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Show Don't Tell: A University of Hawai'i Self-Study on Using ePortfolio versus Thesis as the Master's Degree Capstone Assessment

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University of Hawai'i instructors share graduate candidates' perspectives on ePortfolios as a culminating master's degree assessment in the Pacific-Focused (PACMED) Program. The PACMED Program is a place-based and culturally responsive online master's degree program for candidates across the Pacific region. The ePortfolio is being tested as an instructional intervention to replace traditional master thesis papers as a place-based and culturally responsive assessment. EPortfolios provide a detailed description of candidates' achievements aligned to local professional teaching standards. The authors will discuss exploratory self-study findings of ePortfolio use including a) place-based collaboration b) documentation of local professional teaching standards, c) validation of place based and culturally-responsive projects, d) citation of relevant research literature, e) integration of instructional technology, f) development of candidates' metacognition and efficacy, g) integration across academic STEM disciplines with place and culture, and h) promotion of candidates through evaluation and accreditation processes.

Keywords: ePortfolio assessment, professional teaching standards, indigenous teacher education, place-based education, culturally-responsive education

Introduction

The University of Hawai'i (UH) PACMED leadership team is conducting institutional self-assessment (SIA) to describe the perspectives of graduate candidates on using a place-based ePortfolio instead of a traditional thesis as the culminating capstone requirement for a master's degree. Institutional self-assessment is the intentional process of collecting and analyzing data to measure the effectiveness of academic initiatives, such as ePortfolio assessment, to inform decision-making (Alan, 2016). The introduction describes the context of the UH PACMED Program and the Republic of Marshall Islands to provide a critical background to this self-study.

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PACMED Program

PACMED is a Master of Education degree program based in the College of Education at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (UHM). Candidates receive a UHM degree after completing thirty-course credits (approximately ten courses) and presenting their culminating ePortfolio. PACMED hires place-based Indigenous instructors and coordinators who partner with Hawaii-based instructors for all courses. Most courses are delivered entirely online, but some courses have face-to-face components. Online courses utilize advancements that introduce or build upon the candidates' existing knowledge of technology. Zoom and Google Classroom are two of the most utilized platforms in the program.

Zoom is used for synchronous class meetings and group discussion, while Google Classroom works well for asynchronous class activities. The program has four required and six flexible elective course requirements to meet local professional development needs. Courses are tailored to each cohort and recognize the importance of *place*. Courses also integrate science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) to address real Pacific problems at the request of partners. PACMED currently serves candidates in Hawai'i, American Samoa, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau. Since 2018, PACMED has found a way to balance the place based learning needs and cultures of the islands where it operates with the requirements of a tier-one American research university (Zuercher, Yeung, Tauiliili, & Sanders, 2024).

Context: Republic of the Marshall Islands

In the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), PACMED continues to evolve and adapt. Three cohorts from this area have already successfully graduated from the PACMED program. However, before discussing the RMI cohort, having some historical context on RMI would be helpful. Nestled in the Micronesia region in the Pacific, RMI consists of 29 atolls and five islands (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003). Two atolls are the site of catastrophic events continuing to shape RMI and its complicated relations with the United States (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003). Before independence, the RMI was overseen as a U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands or 'TTPI' (Heine, 2002). Although RMI has been independent since 1986, colonization continues to be felt in many ways, including through its free association status with the United States. The Compact of Free Association (Compact), signed in 1986, 1994, and 2003, provides defense and funding with attachments, influence, and imprints (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003; Heine, 2002). The Compact agreement recognizes RMI's autonomy over internal and diplomatic matters, including economic oversight and educational policy (Heine, 2002). Between 1986-2001, the Compact provided RMI with approximately $1 billion of funding (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003). The latest amendment expired in 2023 and was renegotiated and signed in the fall of 2023 for another twenty years (Underwood, 2003, U.S. State Department, 2024). The U.S. also leases Kwajalein Atoll for its military base. With few natural resources, other

funding sources are derived from RMI's handicrafts, tuna processing, copra, and tourism (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003).

The Marshallese are facing dire challenges of climate change as their atolls are disappearing at a concerning rate due to rising sea levels. While this issue has gained the most media attention, RMI faces many challenges similar to that of developing island countries in the Pacific, including pollution, overfishing, poverty, compromised waste management, migration, unemployment, and limited educational opportunities (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003). Enewetak and Bikini atolls are sites of some of the most devastating nuclear testing in history. The testing conducted by the United States government for military purposes from 1946 through 1958 rendered the areas uninhabitable, and citizens experienced lethal health issues as a result of radiation exposure (Simon, Bouville, Land, & Beck, 2010). The quantity of radiation in parts of Enewetak and other areas in RMI exceeds the amount of radiation in Chernobyl and Fukushima (Rust, 2019).

Furthermore, education remains a critical area for improvement in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (Heine, 2002; Hezel, 2013; Global Partnership for Education, n.d.). RMI's estimated education expenditure was 9.6% of its GDP in 2019 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2003). The West heavily influences Marshallese education (Heine, 2002; Ratliffe, 2018), although historically, many Micronesian islands had their own educational systems. Missionaries were one of the first to influence Marshallese education. Then, Spain and Germany colonized RMI and other Micronesian islands but did not effectuate changes to educational policy (Pine & Savage, 1987). However, Japan gained control of several Micronesian territories from Germany in 1914, including RMI, and introduced the first formal public education system, which it used to preserve Japanese dominance (Jim et al., 2021; Hezel, 2003; Pine & Savage, 1987).

