

This article utilizes the concept of context as entry into understanding the uniqueness of all metropolitan universities and of their partnership efforts with schools. An illustration of Hawaii's local context is presented by means of the custom of "talk story," a practice whereby persons establish connection in order to begin common undertakings. It begins with an initial openness that leads to expanding inclusion and continues through recognition for tolerance of difference. Talk story is a manifestation of a style that underpins the operations of the Hawaii School/University Partnership and its work in school reform.

Hawaii's Partnership

A Study of Context

The Hawaii School/University Partnership

The Hawaii Partnership is comprised of three member institutions, each with its own institutional history. These are the Hawaii State Department of Education (DOE), the Kamehameha Schools/Bishop Estate (KS/BE), and University of Hawaii at Manoa. Hawaii is the only state with a single K-12 unified DOE school system led by one elected school board that appoints the state superintendent. Analogous to DOE is a single system of higher education with University of Hawaii at Manoa as the major campus. KS/BE, with its mission to provide educational opportunities to Hawaiian/part-Hawaiian children throughout the state, is the only K-12 private school committed to this collaboration. All three worked together previously, but not explicitly, as equal partners in pursuit of overlapping educational aims.

Over the past several years of partnership action, a working agenda for educational reform has evolved into four programmatic strands. These are school success, preservice teacher education, principal preparation, and exemplary partnership schools.

School Success

Projects in school reform and renewal are based on strategies developed by a partnership task force to promote success for all students and to reduce or prevent at-risk behaviors. Focusing on the school as the unit of change, several program elements have been identified and applied to an organizational unit of an elementary,

an intermediate, and a high school, known as the Castle Complex. Two of these sites are piloting a school-within-a-school program that restructures the learning environment into smaller groups of teachers and learners for more personalized instruction. At Castle High School, 120 students are heterogeneously grouped and assigned to four teachers for their core subjects. The third site is developing an at-risk prevention model as part of its guidance program.

Involving all elements of the school's community, the purpose is to assist students in developing positive self-concepts and social interaction skills. Parent participation is especially targeted. Lessons have been developed by the teachers and counselors that recognize different learning styles and incorporate elements of the Hawaiian culture into the content. While all three schools are DOE sites, the secondary school-within-a-school project works in closest cooperation with the university partner, and the elementary guidance project works in closest cooperation with KS/BE.

Preservice Teacher Education

Also part of partnership reform efforts are two projects to improve teacher education. The first is a proposed Master of Education for Teaching (MET) program, designed primarily for an increasing nontraditional student clientele. It is organized as a school-based, two-year residency for cohorts of forty students working with selected university faculty members and school mentors. Integrated course work across the college, a case study curriculum, and a paid internship make this program different from current offerings.

Planned as a pilot effort in the 1991-1992 school year, the first cohort will be situated at an exemplary site for professional development. The MET is part of the partnership's contribution to national improvement of teacher education, as a member both of the Holmes Group and the National Network for Educational Renewal.

The second is an ongoing alternative to the university's undergraduate program in elementary education. This is the Preservice Education for Teachers of Minorities (PETOM), now in its fourth two-year cycle. PETOM is developed cooperatively with the College of Education and KS/BE to foster special competencies for teaching, especially as applied in rural settings. The principal goals are to prepare reflective teachers, to apply principles of inquiry to teaching, and to work cooperatively with other education professionals. Specific competencies include utilizing an interdisciplinary knowledge base and enhancing the ability of teachers to adjust instruction to students' cultural backgrounds. To date, PETOM has graduated thirty-one teachers and placed approximately 74 percent in target rural schools.

Principal Preparation

Action by partnership members is committed also to reforms in the preparation of new principals. In this regard, the Cohort School Leadership (CSL) Program is established in response to recommendations from a task force report on "Leadership Preparation for Hawaii's Schools." The CSL program emphasizes the actual working context of the new principals through an extensive internship experience. Interns are becoming more actively involved in their own learning and establishing collaborative working relationships. A first cohort of forty interns currently is "shadowing" forty selected mentor principals at their respective school sites. In addition to this experience, program highlights include integrated university course work, a case study curriculum, focused seminars, and a high degree of coordination of the aims of both the schools and the university.

Partnership Schools

A final action component of Hawaii's partnership serves as a key support mechanism for each of the other three strands of partnership emphasis. This is the effort to identify and institutionalize exemplary professional school sites. Criteria for selection resulted from efforts of another partnership task force. These include the identification of at least six teachers and a strong principal, all of whom are committed to the partnership effort. Other considerations include the interest of faculty and staff in continuous school renewal and professional improvement, and a willingness to work collaboratively with others from the school, university, and community. Allied with criteria for selection are operational expectations. Among these are institutional flexibility, shared decision making, time for participant reflection, and clear organizational rewards. In the fall of 1990, the first group of school sites was identified and planning is under way for implementation in the fall of 1991.

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Context in Operation

Impetus for this article was the result of a developing collaboration between the two authors, each of whom comes from a significantly different background. Our recognition and use of cultural and professional differences have led us to an interrogation of the partnership operation as it is embedded in both institutional and cultural contexts. What has emerged is a premise for understanding partnerships generally, encapsulated in the broad concept of context.

