Teaching and Learning Portfolio

VC’s Prize for Excellence in Teaching

2016

(With Emalus students outside the Vanuatu Parliament)

Robert Nicole
Introduction

I am honoured to present this extended portfolio in response to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning’s invitation to participate in the Vice-Chancellor’s teaching and learning award. I am also greatly humbled by the nominations that have been submitted by my colleagues and students. I have always felt greatly privileged to teach at USP and to engage with the Pacific’s brightest minds and I hope that this portfolio reflects the deliberate efforts with which I meet my responsibilities to my students, to the university, and to this region.

I begin this portfolio, by framing my teaching philosophy into five broad interwoven threads. They constitute the “hidden curriculum” that lies beneath the subject matter that I teach:

- learning as a transformative enterprise;
- fostering a drive for academic excellence;
- exposure to real life situations;
- focusing on the development challenges of the Pacific region; and
- creating an innovative and enjoyable learning environment.

i. I consider teaching to be a noble profession with an intrinsic potential to transform. I live by Nelson Mandela’s view that “education is the most powerful weapon that can be used to change the world.” In our role as teachers at USP, we have the power to nurture and grow the human capital of the Pacific region. In fact, we have a responsibility – perhaps even an obligation – to play a transformative role among our students. All development indicators in the region reveal the urgency with which we must act. My teaching is thus driven by two core convictions: (a) that teaching and learning is transformative and (b) that our students hold in their intellect and in their character, the key to many of the region’s ongoing developmental challenges.

ii. The consequent consideration is how to act on this transformative potential. My approach is to create a learning environment that fosters curiosity but also a sense of commitment to this region and its communities. In fact, I enter into every learning
situation – whether it is inside a classroom, or an email correspondence, or an activity on Moodle, or a field trip into the real world of politics – with the purpose of arousing in my students a deep sense of understanding, responsibility and commitment towards their communities, their nations, their region, and the planet on which we live.

iii. In addition, I impress on them the importance of producing high-quality work – on time. This is because our region cannot afford and must not expect anything less than excellence from our graduates. In my very first lecture I spend a great deal of time on the first of the graduate attributes: “Academic Excellence”. To illustrate my point, I use the true story of a USP alumnus who once sat on the very benches that they now occupy here at USP. He now occupies a diplomatic post on the global stage. I impart on the students a sense of the challenges that he faces and the volume of work he has to produce as the leader of the Solomon Islands UN mission in Geneva. He must combine multi-skilling, multi-tasking, and a multi-disciplinary approach to a multiplicity of different situations if he is to deliver favorable outcomes for his country. I talk about tangible outcomes that depend on his work ethic, efficiency, skills and effectiveness.

iv. I use this example to impress on my students the importance of developing a core cluster of habits that are crucial to their academic success at USP, as well as to their responsibilities as leaders in their fields once they go out to serve in the real world. These include thorough preparation (beginning with their USP degree), extensive reading (not just in their Politics courses but across the board), acquiring the confidence to speak clearly and persuasively in public settings (rather than to sit back and say nothing), and the application of critical and strategic thinking.

v. To convey the seriousness with which I regard these standards of excellence, I compel all students to submit their work on time. This has necessitated a “zero policy” on late assignments. This policy is applied very strictly. Although some of my colleagues find this rather harsh, all my students are made to understand the logic that lies behind it and the benefits that their communities and region can derive from the delivery of excellence with punctuality. In return, I (and my teaching team) undertake to provide feedback on students’ work within very short
and tight deadlines. Assessment is thus used to model excellence and punctuality as requisites to meet the wider development needs of the Pacific region.

vi. I also put students in real life situations where they engage with the real world of politics and where they have to take responsibility for their actions. These include field trips and simulations. These measures are necessary if learning is to be meaningful and memorable in the sense that it has a lasting impact and students remember what they learn. They represent my constant efforts to find opportunities inside and outside the classroom that allow students to trigger their transformational potential.

vii. These activities also dramatise the importance of producing excellence in a region that is acutely dependent on sound decision-making, careful management, and the wise deployment of its resource base. Hence, when the Honiara-based students of PL100 attended a sitting of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee in 2015, they did not merely learn about the mechanics of government and parliamentary politics. They also experienced first-hand the profound importance and implications of the careful management of Solomon Islands public money and resources. This is a message that they remember to this day and that will guide their reflections and behavior for a lot longer than a mere lecture could ever hope to achieve.

viii. Finally, I believe that enthusiasm is infectious and that learning is meant at least partly to be an enjoyable experience. I want my students to look forward to my classes and to feel – when they exit each class, or return from their field trip, or complete the course – that they have experienced something important and that this journey was exciting and fun.