Mission schools were soon shut down and replaced by new schools throughout Micronesia, where education became compulsory, and the curriculum expanded to include ethics and handicrafts. Schools operated for long hours of instruction in the Japanese language, and students were drilled and punished if they failed to memorize lessons correctly. At that time, Japanese influence extended to many areas of Marshallese society (Hezel, 2003). Nevertheless, in 1947, the U.S. Navy assumed control over educational policy in Micronesia. At this time, it was decided that schools would instruct students for the first two years in their native language, and then English would be the standard language for the education system. The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) took over administrative control in 1951 and encouraged using the local vernacular in elementary education. Educators "felt that instruction in the students' home language would enable them to begin their education in a familiar cultural setting" (Pine & Savage, 1987, p. 142).

RMI's informal schools taught history, navigation systems, and practical skills (Pine & Savage, 1987). Traditional education systems involve parents and elders informing the younger generation (Heine, 2002; Hezel, 2013). In some Micronesian island cultures, children are discouraged from asking questions or making eye contact with teachers or other adults (Ratliffe, 2018; Chapman de Sousa, Okamura, Ratliff, & Marlin, 2022). They may seldom speak to elders since this could be considered rude. Individualism and competition in the educational environment

were discouraged. Thus, Micronesian students work well in groups but may struggle with direct classroom discussions. This general tendency may extend into adult society when working with outside humanitarian aid groups. Westerners may find the responsiveness to an "authority figure" less apparent than they expect, but as a cultural norm, perhaps it should be anticipated (Miller, LaBrunda, LaBrunda, & Amin, 2019).

Dr. Hilda Heine, the first woman President of RMI, emphasizes the value of education and its crucial role in integrating authentic cultural values through framework and recognition of Pacific knowledge, skills, and resources. She implored that solutions for the Pacific require a Pacific mindset and understanding of the issues. She states, "The common practice of judging Pacific Island students using Western standards is not practical, realistic, or desirable" (Heine, 2002, p. 122). Dr. Heine warns of the consequences of an educational system that does not reflect those it is responsible for. It is demoralizing and one of the reasons for migration (Heine, 2002). Dr. Heine shares that, unlike the United States, Marshallese students are familiar with expectations of remaining silent in front of an adult, problem-solving in a group with other family members, and a relaxed requirement for school attendance (Heine, 2004). She believes culturally responsive schools require high expectations, understanding, and tolerance (Heine, 2002).

PACMED in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

The PACMED program aims to support and engage the local culture while encouraging dialogue and discourse on social justice issues. The program's structure has been designed to incorporate and reflect Marshallese emphasis on community, communal learning, and support. PACMED candidates take the same courses as their cohort members and often work on group assignments. The cohort is one layer of support provided to the candidates. Where students may be expected to problem-solve and make decisions independently in any American classroom, island students may be reluctant to step outside of standard family practices in which problem-solving and decision-making are shared (Chapman de Sousa, Okamura, Ratliff, & Marlin, 2022; Heine, 2002; Heine, 2004; Ratliffe, 2018; Zuercher, Yoshioka, & Deering, 2012). Through the various opportunities for engagement, candidates often find their cohort becomes a second family. Candidates rely on and encourage each other in a peer-to-peer setting, and through group activities, they solve problems as a community. Most candidates build relationships in and out of the classroom through class interaction and group projects. Many candidates are full-time educators and leaders in education administration in their communities. Some candidates and alumni are government officials, government professionals, business professionals, nonprofit staff, counselors, and administrative staff. The varied experiences further widen perspectives and enrich the learning process.

The PACMED instructional and non-instructional faculty and staff are caring and respectful to the candidates and their communities, which is essential to PACMED leadership. In addition to peer support, PACMED candidates are grouped into smaller units termed "homebase groups." The homebase is usually led

by an advisor known as the "Reader," who is often a PACMED alumnus or has knowledge of the PACMED ePortfolio graduation requirement. The Reader's insight and experience from graduating from the program is invaluable. Readers review every candidate's assignment before it is submitted. Readers also serve as mentors and check in on their group. Moreover, instructors are carefully selected and reflect PACMED values. Many of them are local educators who understand the context. Elective courses are taught or co-taught by instructors who understand the Indigenous community, education, and culture, reflected in the curriculum and instruction.

PACMED identifies its candidates as change agents and leaders in the Pacific. Candidates are encouraged to embody leadership roles in their cohorts, classes, and careers as part of anti-oppressive education initiatives (Kumashiro, 2000). The course format encourages open discussion and conversations in small and large groups, with most of the class literature and media materials centered on Indigenous perspectives. Thus, Marshallese perspectives and issues are reviewed and reflected on. PACMED seeks to engage its candidates in thought provoking discussions that question established norms. Every course includes a STEAM curriculum and problem-solving with a Pacific focus. The courses are designed to be engaging and encompass the community and place. PACMED RMI candidates have taken courses on Ethnomathematics, Place-based Science, Climate Change and Leadership, and other relevant topics. Dr. Heine expressed a critical need for place-based courses, and her vision of the course was that it should incorporate Marshallese navigation techniques requiring STEAM knowledge.

