, and Lisa McManus, the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology (HIMB) faculty sponsor. "Communicating Creativity" was developed and taught by Prof. Amaral, while Dr. McManus facilitated connections with HIMB researchers and provided guidance on course logistics. As an associate professor of Communication and child of the Hawaiian diaspora, Prof. Amaral intended for students to incorporate communication practices within the field of Media Arts in order to support Native Hawaiian causes. Her pedagogical goals were to shift prevailing Western paradigms towards Indigenous frameworks that prioritize relationships with the land (*āina*-based learning) through visual communication theory and practices. Prof. Amaral views film as a form of visual and oral storytelling that is in alignment with the Native Hawaiian oral tradition, and she also believes that experiential learning is in alignment with Indigenous sensibilities. The Hawaiian proverb, *Ma ka*

hana ka 'ike (in working one learns) encapsulates this experiential course philosophy (Pukui, 1983). Dr. McManus, an assistant professor at the Hawai'i Institute of Marine Biology (HIMB), conducts research to understand the impacts of climate change on marine ecosystems. She also aims to make marine science more accessible in support of the University's commitments to Native Hawaiian place-based learning. Reanna Salvador is a graduate of the Communication MA program. She enrolled in "Communicating Creativity" in Summer 2022.

The four-week "Communicating Creativity" course integrated one week of instruction and video/audio recording at HIMB, a marine field station on Moku o Lo'e in Kāne'ohe Bay, O'ahu. To facilitate an immersive place-based format, the cohort of four students (including Salvador) and Prof. Amaral stayed in HIMB dorms for a total of five nights. All students were part of the College of Social Sciences and one self-identified as Native Hawaiian. Typically, Nā Ko'oko'o programs are hosted at sites where students work closely with community members, including *kūpuna* (elders). However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, HIMB was selected as an alternate site. Students learned about the island's unique history and status as a marine research station that is accessible only by boat. Moku o Lo'e was owned by Hawaiian *ali'i* (members of the ruling class) until the 1930s. The island was then privately owned, and was frequently visited by politicians and celebrities. In 1948, a portion of the island was donated to the University of Hawai'i for use as a marine laboratory and, by the 1990s, the entire island became the site for HIMB (Klieger et al., 2007). Prof. Amaral provided each student with a copy of Paul Christiaan Klieger's 2007 book, *Moku o Lo'e: A History of Coconut Island*, so that they could learn about the island prior to their visit. At Moku o Lo'e, students practiced their media production skills to create short creative films in promotion of civic engagement while incorporating Native Hawaiian epistemologies. The course culminated in a media showcase that was open to the public, mentors, and College of Social Sciences administration.

With some grounding in Indigenous perspectives and emphasis on uplifting Native Hawaiian communities, "Communicating Creativity" provided students with an opportunity to develop technical media and storytelling capacities while discerning their values and

responsibilities as future change-makers. The global media landscape has been heavily influenced by Western countries, particularly the United States and Europe (Turan et al., 2009; Stoddard et al., 2014). Thus, a primary course objective was to encourage students to explore alternative worldviews with digital media tools. Students were encouraged to practice *kilo* (keen observation) through activities such as meditative walks while video-taping and daily journaling sessions to reflect on their recording experiences. Students had the opportunity to showcase the relationship they built with Moku o Loé by creating a short film with the *āina* as its target audience. These activities aimed to prompt students to reconsider prevailing Western paradigms in order to embrace Native Hawaiian perspectives and communicate these perspectives through visual storytelling. The second course objective was to help students clarify their individual *kuleana* (responsibility, privilege) and become open to experiencing new ways of observation through the hands-on application of visual communication theory. An important requirement was that students in Nā Koókoó set *pono* (just, proper) intentions and be mindful in their actions throughout the course.

We include quotes throughout this paper from reflections presented by the students during the course *hō'ike* (final media showcase) in July 2022 and from feedback that was solicited in May 2024 for this report. The authors have permission from the students to use their real names.

Course Successes

"Communicating Creativity" utilized an immersive, creative and skills-based format to connect students with Hawaiian perspectives centered on relationships with the land. Students and instructors alike enjoyed their time on the island, developing personal connections and honing technical filmmaking capacities. The hands-on experiences on Moku o Loé emphasized relating to the land, and through creative visual media production techniques, students were also given a unique opportunity to explore their leadership potential. Students connected with local filmmakers, cultural stewards, and marine scientists on the island to expand their perspectives on utilizing

creativity in promotion of social change relevant to Native Hawaiian communities. HIMB, as a UHM stakeholder invested in Native Hawaiian place-based learning, willingly provided facilities—including lodging and classroom space—for holding the week-long Moku o Loé intensive course. This was significant, because many University of Hawai'i students and local residents have not had the opportunity to visit the island—although we note that HIMB has offered public education programs for over 20 years, with significant investment (e.g., faculty and staff hires) to support this work. HIMB continues to enhance community involvement and education as a core value in their strategic planning. Also part of the HIMB strategic plan is collaboration with other University of Hawai'i units on initiatives that center on Indigenous perspectives; this alignment has been approved by the Institute's administrators. Lastly, the small class size, early summer term scheduling and coordination with an HIMB researcher (Dr. McManus) facilitated planning and logistics.