The effectiveness of my teaching philosophy can be difficult to measure/quantify. Thus, I took the liberty to ask a few current and former students about how my teaching might have impacted them. I got to know this first story during Open Day last month. It comes from a student by the name of Viliame Yari (a first year Commerce student of mixed PNG and Fijian heritage) who had little apparent interest in Politics. He told me (without prompting) about
the circumstances that led him to become a PL100 student. This is what he subsequently wrote about it:

The circumstances in which I came into contact with Robert and SGDIA are quite interesting. As a first year commerce student I have no compulsory politics courses to take. However, during the first week of sem 1 2016 I was on campus and needed some respite from the heat. I decided that I would go and find some much needed air condition in the n-111 lecture theater. Little did I know I had just walked into the introductory lecture for PL100 which Robert was taking. What struck me at first was how enthusiastic Robert was towards the subject and the students who had chosen the course. His message that 'you sitting here today can be working in cities like Geneva and representing your pacific nation' resonated with me. It was also clear to me how passionate Robert was about the topic of Politics and how instrumental it was in bringing positive change to our communities. It was after this chance encounter that I decided to choose PL100 as an elective.

The rest of the semester taking PL100 was thoroughly enjoyable and entertaining. As mentioned before, Robert's passion for what he teaches is almost tangible and assisted me when I was faced with theories and concepts I did not understand. Robert's genuine nature is also something I have heard from fellow students time and time again and I distinctly remember him approaching me outside of class asking 'was I too fast during last lecture, maybe I will have to go over the concept again'. This sincere care for his students understanding is testament to his commitment as an educator here at USP. I am extremely grateful for the random set of events that led me to meet Robert and take PL100!

Annie Diau, a middle aged female student from Solomon Islands, has a somewhat similar story to tell. In semester 1 of 2015, she was looking for an elective to make up her 100-level courses. She enrolled in the blended version of PL100 and she describes the impact of the course as follows:
My personal testimony is that I was not interested or dream of taking politics in my academic life. My work experiences and interests were in management and I enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce programme majoring in Management and Human Resource Management at the University of the South Pacific in 2013 as a part time student. All that changed when I took PL100. I changed my second major to politics on the second semester in 2015 and that is how Dr. Robert Nicole’s coordination and teaching approach positively impacted my academic journey. I am currently doing my 300 level in politics here in Laucala Campus. … And thanks to my Course Coordinator Dr. Robert Nicole for challenging and awakening my critical and analytical capabilities through the construction and deliverance of this course. This course was and still is a captivating course that taught me about the important features of politics and motivates my critical thinking and analysis to discover and learn more. (Emphasis added)

To get a sense of how my former students remember my teaching, I wrote to a few students whom I had the privilege of teaching in the 1990s and 2000s. One of them is Maire Bopp Du Pont who was a prominent journalist and then Executive Director of the Pacific Islands AIDS Foundation. She has now joined our profession and teaches French and the Tahitian language at the Lycée Paul Gauguin in Papeete, French Polynesia. She sums up her thoughts as follows (the bold emphasis is her own):

As a former student of the University of the South Pacific in the double Bachelor of Arts of Journalism and History Politics (1996-1998), I've kept of Robert Nicole, the memory of a knowledgeable, passionate and particularly thorough lecturer who accompanied us and created in us the desire to learn and excel.

Robert Nicole, a lecturer with profound humility of heart and sensitivity to the fragile and diverse cultural, linguistic, traditional, historical and political environment of the Pacific Islands' people; with keen availability to stop listen, respond to, and guide his students during classes …; a person of kind and jovial nature, who would make one want to make teaching his/her job; and finally, a man of dedication to make
education accessible for all - a particularly important and challenging goal within the Pacific Islands region, that he has wholeheartedly work to achieve through his additional involvement with distance learning programs at USP.

For all these qualities, Robert Nicole will remain for me and I am certain for many other students of my days at USP at least, a teacher and role model who has impacted on our personal, social and professional lives, and as such, R. Nicole has our outmost respect. Aroha nui.

Having spelt out my teaching philosophy and measured its effectiveness in broad terms and now provide the more intricate details of this philosophy by responding directly to the criteria for the award.