World culture theorists suggest that schools across the globe are becoming more homogenous due to the expansion of modern mass education (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). This is especially concerning when, in its current state, diverse voices are ignored by educational systems that generally favor mono-cultural norms (Savage et al., 2011). As distinctions in education deteriorate, alternative pedagogies, perspectives, ways, and thinking are more critical than ever to preserve unique local cultures and identities (Kumashiro, 2000). In many South Pacific islands, long spans of colonial rule and Western influence have imposed hegemonic ideologies, destroying cultures, environment, health, education, and general well-being. Social justice in this region requires healing and a positive direction from the damage caused, which can only begin by listening to the many voices in the region.

This introduction has provided some historical context. Next, the literature review will outline the theoretical framework and define key concepts, and the self-study methodology, results, and conclusion will follow. This paper is a qualitative institutional self-assessment of the participants' perspectives of the ePortfolio as the capstone project in the Pacific Masters in Education (PACMED) program in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). The research problem is to unmask the participants' perspectives by exploring the research question: What are the perspectives of the Marshallese graduate teacher candidates on the PACMED ePortfolio? This paper highlights the ePortfolio graduation requirement and the perceptions of the participants using an ePortfolio over a traditional master's thesis.

Literature Review

In this section, we extensively review the existing literature and the theoretical framework surrounding culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies. We begin by examining the foundational elements of multicultural education that have shaped the current understanding of these pedagogies. An exploration of the key theories themselves follows this. Additionally, we discuss the benefits and challenges of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy in international and Pacific contexts.

Multicultural Education

A significant and historical moment in multicultural education stems from the American Civil Rights movement. The push to end racially oppressive practices resulted in a priority of federal funding for multiethnic education programs in state education systems in the 1970s (Harmon, 2012). James Banks, a prominent scholar on multicultural education, put forth a multicultural content model encompassing four increasingly engaged phases for integrating culture and social justice into the curriculum (Harmon, 2012).

Beginning with the lowest form of engagement, the *Contribution* phase represents a top-down approach introducing customs and practices without providing explanation or meaning. In the *Additive* phase, students are exposed to diversity and culture, but the cultural context is poorly understood because it is not connected to the curriculum. In the *Transformation* phase, the curriculum integrates diverse viewpoints to engage students in critical thought. The final *Social Action* phase strives to motivate students toward effectuating change and social justice (Harmon, 2012). These four approaches share themes similar to critical race theory, in which the curriculum recognizes multiple viewpoints (Brayboy, 2005; Harmon, 2012). Scholars continue to build upon frameworks and concepts in anti-oppression social justice to create holistic multicultural education (Chapman, Okamura, Ratliff, & Marlin, 2022; Kumashiro, 2000; Yamauchi, 2022; Yoshioka, Zuercher, & Zilliox, 2014).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered educational approach that requires viewing the culture and background of students as an asset and authority to drive meaningful, high-quality curriculum and instruction. It is a tool to reconceptualize mono-cultural, monolithic, and hegemonic educational practices. Culturally responsive pedagogy is "one of the most effective means of meeting the learning needs of culturally different students" (Harmon, 2012, p. 12). While it may be assumed that education in the 21st century should embrace cultural differences, this is not often found in or considered mainstream education. The field of multicultural education and similar scholarship remain specialized areas in education. However, the plethora of research involving various forms of multicultural education recognizes the importance of these concepts in education and society.

Culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy prioritize the multicultural education elements of social justice and social change. Gay (2002) posits that "culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). Gay's work in culturally responsive teaching shifts the focus from curriculum to instruction. She emphasizes that teachers should be accountable; they must overcome oppressive educational practices by embracing cultural capital. Culturally responsive teachers are empowering, multidimensional, validating, comprehensive, and transformative (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Gay (2002) believes ethnically diverse students can better perform academically in a more familiar and natural environment. When teachers prioritize learning about the ethnic culture and learning styles of students and tailor their teaching, they can more effectively guide ethnically diverse students to be academically successful. According to Gay, culturally responsive teachers must be willing to create and develop a repository on cultural diversity, integrate cultural diversity in the curriculum, demonstrate "caring and building learning communities," communicate in thoughtful, meaningful ways, and customize instruction to fit the needs of diverse groups (Gay, 2002, p. 106). She believes teachers should educate themselves on the culture and background of their students. This information can be stored in a knowledge bank and continuously updated to serve students best. The knowledge bank can serve as a basis for understanding how to implement and integrate multicultural education into the curriculum. Gay emphasized that while caring is essential to the teacher-student relationship, *caring* means more than a sense of concern over one's general well-being. Gay posited that *caring* in its noun form was an expectation for student success and being able to care enough to assist them in achieving academically. Communication and response to ethnic delivery of instruction are based on the understanding that education should be viewed from the lens of students and their needs to excel academically. Communication and curriculum should, therefore, be reassessed and tailored to help students learn in a way that makes the most sense to them based on their background and experiences.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ladson-Billings (1992) genuinely differentiated her research from ones that viewed cultural differences as a liability. Her scholarship, which advocates for multicultural and social reconstructionist perspectives, stems from the Social According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy addresses student academic success while supporting them in "finding the strength through their cultural identities to defy and dispel injustices" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Embodying this theoretical model requires transforming the standard teaching model to recognize students and their cultures as an authority of knowledge in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students with instructors committed to incorporating the cultures of their students as a fundamental part of the curriculum are more likely to enjoy learning, problem-solving, thinking critically, and developing cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Ladson-Billings' (1995) research predominantly centers around urban American students, including African-American, Latino, and Native American students. However, the applicability of her work finds universal meaning as she implores societies to reflect on generally accepted norms more critically and inclusively. Ladson-Billings proposes that teachers who embraced and excelled in delivering culturally relevant pedagogy could spur academic progress, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In observing classrooms of eight exemplary teachers from varying backgrounds who taught in lower-ranked school districts, Ladson-Billings found that despite the lower rankings, "more students in these classrooms were at or above grade level on standardized achievement tests" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 475). In addition, beyond reading, writing, speaking, and computing, students could also problem-solve. Ladson-Billings affirms, "We need to be willing to look for exemplary practice in those classrooms and communities that too many of us are ready to dismiss as incapable of producing excellence" (1995, p. 483).