Surely those of us who are members of metropolitan communities are aware of the influence of surroundings. However, dealing with this influence is more complicated than just being aware of time, place, and persons that serve as backgrounds to operation. Context must be recognized as a strong determinant of the particularity of each partnership. This is necessary in order to understand that all components of partnership activity are themselves continuously changing, and continually being renegotiated and redefined. To deal with this, partnership participants must take a step back from the institutions, events, practices, and persons that they take for granted. What results is continuously new understanding of the partnership itself.

The context of the Hawaii Partnership is a unique mixture of ethnic cultures, the history of the area, and the institutional organization as these presently are configured in operation. In Hawaii, this is recognized as embedded in local culture. Local culture is composed of various elements, those exotic and common, eastern and western, separate from, yet with ties to and connections with, the rest of America. An illustration of time and geographical location helps make this clear: local life in the island state always is separated by several time zones and by the Pacific Ocean from mainland centers of economic, political, and cultural power. The same events affect people's lives both similarly and differently, based on time and geography.

Of the various cultural elements that make Hawaii unique, the most significant from the authors' perspective is ethnicity. Hawaii has an ethnic composition that is very different from other states. It is the only one with an Asian majority population, but without a single majority group. The mix is primarily of European, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan, and other Pacific Island backgrounds.

Particular ethnic identity is very important in both public and private interactions. When people meet, local culture is played out in a custom derived from Polynesian cultures. This is "talk story"—which is central to local narratives and serves to establish connection between participants in a conversation. Talk story is a manifestation of the cultural context that is honored by those who are born and raised in the islands. It is introduced to anyone else who remains in Hawaii for an extended period of time. Relationships develop through the process of talk story, with an initial openness leading to expanding inclusion that continues through a recognition and tolerance for difference.

The initial dialogue opens with various questions, which elicit conversational participants' home base (mainland or local, island, district); family ties (immediate or extended); schools attended (local or out-of-state, public or private); and career associations (business, line of work, institution). Through one or more of these questions, there is the underlying purpose of finding some common ground or connection between the parties, even if

such connection may be only remotely related to the immediate purpose of the conversation. It is the beginning point from which the relationship develops and the business begins. Talk story is one of the local practices that is interwoven throughout the operations of the Hawaii School/University Partnership.

Initial Openness

In order to explain the operation of talk story within partnership events, a return to the institutional history of the partnership is necessary. The reason for initial contact among its members was a mutual interest in addressing the needs of the state's educationally disadvantaged students. The formal relationship then grew out of a first set of meetings and the signing of a memorandum of understanding. These meetings were begun through the process of talk story.

Talk story's first characteristic is an initial receptivity. It says that persons in the conversation acknowledge each other and are willing to expect some positive results from the exchange. For instance, at an elementary school in rural Oahu, teachers and School Success task force members met. Their personal connection was established as receptivity to working together in mutually beneficial interaction. Such interaction was possible only because talk story was an integral part of the initial process. In contrast, another partnership effort began in a more formal process that less directly involved the teachers and staff at a school site. While connections were made at the top, talk story was delayed, and there was no general and initial receptivity. In the long run, this resulted in numerous problems for the particular site.

Expanding Inclusion

The transition to the second characteristic of talk story, expanding inclusion, is a natural one if connections are made during the initial stage. Inclusion is important if the professional relationship is to continue. In inclusion, there is a significant degree of personal involvement, but it is important to understand that this may or may not lead to friendship. Professionally, inclusion means a commitment to concerted action for the length of the project. This is explicitly invited; it is not just assumed in a relationship that grows more complex and more enduring. One additional result is that talk story itself becomes more complex as there are new participants, continual negotiation, and deepening commitment to the project agenda.

Inclusion, as a professional process, extends beyond, but continues to incorporate, the personal elements of talk story. This is illustrated currently in an expansion of the school-within-a-school program. At Castle High School, the one core team of four teachers and 120 ninth-grade students

has grown to four cores at two grade levels. The important point regarding talk story is that, even in the larger size, the same processes of conversation continue. What is modeled by the first core for the others is the local necessity of personal connection. The Castle Core idea has extended beyond one school to over twenty middle and high schools throughout the state. Early talk story sessions with individuals in Hawaii and California also led to an ongoing connection.

Recognition and Tolerance for Difference

Underlying initial receptivity and expanding inclusion are both a recognition of and a tolerance for difference. Within talk story, difference encompasses the idea that each participant brings something unique to the interaction. Each uniqueness contributes to what becomes the common goal. As the project is under way, there is a continual return to the value of each individual. What must be understood is that persons are recognized for their different backgrounds, again utilizing the elements that began the initial talk story. As mentioned previously, differences that are highlighted include ethnicities, places of residence, and school allegiances. These are exemplified through humor, telling of anecdotes, and reference to mutual history.

Collaboration has evolved precisely through utilizing personal difference.