Section 1: Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn

I use a variety of conventional and innovative approaches to create an environment conducive to learning. This is done to ensure that my students stay focused and that they enjoy the journey. The outcome of these approaches is reflected in the following comments from one of the students who nominated me:

Nominee has really rekindled the passion that I have for politics and diplomacy his humor and professionalism is infectious it rubs off on students he was firm but fair in his approach to all students and made learning all the more enjoyable. (Emphasis added)

Another nominating student wrote:

Used videos, drama's, debates, simulations and they were extremely helpful as it was something different from the same old routine textbook learning. Concepts learnt during these activities are still fresh in my mind. Also, he used guest lecturers from the community to explain concepts of the course. Very helpful as it showed us our theoretical learning in actual practice in daily life. It also provided a fresh new perspective to the ideas and concepts of politics. (Emphasis added)
The specific details of these approaches and their rationale are outlined below:

(i) **Stimulating curiosity and independence in learning**

I foster these from the beginning of each course through an in-depth discussion of the university's Graduate Attributes particularly those dealing with academic excellence and critical thinking. I relay the experience of USP alumni who now occupy critical positions of influence and decision-making in key global organizations. I use their experience to emphasise the importance of producing excellence now – at USP, so that students are ready for the challenges that await them in the real world. This reflects my ongoing preoccupation in ensuring that what students learn in class is connected to their own lived realities as well as the real world that awaits them outside academia. Several students who nominated me commented on this:

**Student 1:**
By showing and explaining that we could all achieve huge things and never to think of ourselves as small and to always strive for excellence. E.g. the first lecture for PL100, he explained about Geneva and that we all could reach places like that and make a difference if we chose to. (Emphasis added)

**Students 2:**
He would tell us what we need to do but never would he do it for us. This taught me to try to do things on my own and built less reliance on the lecturer. But he was always ready to assist and guide whenever we needed help. (Emphasis added)

**Student 3:**
He encouraged tutors not to spoon feed us but to make us think critically about topics and current issues. (Emphasis added)

(ii) **Development of students' critical thinking skills, analytical skills and scholarly values**

Most students already cited above have commented on the emphasis that I place on critical thinking and analytical skills. To illustrate my thinking and teaching on these skills and values, I therefore cite a passage from a peer review of my teaching conducted earlier in July 2016 by my colleague, Dr Nicola Baker:
Dr Robert Nicole’s teaching style and methods are innovative and engaging and are carefully designed to improve students’ critical thinking and professionalism. …

Dr Nicole’s delivery of his introductory presentations, Course Expectations and Defining Ideology was exemplary. He used mixed teaching methods with clarity and enthusiasm, linking the course aims to USP’s graduate attributes and stressing the value of reading and developing critical thinking skills. He emphasized the local and contemporary relevance of the course content and engaged students through questions, role play and quizzes. (Emphasis added)

Another comment by Annie Diau (PL100 blended mode student from Solomon Islands in 2015) speaks of the drive that I instill in my students to strive for academic excellence and other scholarly values:

Dr. Robert Nicole’s coordination, teaching and tutorial visitation was indeed very effective and motivating because he is very open, communicates well with his students and try as much as possible to give students the drive to discover and use their knowledge, skills and abilities effectively. But even though he tries to tap into his students he is very critical and requires quality output which challenges and activates effective learning outcome from us. (Emphasis added)

A nominating student commented further, that

By making the class interesting and encouraging students to always learn not for the sake of just passing the unit but to excel and understand it very well. (Emphasis added)

This last point is particularly important. I require my students to think short, medium and long term and to embrace objectives that go well beyond their own individual ambitions. I think that my students respond well to the broader sense of commitment and responsibility that I urge them to embrace. Learning is not just about passing assignments and exams (though that is very important). Beyond USP, they have families, communities, countries and a whole region that await their expertise and leadership.
Encouraging student engagement through the enthusiasm shown for learning and teaching

I see teaching as a vocation. A few years ago, I took a break from the profession because I was burnt out and could no longer find the enthusiasm so vital to inspire students. I believe I have returned as a more mature lecturer. I know why I am teaching and this – the development of the Pacific region – is what spurs my enthusiasm. The students seem to appreciate it:

Student 1:

There is never a dull or boring class when it comes to Dr Nicole. He always motivates us that there is a world of excellence out there and if we have to blend in than we have to do our part and that is through dedication and hard work.
(Emphasis added)

Student 2:

Dr Nicole always engaged students in lectures. It is always a fun place to learn and he was never boring.
(Emphasis added)

Student 3:

Dr Nicole is a great lecturer. His cheerful and warm personality make him very approachable and easy to discuss matters. His lectures always had a participation from students and was always filled with jokes to ensure everyone was with him.
(Emphasis added)