Ladson-Billings (1995) found that teachers who successfully implemented culturally relevant pedagogy had similar viewpoints. Exemplary teachers held the perspective that all students had the potential to achieve success. Further, students are capable of leading and teaching the instructor. These teachers also believed that knowledge is dynamic, community and community pride are a crucial part of the curriculum, peer-to-peer support, and collaborative landscapes are necessary, and relationships with their students must be strong (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, successful educators can support academic success while preserving cultural integrity and identity. Researchers identified that many African-American students who did well in school often lacked social connections to their academic success. However, exemplary educators were able to encourage students to be true to themselves and their cultures while reaching academic achievement in school.

In possibly the most defining piece in her model, Ladson-Billings suggests that exceptional educators should support learners in engaging in social justice and be aware of and identify social inequities. This highlights the seriousness this endeavor requires – it is not merely 'feel good' curricula. Exemplary teachers met these goals in different ways. There are many overlapping ideas between the approaches of Gay and Ladson-Billings to multicultural education. If one were to differentiate, culturally responsive teaching would be more practically applied and more focused on ethnic diversity, while culturally relevant pedagogy would be more of a theoretical framework emphasizing critical thinking.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Scholarship in the area of multicultural education continues to be shaped and reframed. Paris and Alim (2014) seek to extend asset-based pedagogies to focus on the future through culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). Paris and Alim's (2017) research is guided by "the purpose of schooling in pluralistic societies" (p. 1). In their 'loving' critique of previous scholarship, Paris and Alim recognize the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in laying the foundation for CSP. CSP reflects many similar values of culturally appropriate and culturally responsive

education. CSP appears to fill in some of the gaps in the implementation and brings a fresher, more modern approach to past asset-based pedagogies.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is concerned with the oversimplification that previous scholarship has seen in practice. CSP seeks to leverage globalization by changing and shifting power dynamics. Paris and Alim emphasize the importance of not only honoring traditions but also appreciating the "evolving ways" culture is "lived and used by young people" (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 91). Similar to multicultural education and Ladson-Billings' scholarship, Paris and Alim emphasize critical thinking and questioning. However, Paris and Alim take it further by imploring the need to look within and problematize within cultures and traditions. Rooted in cultures themselves are biases that may not embrace everyone (Paris & Alim, 2014). To combine culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies, culturally sustaining researchers have shifted the onus of implementation to the schools and put forth a framework to examine classroom climate and instruction, school climate, student voice and space, family/caregiver-school relations, school leadership, community connections, and culture of professional development (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). Paris and Alim's work on culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to shift the assimilationist mindset in education to recognize that culture is dynamic and for schools to be a place that perpetuates the values from many cultures.

Researchers have approached these diverse schools of thought from various angles. They are complementary and comprise a more extensive narrative of social justice, equity, and recognition of diverse voices. Ladson-Billings attempted to connect these varied ideas by stating that pedagogies are "designed to cultivate students' voices, entrepreneurial inclinations, and inventive spirits" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 353). This scholarship, like culture, continues to evolve. While term names are varied and often used interchangeably, culturally responsive pedagogy is currently the most popular (Krakouer, 2015). Although mainly stemming from research on urban students, culturally responsive pedagogy has been widely applied in diverse contexts.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Practice

Culturally responsive pedagogy aims to set high standards and supports students in achieving academically. Wah and Nasri (2019) reviewed six research studies that confirmed the importance of culture and background in motivating students to excel academically. These student-centered approaches positively supported students psychologically and enhanced academic achievement directly and indirectly. Educational benefits include an increase in reading, rates of graduation, and rates of college attendance. Beyond academic achievement, studies reported positive ethnic-racial identities (Wah & Nasri, 2019). Other studies on applying culturally responsive pedagogy also found increased well-being, self-esteem, motivation, academic achievement, and engagement (Krakouer, 2015).

