

Ka Maka o ka Ihe Laumeki – The Point of the Barbed Spear: Native Hawai`ian epistemology and health

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*‘O ke kino ka hale e noho ai ka `uhane o ke kanaka
 E `imi mau i ke olakino maika`i
 E malamamau i ka ikaika o ke kino
 E `ai i ka mea`ai maika`i
 E `imi mau i ka na`auao*

*The body is where our spirit resides
 Always seek good health
 Maintain a strong physical health
 Eat nutritious food
 Always seek knowledge*

The above statements are the philosophy and goals that shape the Physical Education/Health program at *Nawahiokalani`opu`u*, the Hawai`ian language medium High School located on the island of Hawai`i. The program’s theory draws from the deepening understanding of our Hawai`ian philosophy of knowledge, our epistemology.¹ The following article will look into how one project’s focus on “educating the body” links to three cultural epistemological themes: spiritual based knowledge, morality in knowledge, and finally, culturally defined senses.

Culture shapes identity

It [the recovery of historical memory via epistemology] has to do with recovering not only the sense of one’s own identity and the pride of belonging to a people but also a reliance on a tradition and culture, and above all, with rescuing those

aspects of identity which served yesterday, and will serve today, for liberation.²

Liberation thinking is no longer a radical proposition. We believe it is fundamentally tied to understanding our identity and that our Hawai`ian identity is intimately defined by our Hawai`ian epistemology. How then, can we have healthy identities when our epistemology has been shaped by other cultures beside our own? How can we possibly address health and education concerns in culturally appropriate terms and manners until we understand the river of philosophy that courses through it?

Why epistemology?

Epistemology – the philosophy of knowledge. What is it, why is it, how is it? It is hard to recognize and talk about epistemology because it has been defined by mainstream Euro-centric values, and taken for granted by our own culture and by other marginalized people. It is time for Native Hawai`ians to re-claim the traits, beliefs and practices specific to our own knowledge maintenance and production.

To recognize how we know and how this knowledge links to action is indeed vital, but it can also damage culture because of the accommodations we make to assimilate. What we believe about intelligence is at the heart of how

we feel about ourselves as cultural people. We have always instinctively recognized aspects of our forms of intellect, but to enter into this realm of discourse, to barter with terms alien to us within current systems of power, is relatively new.

We assert that understanding our Hawai`ian epistemology is basic to shaping *anything* we set out to accomplish, particularly with regard to education and health. We ask you now to suspend one way of thinking and begin to release into the warmer pools of what is familiar to most of us: that is, culture – the wealth of who we are as Pacific island people.³ For the purpose of this article, “culture” is reflected in the thoughts of *kumu hula*, Keola Lake: “Culture stays for longer

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than religious beliefs. Culture runs across veins. A religious belief is within a conscience. Culture we assimilate, we live, we enact by repetition, by mutual acting in accord with one another. Culture is the behaviors we consider best for us as a group. The things that we have would dictate what we can do with it, therefore, culture dictates our behavior and attitudes, our feelings, our thoughts."

The Body is Where Our Spirit Resides: spiritual based knowledge

One of the main points of Nawahi's health course is the idea that our spirit is housed inside our body. Our body, then, is an epistemological key as it becomes the site for meaningful and specific practice. If our body holds our spirit, then movement becomes an expression of our deeper selves because it extends from spirit. Because of this sequence, movement becomes one way we define identity, and because identity is shaped by our epistemology, our body becomes a tool for meaning.

"Movement is key to how we define knowledge"

This point highlights the first epistemological theme: *Spiritual Based Knowing*. Knowledge in this context is shaped by spirit, and because spirit is housed in our body, we must then recognize our role in its maintenance and care. What is salient about this theme is how our body plays an important role in sustaining this clarity.

We move specific to our place. Place is experienced in cultural ways because of our rapport and history with it. Thus, movement (and therefore body) becomes an important element for how we define knowledge because it links us to place. Knowledge of place shapes what we do and how we move in it. Thus begins the carving of our Hawai'ian epistemology. Because movement extends from spirit, and spirit is housed in body, it becomes clearer why body, spirit and movement are different terms for the same idea. This is a Hawai'ian epistemological point. We do not alienate our sense of spirit from how we move and who we are in the world. We, instead, listen to how spirit and place influences, and move specific to that influence and place. Ask any surfer how she enters the ocean, what she notices, how she behaves in winter swells. Ask a farmer how he listens for rain and what he does to prepare for drought.