Robert Vivili, a Tongan student who took PL100 via DFL and then PL202 in Face to Face mode, added that he appreciated the numerous opportunities provided in my courses for students to engage with the subject matter in relative safety:

For me personally it is stimulating to think that a student is able to discuss issues and share their perspectives in a safe non-judgemental environment it makes me feel part of the learning process which undoubtedly makes me better understand concepts.
(Emphasis added)
Inspiring and motivating students through high-level communication, presentation and interpersonal skills

Over the years, I have realized that “less is more” and that making eye contact with my audience is so much compelling than merely reading from a written lecture or a bunch of slides. Hence, I no longer write out long paragraphs on my slides. As becomes apparent in Section 3 (vi) below (Summary Papers), students acquire a substantial portion of their notes from the recommended readings. They do the readings because these are assessed. I also constantly make eye-contact with my students to gauge their grasp of the complex ideas that I am trying to communicate. As a historian, I also tell them stories from Pacific and global history that I use to contextual and illustrate the points that I am making. Finally, I make an effort to know each of my students by name. This helps me to get to know my students, to call on each one of them to participate in class discussions, and it also makes them feel valued when we meet in the corridors. As an ice-breaker when we meet for the first tutorial, I always ask my students to introduce themselves and to include in their introductions something unusual/interesting about themselves or where they come from. This extra question fulfills to purposes. The first is to get students to think outside the box (albeit in a safe way because they choose what they want to reveal). The second is to get to know them on a different level and for the whole group to value each student and the place that he/she comes from. It also creates great talking points that can ease students’ nervousness, especially at first year level. I also bring food to class, especially if the classes are held early in the morning, late in the afternoon, or over two hours. It gives them “an energy shot” but more importantly, it helps to create a community of learners. This is reflected in the following comments by a student who nominated me.

Dr. Robert Nicole has been one of the best lecturers I have come across while studying at USP. He makes the **effort to know students by their names** and makes us feel comfortable in class to be able to join in discussions and ensures that what he teaches is understood by his students. … Apart from teaching students, he also **inspires us to do our best and excel in the things we learn.** (Emphasis added)

**Section 2. Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field**
Aside from the traditional lecture notes, readings, study guides, videos, films, e-sources and powerpoints, I strive to create further knowledge by innovative means. This knowledge is created for as well as by students. I do this via a variety of interactive activities such as guest lectures, simulations, debates, and field trips. In this section, I propose to focus on the value that guest lectures and simulations add in strengthening the curriculum and diversifying students’ sources of knowledge.

(i) Developing and presenting coherent and imaginative resources for student learning

Of the many resources that we use for presenting resources, one of the most rarely used and yet most accessible, is guest lectures. We have access to a wealth of expertise both outside and within our university. The following is the thinking behind my frequent use of guest lecturers.

- They expose students to specialist practitioners and prominent personalities that operate in the real world of politics. They encourage students to make connections between the abstract concepts of politics that they learn in the classroom and textbooks, and Politics as it exists in the real world.

- Guests who have addressed students in my courses include Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (Former Vice-President of the Republic of Fiji), Ms Reteta Rimon (Kiribati High Commissioner to Fiji and USP Alumnus), Mr Larry Thomas (Deputy chair of the Fiji Electoral Commission and USP Alumnus), Ms Maureen Penjueli (Head of Pacific Network on Globalisation – PANG and USP Alumnus), Mr Richard Naidu (Owner - Munro Leys and Associates), Mr Nikenike Vorubaravu (Vanuatu High Commissioner to Fiji and USP Alumnus), Mr Nic Maclellan (prominent independent Pacific journalist) the late Ratu Napolioni Masirewa (former Special Administrator – Nausori Town Council and USP Alumnus), USP colleagues and many others.

- Guest speakers also expose students to a greater variety of voices. This multi-vocal experience is important not just because it breaks up the monotony of lectures. It also encourages students to see knowledge as something that can be sourced from a multiplicity of sources - not just books, the internet, or lecturers.
Finally, many of these guests are USP alumni and they are good role models for our young students to be inspired by and to follow.

