March 2018 Volume 2, Number 1

Global Comparative Education

Journal of the

World Council of
Comparative
Education Societies
(WCCES)

Éducation Comparée Mondiale:

Revue du Conseil Mondial des Associations D'Education Comparée

Educación Comparada Global:

Revista del Consejo Mundial de Sociedades de Educación Comparada

Всероссийское Сравнительное Образование

Журнал Всемирного Совета Сообществ Сравнительного Образования

全球比较教育

世界比较教育学会联合会刊

Global Comparative Education

Journal of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES)

Éducation Comparée Mondiale

Revue du Conseil Mondial des Associations d'Éducation Comparée

Educación Comparada Global

Revista del Consejo Mundial de Sociedades de Educación Comparada

Всеобщее Сравнительное Образование

Журнал Всемирного Совета Обществ Сравнительного Образования

全球比较教育

世界比较教育学会联合会会刊

التربية المقارنة العالمية

مجلة المجلس العالمي لمختلف مجتمعات التربية و التعليم المقارنين

EDITOR

تحرير, 编辑, Éditrice, ГЛАВНЫЙ РЕДАКТОР, Editora

N'Dri T. Assié-Lumumba (*Cornell University*)

CO-EDITORS

نائب التحرير, 合作编辑, Co-Éditeur, СОРЕДАКТОР, Co- Editor

Vinayagum Chinapah (*Stockholm University*)

Greg William Misiasek (*Beijing Normal University*)

CO-EDITOR & BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

نائب التحرير و مراجعة الكتب & 文献综述编辑, Co-Éditeur & Éditeur de Recension
D'ouvrages, СОРЕДАКТОР И РЕДАКТОР ОБЗОРОВ КНИГ, Co Editor y Editor de
Revisión de Libros

Eve Coxon (*University of Auckland*)

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

مساعد التحرير, 副编辑, Rédacteurs Associés, ПОМОЩНИК РЕДАКТОРА, Editores
Asociados

W. James Jacob (*University of Memphis*)

Aïcha Maherzi (*Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès*)

ADVISORY BOARD

الطاقم الاستشاري, 顾问董事会, КОНСУЛЬТАТИВНЫЙ СОВЕТ, Consejo Consultivo

Abdullah Alajmi (*Arab Open University*)

Steve Azaiki (*International Society of Comparative Education, Science and Technology, Nigeria*)

Gilberto García Batista (*University of Pedagogical Sciences, Cuba*)

Kumari Beck (*Simon Fraser University*)

Luis Bonilla-Molina (*Ministerio del Poder Popular para Educación Universitaria, Ciencia y Tecnología (Mppeuct)*)

Mark Bray (*The University of Hong Kong*)

Oleg Gubin (*Lomonosov Moscow State University*)

Mingyuan Gu (*Beijing Normal University*)

Ruth Hayhoe (*University of Toronto*)

Godwin Kodituwakku (*Institute for Research & Development, Sri Lanka*)

Tamás Kozna (*University of Debrecen*)

Kazuo Kuroda (*Waseda University*)

Norberto Fernández Lamarra (*Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF)*)

Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo (*Wells College*)

Régis Malet (*University of Bordeaux*)

Dimitris Mattheou (*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens*)

Unaisi W. Nabobo-Baba (*University of Guam*)

Donatella Palomba (*University of Rome*)

David Post (*Pennsylvania State University*)

Simon Steen (*European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools*)

Carlos Alberto Torres (*University of California, Los Angeles*)

Ignazio Volpicelli (*University of Rome*)

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

لجنة تحرير المجلة, 期刊编辑委员会, Comité Editorial, РЕДАКЦИОННЫЙ КОМИТЕТ ЖУРНАЛА,

Comité Editorial

Robert Damian Adamson (*The Education University of Hong Kong*)

Sakunthala Yatigammas Ekanayake (*University of Peradeniya, Kandy*)

Zehavit Gross (*Bar-Ilan University*)

Ali Ibrahim (*United Arab Emirates University*)

Jun Li (*University of Hong Kong*)

Régis Malet (*University of Bordeaux*)

Enrique Martínez Larrechea (*Universidad de la Empresa*)