While culturally responsive pedagogy is not a novel concept, it is innovative and divergent compared to neoliberal emphases on standardization that continue to influence educational systems (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Culturally responsive pedagogy has been inconsistently defined and applied in scholarly research and

school settings (Young, 2010; Lim, Tan, & Saito, 2019). Some educators have interpreted and implemented it in their own ways, while others are reluctant or unsure how to embark on this perceived divergent and challenging path (Young, 2010; Samuels, Samuels, & Cook, 2017). Some fear an increase in workload in addition to pressure to satisfy standards and testing. Educators continue to be pressed for time, resources, and efforts to meet the ever-changing and demanding landscape of policies and procedures. Some teachers expressed anxiety over discussing uncomfortable or unfamiliar issues or topics that may create student conflicts (Samuels, 2018). Challenges to consider include cultural biases, "the persistence and prevalence of racism in school settings, and the shortcomings of preservice and in-service professional developments to adequately prepare teachers to apply culturally relevant pedagogy to their practice" (Young, 2010, p. 258).

Even with the best intentions, educators might distort the essence of cultural responsiveness by misinterpreting or misapplying the pedagogy or failing to connect the curriculum meaningfully for students (Evans et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2019). "Efforts to enact cultural responsiveness are often shallow, misguided, and result in the misappropriation of culturally-based pedagogies, in which accommodations, interventions, and simplified content require that students still conform to standardized, mainstream ideologies and practices" (Evans, Turner, & Allen, 2020, p. 56). Evans, Turner, and Allen (2020) cautioned that while there are many benefits, the process is challenging because it requires a shift in the current constructs. As with any reform, determination and practice are key, and a one-off field trip, guest lecturer, or assigned readings are not enough. Educators embodying culturally responsive education must immerse themselves in the lives of their students, including the communities where their students live. Educators should encourage discourse and encourage students to question their traditions, and in this way, culturally responsive pedagogy can empower students to become change agents (Harmon, 2012). Transformation cannot be seen as the responsibility of teachers alone. For students to be successful, support is required from society, communities, and schools. Administrators and educators must receive extensive and appropriate training to understand and implement culturally responsive pedagogy. Authentic engagement takes time, patience, and the support of all stakeholders.

Howe, Johnson, and Te Momo (2021) examined communities where culturally responsive Indigenous pedagogies are embraced and successfully implemented at the university level in Canada and New Zealand. At Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia, Canada, culturally responsive Indigenous pedagogies are prominent at both the bachelor's and master's degree level programs in education. Students can enroll in courses on First Nations, Secwepmec language, Indigenous research, learning, and methodologies. Students and instructors engage with the Indigenous community through field trips, guest lecturers, and "exploring curricula that embed Indigenous ways of knowing" (Howe, Johnson, & Te Momo, 2021, p. 32). At Massey University, students experience the Māori language and culture early in their studies through coursework with Indigenous scholarship and media, field trips with community Elders and partners, guest lectures, and consultation with Indigenous experts. In addition, Māori culture is incorporated into standards and cultural competencies in the teacher education program.

Researchers examined the application of culturally responsive pedagogy at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan Campus (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). After completing a first-year course built on culturally responsive principles, they gathered the perspectives of the Indigenous students. To support their transition to the university, new students take four courses that introduce them to higher education. EDUC 104 Introduction to Academic Pedagogy, the last of the four courses, is guided by the First Peoples's Principles of Learning and holistic Indigenous perspectives (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). The course was carefully designed to embody the cultural ethos and paid close attention to the physical space created. The themes that emerged were all centered on the levels of support students felt they received. The role of relationships in culturally responsive pedagogies, especially for first-year students in higher education, is critical. Students were mostly positive about the many relationships they built throughout the course. *Circles of learning* were a key feature developed using culturally responsive pedagogy. Many students thought it was effective in connecting them with classmates. Peer mentoring and relationships with the teacher were also viewed positively as they provided additional support systems, shared experiences, and a sense of belonging (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017).

The benefits of Indigenous research "include connection to the past, connecting people of today with people of the past, studying social values and norms, belonging and having a sense of community, instilling beliefs and norms, instilling a sense of unity, and generating greater pride in one's own culture and a sense of identity" (Ames, Ames, Bilimon, & Cabrera, 2022, p. 68). A Marshallese student found the academic tools of Indigenous research helpful in expressing her voice and other Marshallese voices. She recognized the importance of growing Micronesian and Marshallese scholarship while preserving the culture (Ames, Ames, Bilimon, & Cabrera, 2022). Educators can foster self-confidence and conserve cultural capital by encouraging "students to spend time out in their communities, studying diverse cultures and studying their own cultures by conducting first-hand research, documenting rituals and traditions, encouraging conversations, and encouraging the use and documentation of Indigenous languages" (Ames, Ames, Bilimon, & Cabrera, 2022, p. 73).

The literature around culturally responsive pedagogy produced several themes that educators may consider. Successful application requires the convergence of mindset and practice centered on a curriculum driven by a desire for meaningful learning. As culture, students, education, and life shift, dedication, grit, and understanding will be needed as educators apply culturally responsive techniques to their situations.