Students seem to appreciate the value of these guest lectures:

Apart from the traditional means of learning used like lecture slides, activities and tutorials, there were instances where he brought in distinguished individuals to make the course content more relevant. (Emphasis added)

and

In the last few weeks of lectures he invited guest speakers who were in the field to share their knowledge and show how the real world applied to various theories learnt in class. These were very, very helpful in learning about the surrounding outside of the classroom. (Emphasis added)

(ii) Demonstrating up-to-date knowledge of the field of study in the design of the curriculum and the creation of resources for learning

I am constantly searching the web for interesting ways of imparting knowledge and interactive ways of doing that. However, I also keen on getting the students to generate resources by themselves. In PL 202 for instance, the students have the option of creating a brochure that they can use to lobby their classmates regarding a pertinent political issue. The other source of created knowledge is the use of simulations. Since the mid-1990s, I have been using the extraordinary power of simulations to amplify learning outcomes. My first experiments were with cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary SPICOL (Student Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders) simulation. This exercise ran uninterrupted for seven years (1995-2002) and involved students from USP and various other institutions taking on the roles of heads of government, senior civil servants, journalists, lobbyists, consultants, conference organisers, etc. to reproduce the annual Forum Heads of Government meeting. A theme of regional relevance would be selected and the students would engage with this theme for a week culminating in the SPICOL communique. I have since reproduced this model in Christchurch (New Zealand) with Pacific youth simulating the New Zealand
parliament. Since my return to USP I have brought a budget simulation into one of my courses.

- In this simulation, students take on the roles of senior civil servants in particular sectors of the government (Health, Education, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs, Infrastructure, etc.) of a hypothetical Pacific nation - “Motu Kele”. They prepare and send a budget submission to the “Ministry of Finance” which includes development projects and activities that their respective ministries wish to undertake in the new financial year. A few days after the submissions, the Motu Kele Minister of Finance responds by reading the budget. This budget is then debated by the students online. These responses to the budget are assessed as are the presentations from the various ministries. This is a required activity in both F2F and blended modes and blended mode students have the added option of sending their presentations by video (Youtube).

- This exercise is used to dramatise the contest for limited resources and the importance of careful management of a nation’s resources. It also dramatizes the difficult choices that politicians and senior civil servants have to make when making decisions about the allocation of resources, and the dangerous consequences of ill-conceived policies and programmes. It also helps students to understand the relationship between different parts of government and the economy.

- The pedagogical significance of this exercise is that it puts students in a “real life” situation where they have to take responsibility for their choices, decisions, and actions. Such sensitivities and responsibilities are difficult to teach via a lecture or a reading in a textbook. They can be more easily communicated to students and internalized by them if they can experience them directly – in a simulated environment.

- The fact that this is a “game” also allows them to be creative and to express their ideas in ways that are seldom possible by “real” politicians. Yet, it places them in positions similar to those that they will encounter in the real world. This is
designed to make learning more “real” and “connected” rather than abstract and disconnected.

- This exercise is also useful in encouraging the students to **work in a team**, to **listen carefully and actively**, to design **robust presentations**, to present **coherent and persuasive arguments**, to **take responsibility for what they learn** (student-centred learning), to **respect** others’ opinions, and to **sharpen their general presentation and debating skills**.

Rosalie Nogebatu, a blended mode student from the Honaira campus in Solomon Islands, commented on this activity in the following terms:

> For the budget simulation assessment, we were public servants of the Motu Kele Government for a few weeks and our task was to submit a budget for the Ministry of Health. This **gave me insights** into some of the duties of our public servants and politicians, and the long process involved in pulling together a Ministerial budget to submit to the Ministry of Finance. It also made me realize **the importance of seeing things through different lenses** – when it comes to the development of aspect of a country and also how politicians and public servants were faced with competing priorities thus engaging them **to think more critically** of what needs to be taken on board. (Emphasis added)

Another student (Annie Diau) from the 2015 cohort, added:

> Formulating a budget simulation as a learning tool in PL100 was one of the course assessment **that I enjoyed and learned a lot from**. It teaches me to be critical in assessing the different ministries in the government that should receive a larger portion of funds and others that does not require that much large portion. I **also learned to be persuasive, convincing, illustrative and visionary** when formulating and delivering this budget simulation. (Emphasis added)

A young man, Jongabule Panda, appreciated the benefits that can be derived from working collectively as a team:
The point here is that we see ourselves as actually taking part in the government and governance of Motu kele the imaginary island, that we are the parliamentarians within the government or the cabinet. It made me to think like as the people’s elected representative and as a minister for my ministry. Furthermore, the kind of group working task has enable other aspects of learning be made effective where group members share and/ or contribute ideas on how best we can present our argument to the minister of Finance (the Coordinator) on behalf of our ministry. In this way, we learn to interact with each group members where we collate ideas and made a final submission. Of course, group work is a major aspect of tertiary education ... here we are getting ourselves used to the atmosphere of group work without working alone all along throughout the semester. (Emphasis added)

(iii) Communicating clear objectives and expectations for student learning.