As in all aspects of talk story, recognition and tolerance for difference can be successful or unsuccessful. One particularly pertinent example is the collaboration of the authors. They have learned to question each other's understandings, to talk through agreements and disagreements, and to laugh at each other's mistakes. The point is that collaboration has evolved precisely through utilizing personal difference. In their sharing, reference has been made to individual backgrounds and work styles, often with connection to the recent arrival of one of the authors in Hawaii. What has resulted is a special experiment in mutual learning. Their story is illustrative of other participants and interactions in the partnership.

Context Subtleties

A significant aspect of what has been learned by the authors is a deeper understanding of the local context itself. Endemic to all contexts are subtleties that sometimes indicate consistency and sometimes indicate contradiction. One example of subtlety is related to the societal hierarchy in Hawaii. The latter manifests itself in the different ways that ethnic groups see themselves and others, and in categorizations of superiority and inferiority. These designations, of course, are applied dif-

ferently by persons in different societal positions. However, some general agreement crosses most groups in what continues to emerge as the hybrid local culture. For many persons, it is more desirable to live on Oahu than on the outer islands or to live in urban rather than rural communities. Likewise, private and mainland education is more valued than public and island counterparts. When these subtle island values are placed alongside another set that centers on a strong, local pride as unique citizens of Hawaii, contradictions emerge.

A second subtlety involves another dimension of the societal hierarchy, the institutions and operations of politics. Everyone understands that politics pervades island life and that this is not unconnected to island economic power. Politics is so interwoven into daily activity that institutional aims may undermine common goals, because they have not taken precise account of each other. The contradictory point is that difficulties occur because within sophisticated complex organizations, politics is always close at hand. The closeness of institutions actually complicates operations rather than simplifies them.

A third subtlety takes up local pride and its relationship to both visitors and newcomers. People who are not identified as local (born in Hawaii) are always welcomed in an initial spirit of Aloha. Over time, friendships and family connections often develop. However, the contradiction is that even in the most enduring of these personal connections, difference is always underscored when someone who is born elsewhere can never be local. Here again, there is a subtle hierarchy, since being local is more valued than being nonlocal in many aspects of Hawaiian life.

A fourth subtlety concerns local attitudes toward the continental U.S., called the mainland in local culture. There is a complex mixture of awe and preference, as well as disdain and distrust of anything mainland. This is also contradictory because, while most residents would not want to live there, they do want to send their children there to college. Another manifestation is the complex reaction to mainland consultants that often takes the form of asserting that expertise already exists in Hawaii.

Context determines the uniqueness of each partnership.

These cultural subtleties, with their inherent contradictions, are played out in one aspect of local interaction that long-time residents observe and newcomers soon learn. This is the high value accorded to a non-confrontational working style. Confrontation would undermine the spirit of talk story, would deny both initial receptivity and expanding inclusion, and would make difference a problem rather than a strength. Nonconfrontation results in a special gentleness of attitude that anyone sees in island interactions and that underpins the ongoing partnership efforts.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, the theme of context has been used to present an overview of the Hawaii School/University Partnership. The authors' point has been that taking account of context requires more than simply being aware of cultural and institutional influences on professional practices. Context determines the uniqueness of each partnership, and this particularity is not transferable from one setting to another. However, applying the theme of context to each partnership is generalizable.

Thus, each context contains its own lessons for understanding its existence and for continued effective operation. For the authors, what are the lessons that have been learned from Hawaii and its practice of talk story? A first lesson concerns the relationship of informal and formal participant interaction. In Hawaii, informality is highly valued, precedes, and is necessary for formal practice. While not a lesson for all institutional settings, this relationship seems especially appropriate when diverse institutions and groups attempt to work together. This is because in organizations like the partnership, members may not necessarily share the same formal practices of operation. Their ability to work together formally is facilitated by the informal practices that they do share. Talk story provides this informality.

A second lesson works with and expands on the idea of valuing difference. What has been learned is the idea that difference can be retained and used in effective professional activity. Most efforts of common working arrangements and common aims seek to establish a base of operations in sameness or consensus. Consensus building is usually conceptualized as coming to singular agreement, but in the unique Hawaii context, consensus is built on agreeing to remain different. Talk story allows for the continual recognition of separate contributions of the three partnership members and of their contextually diverse participants.

A final lesson arises from a significant aspect of both informal and formal difference, in the power differentials that are always present. This is so, even in an institutional arrangement like the partnership, in which partners are to operate as equals. What has been learned once again is a reminder of contextual subtlety and contradiction. For example, in partnership meetings with school and university personnel, school people tend to feel intimidated by persons who are their teachers in other settings. Too often, professors talk and "students" listen. In Hawaii, talk story is one vehicle for realigning these power relationships during the partnership experience.

The authors of this article began their own cooperative work in talk story processes. Their formal working partnership has extended far beyond itself into an informal partnership. Through their common interrogation of the workings of the Hawaii Partnership, their initial receptivity to each other, their expanding inclusion of participation in each other's lives, and their

continued recognition and tolerance for personal difference, they are developing a friendship.

Suggested Readings

- "Hawaii Project on Children and Youth At-Risk." A summary report of the Hawaii School/University Partnership. Honolulu, HI, 1990.
- Hixson, Judson. "Multicultural Issues in Teacher Education." Paper presented at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, 1990.
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