A key assignment was the praxis activity, an experimental filming assignment where students used *kilo* to explore new ways of seeing through creative gathering of media assets (video and audio recording) and editing. The praxis component challenged students to experience the creative process in a holistic manner—spiritually, emotionally, physically—and to create media works presented to Moku o Loé itself as the intended audience. This assignment was designed to foster stronger observation and visual storytelling capacities, linking creativity with Indigenous science. (To access the videos, see Supporting Information at the end of this report.) While some students were resistant to this approach, all gained new experience in an unconventional media creation method, which they were unlikely to experience on their own or in other media and communication classes. For example, one student shared the following comments:

For me personally the trip to Moku o Loé was very impactful. I've always wanted to go but didn't know the full history until going there. It also brought great sadness to learn how the island was transferred from one *haole* (foreigner) hand to another. So while I was there I felt like I made a bond with the island, and in my video I really felt like

the island didn't want me to go, but understood that I had to. During my *mo'okū'auhau* (genealogy) research, I recently discovered why I felt a strong bond. One of the siblings to Queen Pauahi is my *kūpuna*. I truly believe that our *kūpuna* speak to us in various ways, including through the land. I feel that had I not gone there, maybe my *kūpuna* wouldn't have had a better opportunity than on Moku o Lo'é to speak to me and help me fill the gaps in my *mo'okū'auhau*. Helping me to find out where I came from, my identity, why I am the way I am, and why I feel the need to fight for Hawai'i.

Essential to the course were informal "talk story" discussions with local Native Hawaiian media professionals, HIMB researchers, academic administrators, and cultural experts. These insightful dialogues showcased how different Western and Indigenous perspectives could be presented, discussed, and applied in various careers. The instructors attempted to facilitate compassionate, open, judgment-free spaces for discussing complex, emotionally charged questions of identity and purpose. Specifically, we discussed the relationship between conventional and Indigenous scientific approaches.

Some students gained unexpected but profound clarification of their core values and duties as future agents of social change. Salvador used her experience building relationship with *āina* (land, place) on Moku o Lo'é in her thesis research methods. Partnering with a community organization on O'ahu, she regularly returned to the place of her research and established deeper connections to the area and people working within the organization than would have been possible with a non-collaborative research approach. Another student wrote,

One of my core values in all that I do is to always seek *kanaka* (Native Hawaiian) input and to always open my ears to the knowledge and wisdom the *kūpuna* around me have to offer. This core value has been solidified in me by my experience as a Nā Ko'oko'o student and specifically in our experience visiting Moku o Lo'é.

The course culminated in a *hō'ike* where students presented final works to each other and invited guests, including community members involved in the course and administrators. As part of the *hō'ike* and representing

the final class requirement, students introduced their films and explained their creative process to the audience both in person and over Zoom. This practice of sharing taught the students to reflect, articulate and summarize their own learning journey. Additionally, engaging with the audience to receive constructive feedback and discuss their projects was a valuable experience.

Areas for Improvement

The course "Communicating Creativity" offered students an innovative experiential format that exposed them to Hawaiian perspectives and epistemologies that challenged prevailing notions of media production. However, Prof. Amaral notes certain areas for refinement to better prepare students for engaging with Indigenous perspectives. Most students struggled with the creation of media projects that incorporated relationships with *āina*. Some felt resistance to and were dismissive of adopting an unfamiliar non-Western worldview; some also felt conflicted about their identities as non-Hawaiians. The intention of this course was to move students away from the Western constructs associated with filmmaking towards a more creative and holistic approach. To help the students be more open-minded for these assignments and to ease discomfort, the instructors could have provided more clarity about the intended learning outcomes centered on expanding worldviews and experimenting with different creative perspectives during the pre-production, production, and post-production processes. Furthermore, additional emphasis on the power of media production to amplify Native Hawaiian voices, facilitate civic engagement, and support community endeavors might have provided a better understanding of the potential for this kind of work. To support this, in a future iteration of the class the instructors could prioritize assignments where students view more projects created by Native Hawaiian filmmakers before staying at HIMB. Additionally, having more experiences on Moku o Lo'é before the class started might have allowed more time to build technical and emotional preparedness. Nevertheless, the course cultivated deeper observation and storytelling skills linking scientific observation with creative communication.