Again, I draw on Dr Baker’s testimony (see above) in which she wrote that my explanation of course requirements and expectations were “clear, detailed” and connected to USP graduate attributes. I always encourage my students to strive for excellence. Our region desperately needs and expects that from them.

Section 3: Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning

Assessment is one of the most important components of my teaching. When I first inherited the PL100 and PL202 courses they tested only ONE type of assessment: essay writing. With a little creativity, I have developed assessment types to cover the many different skills that we expect our graduates to have. Here again, I try to be creative.

(i) Integrating assessment strategies with the specific aims and objectives for student learning

All my assessment methods are used to meet the specific aims and objectives of the course. But they also fulfill a larger purpose: that of preparing them for work beyond their years at USP. For instance, I use the debate to test oral, aural, and written capability. But, as the following example suggests, I also use the students votes for the best debating team to introduce another element of politics: electoral systems:
In this case, students prepare the debates in their groups; they listen to the debaters and presentations; they assess them in terms of content and quality of delivery; and in the process, they are introduced to two different methods of counting votes. This feeds into their understanding of electoral systems – political instruments that are often dry and difficult to explain without practical examples.

(ii) Providing timely, worthwhile feedback to students on their learning

My students are assessed early in the semester. This is intended to identify those that will need help. By week 4, we know those students who have reading and writing difficulties and
we have them referred to Student Learning Support services for tailored support. Roshila Singh will attest to this.

Also, as mentioned in the introduction, I have a “no late assignments” policy for all my students. In return, I impose on myself and my tutors a “no late feedback” policy. I think that the students appreciate the timely feedback and that “what is good for the goose is good for the gander.”

Students who nominated me seem to agree:

Student 1:

Something i love about Robert is his ability to always provide feedback on time.

(Emphasis added)

Student 2:

Assessments were always filled with comments and ways to make it better and this assisted in independent learning. (Emphasis added)

(iii) Using a variety of assessment and feedback strategies

PL 100 contains 7 different types of assessment strategies that test a wide variety of skills and aptitudes:

1. Debate (oral, aural, and written)
2. Summary papers (X 5) (oral and written)
3. Field trip (aural and written)
4. Simulation (oral, aural and written)
5. Essay proposal (written)
6. Research essay (written)
7. Exam (written)

(These types of assessment are explained in more detail elsewhere in the portfolio.)

Feedback is provided orally and in writing (usually online through track changes – to save time and paper!)
(iv) Implementing both formative and summative assessment

Typically the assessments are small in terms of the length and mark value. However, in their cumulative worth they are quite significant. Their importance is that they get students ready for the larger chunks of summative assessment. As the two examples below suggest, several of the assignments are a mix of formative and summative assessment.

- **Summary papers** are designed primarily to **encourage students to read**. Too few Politics students do the required readings and as a consequence their work often lacks sufficient depth.

- In their papers, students are required to identify interesting points that were raised in the week’s lectures. They then have to reflect on one of these points and to formulate a response to it. This is designed to encourage **active listening and note-taking, as well as reflection and analysis**.

- Summary papers also require students to identify a topic of **current affairs** and connect it to the topic of the week. This is intended to get students to **make the links between what they learn in the classroom and the world of real politics**.

- The summary papers ease first year students into a **reading and writing routine** that will serve them well at university level. They learn the conventions of academic writing and the discipline of regular reading.

- **Students with reading and writing difficulties are identified early**. They get appropriate help from the SLS before the larger assignments are due.

- Finally, summary papers are useful to students when they prepare their exams. They act as **revision notes** and thereby indicate the **value of regular work**.

As a working mother of a young family and DFL student from the Honiara campus, Rosalie Nogebatu found the summary papers particularly useful:
The summary papers really helped me understand key themes covered in the unit. I found the exercise thought provoking as I had to identify and apply how these themes were linked to my community and local situation. It also helped me to understand the complex subject of politics and political concepts. The summary papers were also a big help because most of what we covered also came in the final exams, making studying for the exams much easier. (Emphasis added)

Similarly, the essay proposal encourages students to see essay writing as a process and to begin planning, organising, and researching their essays much earlier than they normally would. They learn the value of working progressively to meet strict deadlines.

Section 4: Respect and support for the development of students as individuals

I feel very fortunate and privileged that every day I get to interact with some of the best young minds that the Pacific region has to offer. I see my role as a catalyst for spurring them to achieve great things. I believe that my students appreciate this approach and philosophy.