PACMED ePortfolio versus Master's Thesis

Instead of following a standardized master's thesis required by many American master's degree programs, PACMED requires an ePortfolio framed by local professional standards for graduation. Attwell (2009) argues that the ePortfolio is one way to rethink education from a more rigid, authoritative view to one that values and engages learners. An ePortfolio is a learner-driven, thoughtfully

composed body of work that electronically demonstrates one's educational journey (Attwell, 2009). Creating the ePortfolio is as crucial as the final product (Roberts, 2018). The ePortfolio often reflects the learner's trials, advancements, and achievements. ePortfolios have various uses in different capacities and are especially useful in assessments, career planning, and active learning (Attwell, 2009). In creating an ePortfolio, learners are engaged in several ways, including "knowledge collection, arrangement, reorganization, presentation, sharing, application, accumulation, and management" (Chang, Tseng, Liang, & Chen, 2013). Because they are adaptable, there are different types and myriad ways to approach ePortfolios (Roberts, Maor, & Herrington, 2016). In a *standards-based portfolio*, the learner demonstrates how they meet or exceed the standards and objectives through artifacts and self-assessments (Attwell, 2009).

PACMED Candidates are introduced to the ePortfolio in their very first semester. The EDCS 695 Plan B course curriculum is taught as one of their first courses, and the instruction goes through the foundation and requirements for writing an ePortfolio. Local teaching standards serve as a guideline for the ePortfolio. Table 1 illustrates the Republic of Marshallese Islands Public School System's nine professional teaching standards, which are the basis for the PACMED ePortfolio.

Table 1. Republic of the Marshall Islands Public School System Professional Teaching Standards

Standard 1: Philosophy	Effective teachers can describe their philosophy of education and demonstrate its relationship to their practice.
Standard 2: Learning Theory and Practice	Effective teachers consistently plan and implement meaningful learning experiences for students based on learning theories and adopt RMI student and curriculum standards.
Standard 3: Mantin Majol Culture and Values	Effective teachers help students progress with a clear sense of their own local cultural identity, built on a strong foundation of their own cultures, language, and spiritualities, and with deep pride in their values, traditions, and wisdom.
Standard 4: Learning Environment	Effective teachers consistently create a safe and positive learning environment that encourages social interaction, civic responsibility, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation. Consistently provide opportunities inclusively and adapted to diverse learners.
Standard 5: Content and Instruction	Effective teachers consistently demonstrate competency in content areas to develop student knowledge and performance. They consistently engage students in appropriate experiences supporting their development as independent learners.
Standard 6: Assessment and Accountability	Effective teachers consistently apply appropriate assessment strategies to evaluate and ensure the continuous intellectual, social, physical, and emotional development of students.

Standard 7: Family and Community Relationships	Effective teachers establish and maintain strong working relationships with parents and school community members to support student learning.
Standard 8: Diversity	Teach students with respect for their individual and cultural characteristics.
Standard 9: Professionalism	Effective teachers continually evaluate the effects of their contributions and actions to the teaching profession and actively seek professional growth opportunities.

Source: Marshall Islands Public School System (n.d.)

By researching literature and discussing their experiences, candidates show how they meet and exceed the teaching standards (Table 1). PACMED Instructors have recognized that for the ePortfolios to be effective and meaningful, the purpose and background must first be visible to candidates. While the ePortfolio is a graduation requirement, instructors explain how it is more significant than an assignment. The ePortfolio is a way for PACMED candidates to tell their stories. This is a personal narrative backed by research and data. They control what they share and how this story is told. This understanding is crucial in cementing the ownership and authenticity of the PACMED ePortfolio.

The PACMED ePortfolio utilizes the BLEE framework. BLEE is an acronym for Benchmark, Literature, Exemplar, and Effect. The Benchmark is derived by paraphrasing the local RMI teaching standard. Candidates use their own words to reflect the context of their Benchmark or "B." For the Literature section, candidates perform research by searching for peer-reviewed articles to find support for the benchmark that fits into their "story." The candidates then share their Exemplar, the first "E," which is the action they took to meet the benchmark. Depending on the prompt and candidate, this can include activities performed in the classroom setting or certifications received through professional development. An exemplar proof is also required to confirm this occurred. Candidates learn how to use Google documents to hyperlink their exemplar proof to their ePortfolio. "ePortfolios allow hyperlinks to connect documents and link to external sources/references" (Roberts, Maor, & Herrington, 2016, p. 22). The proof provided by the candidates can be in various electronic forms, including photos, websites, and other documents. Finally, candidates discuss the positive Effect their exemplar had. For example, classroom teacher candidates share their exemplary action's positive effect on their school and students. These four parts are developed into a paragraph that reads like a story for each standard. These BLEE paragraphs document proficiency in meeting the standards.

In addition to learning ways to research, it is valuable for educators to grow their repertoire of e-learning resources. By collecting data for the ePortfolio, candidates are being exposed to various technologies and websites as well as honing their skills in effectively using e-learning technology. "ePortfolios offer an opportunity for allowing learners to use computers as they do in their social life, to create, to share and to network" (Attwell, 2009, p. 5).

In addition to developing knowledge of the standards, research, writing capabilities, and understanding of technology, candidates use the ePortfolio to reflect on their accomplishments (Miller & Morgaine, 2009). The ePortfolio often builds the confidence and identities of candidates as they can document their

professional progress (Miller & Morgaine, 2009). It can serve as a method to evaluate one's progression and current state in an organized manner. Patterns and themes may emerge from the ePortfolio, allowing for more stimulation and thought processes (Miller & Morgaine, 2009). It is a tool that can be developed and actively transformed throughout the program as candidates continue to grow professionally and personally. Attwell (2009) suggests that deep reflection is a crucial part of the learning process in developing critical thinking beyond appreciating one's attainments. This may be achieved by equipping learners with the skills to do this, and one suggested method is feedback and dialogue (Attwell, 2009).