Nagwa Megahed (*American University in Cairo*)

Elena Minina (*The Institute of Education, Higher School of Economics-Moscow*)

Joan.osa Oviawe (*Grace Foundation for Education and Development*)

Haixia Qie (*Tianjin University*)

Guillermo Ruiz (*University of Buenos Aires*)

Xiaoyang Wang (Tsinghua University)
Anthony Welch (University of Sydney)
Lorin Yochim (Beijing Normal University)

EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT TEAM

فريق العمل التحريري للجنة
РЕДАКЦИОННОГО МЕНЕДЖМЕНТА ЖУРНАЛА, Equipo de Dirección Editorial

General Management Member

إدارة عامة
Membres du Comité de gestion, Общие Члены Управления, Miembros de la Dirección General

Jihye Green (University College London)

Language-Specific Management Members

فريق العمل الخاص بالمراجعة اللغوية
языков, Команда Лингвистов-Переводчиков, Miembros de la Dirección en idiomas específicos

العربية اللغة
中文 (Chinese (Mandarin)) | LinLi Zhou (周林莉) (Beijing Normal University, UCLA)
Français (French) | Rassidy Oyeniran (Beijing Normal University)
Русский (Russian) | Larissa Forster (Лариса Форстер) (Beijing Normal University)
Español (Spanish) | Mercedes Andrés (Zhejiang Normal University)

Assistants

العربية اللغة
中文 (Chinese (Mandarin)) | Wenchao Zhang (张文超) (Queen's University Belfast)
Русский (Russian) | Olesya Gladushyna (Олеся Гладушина) (Beijing Normal University)
Español (Spanish) | Melissa Gonzalez-Soto (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)

Interns

مترجم
Alex S.M. Mhone (Beijing Normal University)
Francisco Mitumba (Beijing Normal University)

A *tok stori* about *tok stori*: Melanesian relationality in action as research, leadership and scholarship

Kabini Sanga

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Martyn Reynolds

Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Irene Paulsen

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Rebecca Spratt

University of Auckland, New Zealand

Joash Maneipuri

SSEC Education, Solomon Islands

The fit between methodology and context is an important matter in research. This article discusses the suitability of one research methodology, *tok stori*, in its indigenous location, Melanesia. *Tok stori* is a Melanesian Pacific relational mode of communication, widely practiced and understood, capable of application in a wide variety of Melanesian contexts. In this article, *tok stori* is first located in the relational web of the *wantok* system, and subsequently discussed through literature which draws on historical, cultural and regional perspectives. The relationship between *tok stori* and *talanoa*, its regional counterpart, is then explored. A *tok stori* session about *tok stori* provides the basis for a thematic analysis of *tok stori* as a form through various lenses: as a cultural norm; as process; as a space for relationality; and in intersections with the West. Finally, five findings are presented. These focus on the potential contribution of *tok stori* in a number of non-traditional fields, including deliberate leadership development and formal research. Advocating for Melanesian methodology as a fit with Melanesian research is an act of decolonisation. However, the relational core of *tok stori* also provides others with the opportunity to rethink the importance of valuing people in knowledge creation and learning. Thus, *tok stori* offers a counterpoint to decontextualized and dehumanised knowledge generation and advocates for the importance of relationality.

Tok stori o tok stori: Меланезийская реляционность в действии как исследование, лидерство и знание

Соответствие между методологией и контекстом является важным вопросом в исследованиях. В этой статье рассматривается пригодность одной методологии исследования, *tok stori*, в исконном местоположении, Меланезия. *Tok stori* — это Меланезийский Тихоокеанский реляционный способ общения, широко практикуемый и понимаемый, который может применяться в самых разных меланезийских контекстах. В этой статье *tok stori* сначала рассматривается в реляционной сети системы *wantok*, а затем обсуждается в литературе, которая опирается на исторические, культурные и региональные аспекты. Затем исследуется взаимосвязь между *tok stori* и *talanoa*, его региональным аналогом. Сессия *tok stori* о *tok stori* обеспечивает основу для тематического анализа *tok stori* как формы через различные линзы: как культурную норму; как процесс; как возможность для реляционности; и в пересечении с Западом. В заключение, представлены пять выводов. Они сосредоточены на потенциальном вкладе *tok stori* в ряд нетрадиционных областей, включая целенаправленное развитие лидерства и формальные исследования. Пропаганда меланезийской методологии как соответствия меланезийским исследованиям является актом деколонизации. Тем не менее, реляционное ядро *tok stori* также предоставляет другим возможность переосмыслить важность ценности людей в создании и обучении знаний. Таким образом, *tok stori* представляет контрпункт для деконтекстуализирования и дегуманизирования поколением знаний и выступает за важность реляционности.