(i) Participating in the effective and empathetic guidance and advising of students

This is a theme that comes up repeatedly in students’ feedback. I’m not sure where I get these attributes from, but students seem to appreciate them:

Student 1:

Dr. Nicole was someone who had charisma and professional magnetism that helped students like myself grasp complex concepts and better understand the learning criteria. He also brought humor and was able to relate to students in an amiable and interactive way. (Emphasis added)

Student 2:

He always took time to listen to students. He would always speak politely making students feel completely at ease. He never embarrass students as well in class if they didn't know an answer or weren't able to speak. Plus he always gave everyone time to speak and everyone's views were treated equally. (Emphasis added)
Student 3:

He is very committed to his work, always have time for student queries and is very down-to-earth making his class a comfortable environment to study in.” (Emphasis added)

Student 4:

... very prompt in responding to queries and emails from students. By allowing anyone to ask him questions after lectures if they were too shy to ask in front of others. He was very thoughtful of hard situations such as clashes with classes, yet very firm with late assignments. (Emphasis added)

Student 5:

oh he is good at that and I guarantee that. Any person who takes any of Dr Roberts class would agree with me. He is funny, always trying to converse in Fijian language and the providing refreshments in every lecture session.

Student 6:

He was always available when students came to him either in his office or by email. Very approachable and easy to talk to about things that are not clear in class. (Emphasis added)

Student 7:

He is very down-to-earth, respect students and always provide feedback on assignments and queries when needed.

Student 8:

He was seldom a teacher and more of a colleague. Treats students as equals. (Emphasis added)

Student 9:

Nominee always respected the view points and thoughts of students regardless of how radical it might seem he made time for all view points and didn’t
discriminate according to which viewpoint or stance a student had. (Emphasis added)

(ii) Assisting students from equity and other demographic subgroups to participate and achieve success in their courses

In this respect, I undertook tutorial visits to the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu campuses to mitigate the difficult learning conditions that exist in these places. The trip to Vanuatu was in direct response to Cyclone Pam. Visits to Honiara were conducted to mitigate the ongoing challenges faced by students at that campus. These visits are partly responsible for improvements in the DFL pass rates. This year, for the first time in my career, the pass rate for distance students was better than it was for F2F.

To measure the value of these visits, I use the following testimony from one of the Solomon Island students, Rosalie Nogebatu:

The course coordinator, Mr Robert Nichole came over to Honiara for a short visit and to facilitate our visit to the National Parliament. I have found such visits from the main campus to assist us in the regional campuses very helpful. Being a full time working mother, it is difficult to be studying through distance learning or through blended mode and having the lecturer, even just for a few tutorials and lectures, made it easier for us to take in and understand concepts and themes, (politics is a complex subject) he answered a lot of questions and cleared uncertainties we had and guided us task requirements for the course, walking us through what was needed, with clear instructions. (Emphasis added)

Each semester 1, I also organize special “catch up classes” for Solomon Islands and other students who are late to arrive in Suva.

(iii) Influencing the overall academic, social and cultural experience of higher education

To illustrate my thinking on this particular sub-section I outline below the experience that my students go through on the field trip as well as a cross-institutional collaboration between PL202 USP students and students at the University of Victoria in Melbourne.
The purpose of the **field trip** is to get students to **interact with formal political processes in the real world** and to link classroom concepts with politics in action. The visit to parliament exposes students to the realities of liberal democratic politics (the numerous parliamentary **processes, protocol, and procedures**) in a way that a mere lecture or reading cannot possibly do.

Learning also becomes quite a **thrilling experience**. Students get to see and occasionally to meet and mingle with some of the most powerful figures in their country. Politics become something very tangible that they can sense by sight, hearing, touch, and even smell and taste! On occasion, students have been invited to stay behind and have morning tea!

**Pictured:** PL202 students meet with Honorable Netani Rika, chair of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence and Foreign Affairs (Semester 2, 2015).

The DFL students also visit their own national parliament or they attend a meeting of their local government.

The value of the field trip to DFL students is captured in the following comments which I received from Annie Diau (Solomon Islands blended mode student):
A field trip visit to the national parliament of Solomon Islands on 2nd April was one of Dr. Robert Nicole’s ways of showing us the practical example of politics in the National Parliament level. Dr. Robert Nicole accompanied us along with our local tutor in this field trip and we were fortunate to witness the Public Accounts Committee proceedings for the 10th parliament. What we learn in theory becomes clearer when we witness the checks and balance, critical analysis and scrutiny performed by the Public Accounts Committee. This field trip was very effective in demonstrating what we learn in the classroom and it expands our understanding in the realm of politics.