While the ePortfolio is an individual project, it is also an effective medium for collaboration (Roberts, Maor, & Herrington, 2016). PACMED candidates work on their ePortfolios throughout the program and are encouraged to rework and modify them. It is inevitably shaped by the shared experiences of the cohort members and the knowledge acquired from their PACMED courses. In the EDCS 695 course on the ePortfolio, candidates share parts of their ePortfolios in class. In this class, PACMED candidates have a lecture session and breakout session. In the breakout session, candidates usually work with co-instructors and colleagues on assignments. Candidates are encouraged and often look forward to sharing what they have written down so they may get feedback from their instructor and classmates.

The writings are in various stages and can be partially developed during discussion. Depending on the ideas and stage of the ePortfolio, the instructors and Readers approach the candidates differently. The instructor may ask a candidate to share an example and have the class provide suggestions. This is one way to engage the class, increase their understanding of the assignment, and learn from one another. It is also a way to develop the candidate's deeper reflection by looking beyond words for the meaning and thought process behind it. The instructor might also ask questions regarding the thought process of the writing, what the impetus was for the candidate choosing to share this particular example, and how the candidate felt about the exercise. Candidates may then consider connections between their proposed effect and its reasoning and ponder whether other methods exist to achieve these desired results. ePortfolio instruction can be reflective for educators and can inform and improve curriculum and teaching (Kirkpatrick, Renner, Kanae, & Goya, 2007). It is an excellent tool for instructors to be more culturally responsive. Instructors can learn more about their students' backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Instructors can also use this organized information to be more responsive and develop practices to better support and empower emerging Indigenous leaders.

The ePortfolio has many benefits that last long after the candidate has graduated from the program. The ePortfolio supports lifelong learning by serving as "a record of learning drawn from different contexts and allows that record to be updated over time" (Attwell, 2009, p. 2). The ePortfolio remains relevant in the professional lives of teachers. Candidates often take ownership of this tool and adapt it to their profession and context (Attwell, 2009). PACMED candidates look at the ePortfolio as akin to a living portfolio they can easily reference. It has been used for many purposes, including accreditation, evaluations, and promotions. As such, the ePortfolio reflects the evolution of PACMED candidates.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted to lay the foundation for this exploratory qualitative self-study, which lays the foundation for multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy, place-based education, Indigenous methods, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and ePortfolio assessment in teacher education. Educational self-assessment refers to the structured process of collecting and analyzing data to measure the effectiveness of academic initiatives, providing valuable information for informed decision-making and supporting learning outcomes (Alan, 2016; Clark & Erickson, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Scheerens et al., 2003). In higher education, self-study, or Institutional Self-Assessment (ISA), is an essential research tool for enhancing quality performance and products (Ansah, 2010; Heiderscheidt & Forcellini, 2023). In this study, "quality" is measured from the participants' perspective, recognizing that the participants' experiences define quality. Self-study enables institutions to assess their performance through systematic reflection, providing data to guide collective improvement efforts (Alan, 2016; Zeichner, 1999; Heiderscheidt & Forcellini, 2023). The core components of ISA include data collection, collaborative analysis, and feedback loops that facilitate continuous program improvements. Zeichner (1999) argued that the birth of the self-study movement in teacher education around 1990 is probably the most significant development in teacher education research.

This study employed a mixed-methods self-study approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were gathered through confidential surveys, focus group discussions, autoethnographic journals, and artifact analysis of ePortfolios. These methods enabled a deep exploration of the experiences and viewpoints of the participants. On the quantitative side, confidential surveys were administered using Google Forms.

The study participants were purposively selected and comprised the entire PACMED Cohort, consisting of 18 graduate students. In addition, the PACMED faculty leadership team participated in collective data analysis, reviewing the data and engaging in feedback loops to propose and implement program improvements. Confidential exit surveys were administered near the end of the master's degree program.

Typological Data Analysis

Typological data analysis was used to interpret and categorize the qualitative data collected. This method involves identifying recurring patterns, themes, or characteristics within the data and organizing them into distinct categories (Hatch, 2002). This study conducted typological analysis iteratively, with researchers repeatedly revisiting the data to refine the categories as new insights emerged. The data—collected from surveys, focus group discussions, journals, and artifact analysis—were examined through this lens, revealing key themes and patterns related to the participants' perspectives regarding ePortfolio. The typological analysis generated important insights that fed back into the program's continuous

improvement efforts, allowing the faculty and leadership team to make data-driven decisions to enhance the program's quality.

Results

The following three themes emerged from the typological analysis of the confidential data collected from surveys, focus group discussions, autoethnographic journals, and artifact analysis of the ePortfolios of the 18 graduate candidates. The leadership team collectively analyzed the data to identify the participants' perspectives regarding the PACMED ePortfolio as the first stage of institutional self-assessment. These themes were member-checked with participants for validity.