Una tok stori sobre tok stori: La relacionalidad melanesia en acción como investigación, liderazgo y erudición

El ajuste entre la metodología y el contexto es un crucial en la investigación. Este artículo discute la idoneidad de *tok stori* como metodología de investigación, en su ubicación indígena, Melanesia. El *tok stori* es un modo de comunicación relacional del pacífico melanesio, ampliamente practicado y entendido, capaz de aplicarse en una amplia variedad de contextos melanesios. En este artículo, *tok stori* es ubicado por primera vez en la red relacional del sistema *wantok*, y consecutivamente se discute a través de la literatura que se basa en las perspectivas históricas, culturales y regionales. Luego se explora la relación entre el *tok stori* y el *talanoa*, en su contraparte regional. Una sesión de *tok stori* sobre *tok stori* fundamenta un análisis temático sobre *tok stori* a través de varios lentes: como una norma cultural; como un proceso; como un espacio para la relacionalidad; y una intersección con el oeste. Finalmente, se presentan cinco hallazgos. El enfoque está puesto en la potencial contribución del *tok stori* en una serie de campos no tradicionales, incluyendo el desarrollo deliberado de liderazgo y la investigación formal. La defensa de la metodología melanesia como parte de la investigación melanesia es un acto de descolonización. Sin embargo, el núcleo relacional del *tok stori* también brinda la oportunidad de repensar el alcance de valorar a las personas en el conocimiento de la creación y el aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, el *tok stori* ofrece un contrapunto a la generación de conocimiento descontextualizada y deshumanizada y aboga por la importancia de la relacionalidad.

Introduction

Lynda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminds us that for Indigenous peoples, “our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices—all may be spaces of marginalisation, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope” (p. 4). This article pays attention to one social practice, *tok stori*, a communication mode of Melanesian origin, and seeks to tell part of its story. *Tok stori* offers opportunities for researchers and others to follow a relational path in their investigations, one which recognises the connectedness of humanity. Such a path is likely to yield learning which serves the interests of communities precisely because the methodology is ontological: *tok stori* is a way of being in the world and of understanding the world. We begin the story with a brief discussion of the *wantok* system, paying attention to the way webs of connectivity develop Melanesian-style. We then present some of what has already been told of *tok stori* with a focus on some areas

existence. Regionally, the concept of being a *wantok* is also an element underpinning notions of Melanesianism (Lawrence, 1975). As a relational network, the *wantok* system can sit uncomfortably with supposedly non-relational Western-based social structures (Mana, 1999; Tanda, 2011). However, as McLeod (2008) says, the *wantok* system points “to the ongoing importance of kin and the attached notion of reciprocity” (p. 8) in Melanesia, where relationality is central and language as *tok* is a key element in indicating the kinds of relatedness experienced and obligation due. *Tok stori* is an element of negotiating relatedness in an ongoing way. Being a *wantok* through *tok stori* implies being involved in the creation of a negotiated understanding of the world.

Tok Stori in the Literature

Just as the meaning of *wantok* is contextual, so is *tok stori*. When claiming *tok stori* as a methodology as well as an ontology, a tension must be acknowledged between specific and longstanding cultural contexts and more contingent experiences. These poles are represented in the literature by village- and regional-level examples.

