

EAP and the University of South Pacific

At the end of 2004 I joined my husband in Suva, Fiji, on his diplomatic posting. Suva has many of the characteristics of a village: it is not very large and before long everyone knows where you fit in the pattern of life. The shopping centre is small but residents lack for little except, perhaps, book shops of any quality. In May of this year, after a few weeks teaching in the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at the University of the South Pacific, I was appointed to a full-time, two year contract to teach in the English for Academic Purposes section of the Department of Language and Linguistics.

The Laucala campus of the University of the South Pacific is perhaps the most beautiful physical environment of any university I have ever been involved with. It is built on the site of the old RNZAF Air base in Suva where the flying boats used to come in and out: the long low rambling stone wall which was built to offer protection for these planes can still be clearly seen in the bay and small boys race along it at low tide when fishing. Quite what they get that is edible from water the colour of this harbour beggars description. The site itself runs down a fairly steep hill towards the bay and its rim of mangroves, and attracts sea breezes that are a life-saver in the depths of the summer when the air is hot and so humid that it is nearly visible. The buildings are scattered across the site, built under large mature trees with well-maintained gardens and pools, and we teach in rooms with floor to ceiling wooden louvres and large overhead fans.

This is a unique institution in many ways. Firstly, it is a regional university catering for students from Fiji, Kiribati, The Marshall islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, The Cook Islands, the Tokelau islands and the Solomons. There are three large campuses: Laucala in Suva, which is the largest and the home campus; Emalus in Vanuatu, and Alafua in Samoa, and a number of smaller campuses in other countries. Within each country there are also several centres which handle the administration for the large numbers of students who study by DFL: Distance and Flexible Learning. In any one of my face to face classes, I have a minimum of seven nationalities and a much greater number of mother tongues, some of which may be spoken by only a few hundred people. In this situation, English has been chosen as the lingua franca of the university and all teaching and academic work is carried out in it. Because it is not a first language for the vast majority of students, English for academic purposes is a busy department.

For a number of programmes, this course is compulsory; for several others it is advised. Students from other programmes enrol because, in their second and third year, they realise that they need help with English's intricacies. English is taught as a foreign language in all the contributing countries but the degree to which first year students control it varies greatly. The course has one of the highest enrolment rates for any single course in the university: in the first semester we often have over 1500 students enrolled, somewhat more than one third studying face to face and the rest by distance. This

semester we have 1300. The course is 10 years old this year, and the terms of my appointment and that of the new Co-ordinator include reference to the restructuring of the materials.

One of the most interesting parts of the teaching is the expectation that as EAP lecturers we should spend some time in each semester teaching in Centres or regional campuses to assist DFL students. Mid-semester break in August 2005 for me was spent taking a five day tutorial in writing essays, preparing reports and oral presentations in Port Vila, Vanuatu, another lovely campus in a small town built around a stunning harbour where the water is so clear that you can see the coral reefs clearly and the dugongs laze on quiet days. For a keen snorkeller, this was heavenly. For one of my colleagues the break was spent in Honiara doing the same thing. In mid September I went to Labasa on Vanua Levu (the "other island") while he went to Lautoka not far from Nadi, both of us in sugar towns with long noisy diesel-engined sugar trains running 24 hours a day through the centre of town and the air heavy with the honey smell of hot crushed cane, as well as the smoke from farmers burning off the harvested fields. At the end of October I travelled for a week through Bua on Vanua Levu, an area with significant numbers of students doing our course but who are isolated by the tough terrain and the poor roads – even if there are any. The journey was educational both for what I learned about transportation without roads and in my admiration for the study achieved by students under extraordinary difficulties of isolation and resource poverty. In January I headed back to Port Vila for the month to take the summer school session and the new Co-ordinator spent December in Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo in the north of Vanuatu while others are in the Marshalls and Kiribati. In 2006, staff managed to take regional tutorials in all the centres in Fiji at least twice and I spent mid-semester tutoring in Samoa and Tonga, along with a colleague from the Foundation Programme.

The DFL programme is exciting for what it can achieve in a limited range of teaching options. Of the thousands of students studying by distance across tens of thousands of square kilometres of ocean, the smallest percentage has any access to computers or videos or even electric power. In Labasa some of the students who attended the tutorial had travelled for a whole day to get there and had paid the equivalent of a month's salary for transportation. As a result, the sorts of distance education possibilities we take for granted in New Zealand are simply not realistic here. Distance courses are paper and tape based but support is added by the use of satellite tutorials and video conferencing, all of which are recorded and kept at the various campuses and centres so that if students can get to a centre they can listen or view the tutorials. One of the most moving experiences for me was the first satellite tutorial I took part in, sitting in the studio in Laucala and waiting for the technician to connect us to students all across the Pacific Ocean. "Good evening Honiara. This is Laucala. Are you receiving?" And a few minutes later back would come, "Good evening Laucala. This is Honiara. We have 12 students standing by", and then the little light for Honiara would light up on our wall map. One by one other little lights lit up until we were sitting in front of the microphones with 80 invisible students from 9 countries. We tutor and they can ask questions, share with each other

problems and solutions, or query test questions, and we do this on every second Thursday evening. Twice a semester an evening or a Saturday morning is spent in two hour video tutorials. In this case the studio has a huge screen and we can see the students we are teaching in Niue or Honiara or the Marshall Islands and they can see us. They wave out as we go to air and raise their hands to question. On the night it was Niue's turn, the island had run out of fuel so there was no power, only enough to run the video room for the session. The students sat in the dark so as to save the power for the screen. We could just see vague murky shapes in the reflected light and disembodied voices floated out of the night. Strange but it worked.

It's great teaching: it's real, practical and effective and we are sure we can make it more so. And as we work with chalk much of the time, we are literally at the chalk face. The new course is almost finished and will be ready to go by the first semester of the 2007 academic year. We are already using it with the face to face students and have seen significant improvements in skill-acquisition and productive work, and liaison with other departments has led to a further investment in the course by those sections of the university. This is EAP in a very immediate way; it is challenging but it's also some of the most enthralling teaching I have ever done.

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