Graduate University Candidates Prefer the ePortfolio

Eighty-eight percent of the participants preferred the use of an ePortfolio vs the traditional Master's Thesis as a final assessment tool for the PACMED program. Candidates reported that their understanding of the local professional teaching standards deepened through the creation of a place-based ePortfolio. They also appreciated learning new technology skills, such as hyperlinking and other Google Suite features in the ePortfolio process. Candidates learned new strategies from their peers by sharing ePortfolio exemplars and effects in small professional learning communities. Participants believe that PACMED should continue using the ePortfolio because it helped them understand the local professional teaching standards, improved their teaching skills, and allowed them to showcase their work as teachers and leaders in their school communities. When asked about suggestions for PACMED instructors about the ePortfolio process, they responded that they loved the ePortfolio as it helped them understand the professional teaching standards, improved their grammar and writing skills, helped them learn Google Suites, and helped them reflect on their teaching practices. They also greatly appreciated the support and feedback from instructors, readers, and cohort members on completing their ePortfolios.

ePortfolio Has Practical Applications Beyond the University Program

When candidates were asked what professional endeavors the ePortfolios could be used for, 88% selected that it could be used for future job applications, school accreditation, teacher evaluation, and as a University of Hawai'i graduation requirement. In comparison, 12% of the participants believed the ePortfolio could only be used for the University of Hawai'i graduation requirement. However, framing the university ePortfolio with the local Department of Education professional teaching standards greatly expands the practical applications of graduate work. When asked whether the ePortfolio deepened their knowledge and understanding of their professional teaching standards, 94% said they highly agreed.

Culturally Responsive STEAM Education is Highly Valued

Candidates were asked which professional teaching standard benchmark exemplar was their favorite. Standard ten was chosen 29% of the time, emphasizing the development of place-based and culturally responsive STEAM pedagogy. Standard three was selected 22% of the time, emphasizing the importance of helping students develop a strong understanding of their cultures. Similarly, Standard seven was chosen 13% of the time, highlighting the need to establish and maintain robust working relationships with parents and school community members to support student learning. In contrast, Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 were each selected by 6% or fewer participants. Ninety-four percent of the respondents agreed that the exemplars they chose to show their proficiency in meeting the standards for their ePortfolio helped them reflect on their teaching practices, sensitivity to student needs, and educational leadership.

Discussion

Three emergent themes were discovered based on the PACMED leaders' collaborative analysis of the surveys, focus group discussions, autoethnographic journals, and artifact analysis of ePortfolios by the RMI cohort in the PACMED master's program. First, participants expressed the value of ePortfolios in helping them understand the local professional teaching standards set forth by the RMI Department of Education and its effect on personal reflection on teaching practices and addressing the needs in the classroom. The majority of participants prefer to create a culminating ePortfolio to reflect on their accomplishments (Miller & Morgaine, 2009). The ePortfolio is used to help highlight their growth areas as a teacher and showcase their work for evaluations, future school accreditations, and job promotions. Candidates felt supported from the onset of the PACMED program in creating their ePortfolio by local readers, instructors, program advisors, and cohort members. The support and feedback they received helped ease the process of creating their final assessment and allowed them to gain technical skills by using Google Suites for the ePortfolios. They expressed a deep appreciation for the support from the PACMED program staff and cohort members as the ePortfolio evidence and literature citations were constantly discussed during the program coursework and became an integral part of their assignments. This allowed them to reflect on their growth as educators and the development of their fellow cohort members. 94% of the respondents agreed that the exemplars they chose to show their proficiency in meeting the standards for their ePortfolio helped them reflect on their teaching practices, sensitivity to student needs, and educational leadership.

Second, the ePortfolio was seen as a more valuable tool than the traditional Master's Thesis as it allowed for constant reflection of teaching strategies focused on relevant place-based STEAM initiatives and the Department of Education's emphasis on improving cultural responsiveness and focus on cultural diversity. The ePortfolio also helped candidates focus on multiple facets of the teaching profession rather than creating a thesis that may focus on a singular topic. The ePortfolio was

considered practical because it could be used for future job applications, school accreditation, teacher evaluation, and as a University of Hawai'i graduation requirement.

Third, culturally responsive STEAM education is highly valued by the Pacific participants. They reported that their favorite portfolio entries focused on their culture and respecting cultural diversity. Candidates also expressed appreciation for place-based and culturally responsive STEAM pedagogy, which is problem- and project-based, to address relevant Pacific concerns like sea-level rise, food security, health, and alternative energy.

Conclusions

Self-assessment allows programs to reflect on the progress of their goals and make changes and self-corrections. The primary focus of this paper was to describe the perspectives of the participants on the use of the ePortfolio versus a Master's Thesis paper in helping evaluate their teaching practices, show growth in educational leadership as well and provide evidence of scholarly research skills. The secondary focus of this paper was to carefully look at how the ePortfolio requirement of the PACMED program aligned with the RMI Department of Education goals to emphasize the development of culturally responsive teaching practices and improve the quality of teaching in the classroom.

Based on the findings of this self-study, the recommendation is to continue using ePortfolios as an integral assessment tool for its value in teacher self-reflection, its direct impact on the understanding of the participants regarding the professional teaching standards, and the support and feedback gained from PACMED facilitators. Participants' feedback during surveys, journals, and interviews indicated overwhelming support for using ePortfolios to document success, learning, growth, and development as teachers and leaders in their school communities. The recommendations for the program are to continue the emphasis on place-based support and feedback from instructors, readers, and cohort members on the ePortfolio writing process throughout the program.

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