... the context of morality in knowledge. For Hawai'ians, it is no accident that quality and focus are part of movement. Culture shapes how we behave, it is the set of beliefs and practices that determine whether we are doing things right and well. This, in turn, is shaped by previous knowledge, experience and history.

Aspects of spirituality also shape how movement is experienced. Students are taught to *kahea*, to call, before they enter the gym. The idea to "help us manifest our limits today" begins the work-out so that when stretching occurs, students feel their limits, they learn to exhale, and thus they learn to go beyond what was accomplished the day before. A spiritual context, tied to cultural protocol, is fundamental to how intelligence is "embodied". It resonates with the practice of "everything above we acknowledge, everything below we honor".

As Hawai'ians, we thrive in multiple realities of spiritual acknowledgment and believe that if we care for this receptacle of spirit, intellect can be experienced in many ways. Thus, knowledge can be received. Keeping our bodies healthy, then is part of a Hawai'ian worldview because it allows us to participate in the spaces around us in the best possible manner. This leads us into the qualitative discussion of "how" one participates and moves.

How to Restore Health through Practice: morality in knowledge

Repetition and practice are part of Nawahi's Health curriculum. It is nothing new. What is unique about the discussion of practice is the link it has with integrity of purpose and focus. There are clear connections between morality, practice and culture, and students are reminded of this before each workout.

This brings us to our second epistemological point: the context of *morality in knowledge*. For Hawai'ians, it is no accident that quality and focus are part of movement. Culture shapes how we behave, it is the set of beliefs and practices that determine whether we are doing things right and well. This, in turn, is shaped by previous knowledge, experience and history.

The influence of a previously defined moral code on the philosophy of knowledge is synonymous with watching a video on perfect execution of a skill before one throws the javelin. The athlete sees right practice, right effort, right form. Culture is the video. This is how morality and integrity link to repetition and movement. They are defined by culture and thus become an epistemological thread weaving the qualitative "how" one acts within a context. Do you know the sequence of repetition, how do you focus, is your practice *pono*? It is not a discussion of pre-destined movement, but rather, a pre-determined way of approaching practice that makes it a cultural act.

When we say that knowledge has morality, we're saying in essence that there's a right way and a wrong way to practice. Every coach knows this. We are advocating for culture as the definer of what these right and wrong practices are. What are the proper ways to enter a forest? What is the wrong way to treat our elders? What is the best way to lift weights so we're using the proper muscles? It leads us to a discussion of *pono* behavior.

Pono is described by historian Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa as the following:

*"In Hawai'ian, this perfect harmony [proper behavior with land and the lands reciprocity] is known as pono, which is often translated in English as 'righteous', but actually denotes a universe in perfect harmony."*⁴

Although it is, perhaps, silly to link proper stretching with the notion of *pono*, we do so now because it is the idea of morality, of perfect practice which *pono* represents, that we weave now into this discussion. We believe *pono* is a fundamental belief that holds up this article. If we did not know what was good practice or proper ways to behave, then we are left to re-invent culture every generation. This is not the case. There are practices that get expanded, and there are things that get changed, but culture begets culture. And for Hawai'ians, it stands on what has worked before us. *Ka wa mamua*, (the *time we face*) is our history – it is what we know, it is what we value. It is history that links us to our future.

The quality of practice, then, is important. We tie it to morality because it helps to shape the points of philosophy relevant to knowledge. It also links with the third epistemological idea concerning how we shape our senses and why this is important in this topic of health, education and philosophy.

Making Sense in Context: culturally defined senses

We view the world with culturally shaped sensory organs. How we notice *ho'ailona* (signs), where we swim, how we enter a forest, how we view *kalo*, how we cultivate dreams. Our empirical belief structure is shaped by our island environment, our genealogy, the hopes of our *kupuna*, and the direction given to us from history.