While students benefited from the group discussions, HIMB researchers sometimes shared cautiously. There

were a few reasons for this. These meetings were intentionally unstructured to allow the conversation to evolve organically, but there were occasional moments where no one wanted to be the first to share. Having a moderator or a set of prompts for each guest might have allowed for a more fluid discussion. Some hesitation in speaking may have been due to discomfort surrounding some of the topics for the researchers, because they addressed the role of Indigenous perspectives in science; some scientists may believe that Indigenous wisdom and spirituality are incompatible with conventional science (Bassalla, 1967; Makondo & Thomas, 2018). In the future, additional meetings with time for casual conversation with researchers could lead to more open exchange, which is particularly important if a future course's primary objective is science communication. ("Communicating Creativity" was focused more on experimentation with different perspectives.) Additionally, pairing course participants with HIMB students before the official site visit could foster more trusting, familiar relationships.

Overall, greater coordination among UH programs is vital for ensuring that educational offerings support the institution's stated duty to support UHM's Strategic Plan to become a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning (Native Hawaiian Place of Learning Advancement Office, 2019). Administratively, uncertainties surrounding COVID-19 and difficulties in procuring proper media equipment initially delayed recruitment, compressing preparation and resulting in a smaller class size. Furthermore, the ideal set of prerequisite coursework would include an introductory media course to build technical skills and an introductory Hawaiian Studies course to provide background on Hawaiian perspectives. With those prerequisite courses, "Communicating Creativity" could better emphasize creative approaches in support of amplifying Native Hawaiian voices and engaging in civic issues. Moreover, recruitment that targets students eager to apply Indigenous perspectives to their own scholarship could help assemble a group that is motivated to integrate the skills and knowledge that this class provides. Increased logistical support from the College of Social Sciences and HIMB could ease the administrative burdens that fell to the faculty involved in this course; these burdens deter the implementation of similar innovative programming. While HIMB and the School of Communication are

from different UHM Schools, supporting partnerships with other programs is an important way for HIMB to build and maintain connections with colleagues on the main campus, which is located approximately 14 miles away. Additionally, these partnerships allow HIMB to expand public access and awareness of the research and educational programs offered on Moku o Lo'é. In general, structural support through funding, public relations, and curricular mainstreaming of Indigenous methodologies remain imperative if the University is to actualize its commitments to Native Hawaiian communities through student development.

Conclusions

Student feedback indicated that "Communicating Creativity" provided them with a uniquely impactful opportunity for grappling with Indigenous ways of knowing through building a relationship with the land. One student stated,

Being on HIMB, not only did I get to learn from our *kumu* (teacher) and *kūpunas*, but I learned to let the island [itself] tell me its own story... Two years later I hold on tightly to everything I learned during my experience with Nā Ko'oko'o.

Another student shared,

My time working with Nā Ko'oko'o and HIMB stands out as one of the most memorable experiences during my time at UH. It was incredibly rewarding to engage with Native Hawaiian culture in a way that allowed me to express my creativity and passion for media, while supporting these communities and their values.

Overall, by personally engaging Moku o Lo'é's complex history and modern uses, students gained appreciation for Native Hawaiian perspectives while honing technical media skills.

Despite the clear benefits of this approach, offering field-based experiential learning programming with cultural components strains existing staffing models. Providing cameras, editing laptops, other filmmaking gear, and transportation also involves major investments often beyond standard departmental budgets. Moreover, in order

to meaningfully indigenize curriculum, faculty must devote extensive effort to developing innovative courses, which current tenure metrics—at the University, School, and Departmental levels—largely neglect. We note, however, that there are ongoing efforts to revise these metrics across different programs at UHM.

Continued conversations around reforming faculty evaluation systems to reward public scholarship and service more comparably to publications, awarded grants, and other scholarship metrics (e.g., Özkan-Haller, 2021) seem prudent, given the University's stated emphasis on becoming a Native Hawaiian Place of Learning. Actualizing this by diversifying offerings to highlight Indigenous worldviews demands implementing support structures to facilitate the development of similar experiential courses. Until better technical/logistical assistance and value alignment mechanisms take shape, traditional university standards prevent fully delivering the demonstrated potential of enriching Western pedagogies by bridging cultural heritage and scientific insight.

Nevertheless, students gained profound clarity of personal purpose and community responsibility during "Communicating Creativity." This course thus provided a promising template demonstrating that place-based creative media production can help actualize the University's commitments to Indigenous knowledge, provided adequate structural backing allows such programming to substantially expand.

To end this report, we want to share the following *'ike kūpuna mana'ō* (knowledge infused with ancestral wisdom) from Nālani Minton, Director, 'IKE AO PONO at UH Mānoa, gifted to the Nā Ko'oko'ō cohort at the *hō'ike* in July 2022:

Each of us learns from the *'āina* how to go deeper into the understanding of who we are, but also of what the great potential is when spirit is recognized in all living things as speaking to us. And for us to be able to respond, we have to know that truth so deeply within us.

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Supporting Information

Student project videos can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11168419>.

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