The online cross-institutional collaboration involved students of my PL202 course and those of “ASA3023: Theory and Practice of International Development” taught by Dr Nicole Oke University of Victoria in Melbourne (Australia).

- In this partnership, USP students worked in small groups with their University of Victoria counterparts, using the online platform, Wiggio. In spite of the distance, the collaboration created an extensive cultural melting pot which spawned significant learning outcomes. Among them was the realization by our students that their ideas were valid and valued and that they could match and sometimes exceed the quality of those enrolled in a first world university.

One of the students who nominated me commented that this had exposed him/her “to other university students abroad which was a great opportunity to collaborate and share ideas.”

Section 5: Scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching

Much of my teaching philosophy was nurtured here at USP. As a student in the 1980s, I was taught by such mentors as Cliff Benson, Tom Kaye, Akanisi Kedrayate, Konai Helu Thaman, Nii Plange, Claire Slatter, Vanessa Griffen, Atu Emberson-Bain, Sandra Tarte, Albert Wendt all of whom had an impact on how I teach now. Perhaps the most important factor was the courses that I took as part of the then Graduate Certificate in Education. They really helped me to understand and then apply the subtleties of education in my own academic career. Later I came across a whole lot of other inspiring teachers including current members of my school
and faculty, who have influenced my thinking and practice of teaching. I sometimes feel that I am merely taking baby steps along the path that they have laid out before me …

(i) **Showing advanced skills in evaluation and reflective practice**

When I obtained the Graduate Certificate in Education from USP in 1988, I was well aware of the research which shows that placing learners at the centre of the learning process creates the most conducive environment for effective learning. Much of my teaching practice since then has been to locate students at the centre of their own learning.

For example, a topic such as political ideologies is challenging to teach because it tends to be very “dry”. But when the class is transformed into a political debating chamber, the learning is fun, collective, and meaningful:

- The purpose of the debate is for students to learn off each other by having serious conversations about a core component of Politics.

- It develops students’ confidence and their ability to communicate orally in a university setting. Students prepare their debate presentation in groups. This helps them to come out of their shells and to get to know each other early in the semester. It also introduces them to the critical importance of building coherent arguments and tests their ability to defend these arguments. Also, by working together they develop their ability to work in a team.

- Students are required to respond to the debate as well as to the views of their other peers online (Moodle). This helps them to develop their capacity to think independently and critically. It also encourages them to listen carefully to the debate and to pay attention to core arguments as well as to the details.

(ii) **Participating in and contributing to professional activities related to learning and teaching**

I have participated in several year 1 seminars organized by FBE to seek alternate ways to improve pass rates and averages. I have also been in regular communication with the FBE SLS team in a shared effort to improve student performance.
(iii) Coordination, management and leadership of courses and student learning

I coordinate PL100, PL202, PL411 and provide mentoring for GAs and TAs in these courses. There are now four cohorts of Politics GAs who have gone through my courses and who can apply (if they so wish) the pedagogical principles that underpin them.

(iv) Conducting and publishing research related to teaching

My philosophy of teaching has been published in the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) newsletter as well as the USP CELT newsletter (when it still existed). See for instance:


As the USP lead, I also collaborated with Professor Peter Hempenstall (University of Canterbury) and Professor Terence Wesley-Smith (University of Hawaii) on a cross-institutional project which involved USP students linking up with students in Hawaii and Christchurch for one semester via the shared platform Blackboard (similar to Moodle). This collaboration resulted in a publication on e-learning in the Pacific:


(v) Demonstrating leadership through activities that have broad influence on the profession.

As I mentioned above, I have participated and organized conferences that have helped to push thinking forward. See in particular, my leadership in the SPICOL (Student Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders) conferences organized between 1995 and 2002 at USP and PYLAT (Pacific Youth Leadership and Transformation) in 2010 and 2011 in Christchurch.
More recently, I have organized conferences and exhibitions that featured participation from USP undergraduate and post-graduate students. I am happy to provide details if/when necessary.

VINAKA

NOTE 1: I am happy to provide original copies of emails containing testimony from students who supported my nomination for this second/final round.

NOTE 2: There is much more testimony in the course evaluation reports. I did not include them here because they would merely repeat what has already been highlighted in this portfolio. Please read these course evaluation reports if you need to confirm students’ opinions of my courses.

Total: 7,926 words