The literature gives examples of storytelling traditions at the village level in Melanesia and suggests that not all storytelling can easily be termed *tok stori*. For instance, Van Heekeren (2014) provides an interesting investigation of the contextual complexities of the word *stori* as used by the Vula’a of PNG. He outlines the way the *tok pisin* word *stori* has subsumed *tok ples* (local words) for several narrative forms such as *rikwana*, a term which is close to the English word legend. Van Heekeren points to the European misunderstanding that *stori* means story, whereas, depending on context and the tribe of speaker, it can refer to a range of things. Thus, beyond denoting *rikwana*, the word *stori* is used “to refer to a range of conversational activities; from telling jokes and anecdotes and discussing local gossip to relating events of historical importance” (p. 174). *Stori* in this context is as much about being social and talking as it is about giving information through content or meaning. The meaning of *stori* is active, and “conversation is given great social value” (Van Heekeren, 2014, p. 174). Relationality is at the heart of *stori*, and central to *tok stori* as an activity.

At the regional end of the spectrum, Kabutaulaka (2015) sees *tok stori* as both rooted in Melanesia and as a central element in Melanesianism. Acknowledging relationality as the core of *wantokism*, Kabutaulaka sees *tok stori* as the discursive embodiment of Melanesia, a fluid relational process where linguistic bonds connect. Evans, Guy, Honan, Paraide, and Muspratt (2010) describe *tok stori* in PNG as “an oral tradition where reflections on issues or problems are undertaken dialogically” (p. 83); Vella and Maebuta (2018) in a Solomon Islands context say it is “a cultural and accepted method of sharing information” (p. 66); and Brigg, Chadwick, Griggers, Murdock, and Vienings (2015) call *tok stori* a “traditional orally transmitted Melanesian processes of discussion” (p. 10). Thus, common ground can be seen across the region.

Although some writers have used the Polynesian *talanoa* and *tok stori* synonymously (Houma, 2011; Nanau, 2014; Sanga, 2016), *tok stori*, when understood as a processual relational negotiation, is different in scope from *talanoa*. For example, Tongan discussions of contextually-important elements of *talanoa* (Fa’avae, Jones, & Manu’atu, 2016) do not apply, whereas an acknowledgement of the significance of village-based understandings such as those discussed by Van Heekeren (2014) may be more relevant. What is at stake in distinguishing *talanoa* and *tok stori* is not protocol which is, in any case, always contextual, but identification and Melanesian ownership. For example, in the context of post-tension negotiations in the Solomon Islands, the grass roots appeal of *tok stori* was its recognition by villagers as “their

custom way” (Talanoa & Development Project, 2005, paragraph 8). *Tok stori*, then, is a Melanesian expression of commitment to togetherness manifest through engaging in *stori*, a shared narrative which dialogically constructs reality. This is the core of its ontological nature.

Tok stori is reported in the literature as an effective approach to research as knowledge generation in several fields. Of special interest are the ways in which *tok stori* relates to thinking, actions and activities which have Western origin. Although before colonisation Indigenous groups “had to work out ways of knowing... to predict, to learn and reflect” (Smith, 1999, p. 13), one role formal research following the Western tradition can perform in postcolonial life is to mediate “between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting the Other” (p. 2). *Tok stori* as practiced amongst *wantoks* in villages and towns in Melanesia is an everyday occurrence. The question is, how can *tok stori* contribute in other contexts? In order for the potential of *tok stori* as resistance and Indigenous voice to be realised in intercultural contexts, we might heed the advice of Thaman (2008) to “look towards our own cultural roots for inspiration in order to reclaim our conversation with one another about our education and about living together as a human family” (p. 463). Because *tok stori* has deep roots, its pedigree for sponsoring positive change is well-established. In the modern world, this potential continues. To illustrate this, examples from the literature of *tok stori* as knowledge generation in conflict mediation, leadership development, and educational research will now be discussed.

Brigg and colleagues (2015) discuss *tok stori* as mediation, specifically in post-tension Solomon Islands. In this extreme situation, *tok stori* was adapted with the intention of enhancing its potential for bringing peace. After the cessation of violence, the National Peace Council (NPC) and local chiefs organised *kastom* (customarily based) protocols in the form of “bridging” (Brigg, et al., 2015, p. 10) ceremonies as a prelude to *tok stori*. These events, sometimes conducted in a shuttle fashion between groups, were intended to bring participants to a relational state where *tok stori* would be possible. *Tok stori* was then used in conjunction with a Western stage-based conciliation model, a blend described as “externally assisted dialogue” (Spence & Wielders, 2006, p. 11). Although the vitality of *tok stori* is indicated by its adaptability, the need for this assistance is disputed. Briggs and colleagues (2015) recall that a “former senior NPC official noted...a system for dealing with the full range of human conflicts and grievances had historically been in place throughout the Solomon Islands” (p. 11). Whatever one’s opinion, *tok stori* embedded in the peace-making initiative was central to re-establishing order through reconciliation.