We are island people and it will take conscious programming to make our Education and Health systems more in line with our epistemological structure. This is the challenge of the

Nawahi project. Whether the unit is weight lifting at the local spa, swimming in a pool, or working in the *mala kalo* (taro garden), students come with their own well-shaped sensory cues. Even in modern Hawai'i, however, we believe these senses are shaped by cultural avenues, island expectations and family backgrounds. This aids in the discussion of health because we as educators and health professionals shape the environment of practice and movement.

The key for the *Nawahi* project is to help students "educate the body". The use of technology (weights) is seen as preliminary and superficial, yet it is an important way for students to cultivate their *embodied knowledge* found in movement. It is recognized that at one time, physiology was

in a natural system, i.e.: farming, fishing. Technology, then, is used to condense time and therefore better prepare students for the more rigorous cultural projects that will be offered in future months (*Nawahi* has a ten acre *mala*, garden, and an expanding aquacultural program). The ways in which *Nawahi* prepares students for more physical projects and a better rapport with what was once a natural system of

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knowing (via our bodies), are through activities that address the following four categories:

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| 1. Flexibility | Stretching, warm ups |
| 2. Endurance | High and low impact aerobics |
| 3. Strength | High reps, light weights |
| 4. Relaxation | Sauna, cool downs, meditation |

From technology to the *mala kalo*, taro garden. Metaphors in all four categories lift an ordinary class on stretching toward cultural illumination that stands on previous ideas of spirituality and morality. When students begin to stretch, for instance, they are "reaching for the four corners of our Hawai'ian reality – *iluna, malalo, hema, akau*: above, below, left, right."

Thus extends the nature of our sensual selves. The grasping, *a'apo*, of knowledge found in metaphor, practice and our embodied selves. It is a high expectation to hope students understand that "body is the manifestation of the place we know and love", but it is not impossible.

Speaking the language of the body

Can we "speak" the language of the body? The answer to this question is "yes", but only through understanding movement and through expressions of the body. This embodied knowing is accomplished with the recognition that *process*

must become *product* in order to formulate the vocabulary of health and Hawaiʻian intellect. This is an epistemological idea that is rooted in the how, what and why of any program, and this is always shaped by culture. When this occurs, the goals of our lives change to become more organic, more cultural, more in balance, more defined. The intelligence within our bodies, the genetic disposition of movement, the metaphors found in disciplined practice, is vast, profound and helps to guide us. Hawaiʻian intellect is not separate from body. It is body.

How then does one teach the language of the body, and not logos, the language of body/mind separation? How do we de-educate, re-define, establish strategies and thus practice in culturally empowering ways? *Nawahi's* Health and Physical Education program has developed four ideas to approach this topic:

1. **Show up:**
Nothing can happen if you're not there
2. **Pay attention to what has heart and meaning:**
Cultivate a sense of gratitude
3. **Suspend judgment and don't blame:**
Cultivate *pono* behavior
4. **Stay open to outcomes but don't be attached to them**
Be ready to let outcomes go

And so, the question of how one is graded falls away. In its place is the expectation of how students will best serve humanity. Students are understanding their bodies for their lives. They are given opportunities to experience physical stress so that *ka maka o ka 'ihe laumeki*, the point of their barbed spears, are sharpened and developed. Students are exposed to the question of technology so that they can eventually re-enter into the natural system of health. They will be charged-up to work, play, relax, because they will know how it "feels".

And through movement and understanding their bodies, students will no longer simply "talk" culture, they will exhibit, think through, and "be" culture. They will become practitioners and their bodies will be their tool for expression. They will then plant, harvest, feed others. They will thus understand knowledge in a more connected fashion, they will see their impact, they will listen with their expanding sensory organs. They will smell the qualities of rain and be able to see how it links with what they are learning in class. After all, it is ultimately outdoors, under sun and moon, where our youth learn best. Even if they don't know it now.

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We do indeed need to "re-enter a natural system", but not without conscious preparation, and not without the illumination of our Hawaiʻian philosophy of knowledge. And so, let it be written, let it be said:

"We have what we need. We are who we need."

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He hale ke kino no ka mana'o.
The body is a house for the thoughts.
'Ōlelo No'eau #563