In the context of leadership development, Sanga (2017) gives an account of “storying as pedagogy” (p. 101), a process of people development which is the antithesis of the “forced separations” (p. 102) of abstracted theory and lived experience found in some other approaches to leadership development. In his account, key aspects of *tok stori* as pedagogy include: friendship as a basis for interaction, which allows experiences to be shared in unthreatening situations where the challenging of assumptions is supported by relational closeness; leadership as a relational activity which is primarily narratively embedded rather than strategically understood; inclusiveness, where *tok stori* is unifying through narrative and the stratification of position and abstraction are downplayed; and validation for those whose world-view tradition is generally mediated through storying. In Sanga’s view, storying itself invites listeners to open their worlds to each other and become part of each other’s stories. Its active nature mitigates against stagnation and dependence, and works in favour of productive and deep conversation. Storying is a powerful pedagogy since it focusses collaboration, cooperative activity, action through talk, innovation through contextual reshaping and construction of new, fluid realities. *Tok stori* is the Melanesian form of this.

Other writers have described *tok stori* in formal research contexts. Davidson (2012) describes *tok stori* in her research as a method where the Western forms of interview and focus group “morphed in one-on-one or group ‘stori’ sessions” (p. 63). She suggests that *tok stori* fluidly frames power in research: participants can anticipate the shape of conversations through their own knowledge. Despite being an outsider with limited fluency in *Tok Pisin*, Davidson was aware of ungrasped subtleties in *tok stori* beyond the narrative inquiry principles driving her work, and of the importance of relationality to *tok stori*. *Tok stori*, it seems, transcended the theories she brought to the field. However, the observation of similarity between *tok stori* and focus groups has led these forms to being seen as one (Roughan, et al., 2011). Where this happens, the surface appearance of group discussion can mask the ontological differences between telling one’s story to others in the hope that it will be heard and participating in the creation of a relational world through *tok stori*. This danger points to the need to focus on the *stori* process and its ongoing relationship to life rather than a narrative and its relationship to the past. In the former, *tok stori* invokes aspects of being a *wantok*. The latter involves listeners.

A Tok Stori About Tok Stori

At the 2017 OCIES conference in Nouméa, New Caledonia, a *tok stori* about *tok stori* took place in the English language. The intentions included: investigating what was understood about *tok stori* by participants; furthering the development of deliberate thought about *tok stori*; focussing on Melanesian relationality within a Western-defined conference space; and signalling the potential of *tok stori* to contribute to research of benefit to Melanesian people and others interested in advancing a relational understanding of humanity. The participants numbered 17, and included: people from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Fiji; non-Melanesian people from the United States, New Zealand, and Australia with experience of *tok stori*; and others with no experience but who wanted to take part in, and further their understanding of the potential of *tok stori*. All authors were participants in this activity.

The session touched on *tok stori* as an everyday part of Melanesian life, in research, leadership development, as pedagogy, and as an activity within Western-framed contexts such as international aid. The *tok stori* session lasted an hour and a half, and was recorded and transcribed with participants’ permission. The first five or so speakers had been asked to consider in advance what they might say, and the first speaker set the scene for the group. What follows is a thematic analysis of the transcript of the *tok stori*, developed to expose some of the features of *tok stori* as understood by participants, as well as to focus questions about its parameters and relevance. Following the discussion of themes, we present a more general discussion of *tok stori* as ontology. Participants are identified by number throughout (P1, P2, and so on).

Thematic Discussion

Aspects of Tok stori and contexts for its operation

This section discusses *tok stori* as a cultural form, process, expression of relationality, and some of the ways it exists in interfaces with ideas and practices from the West.

Tok stori as a cultural form

A helpful approach to culture in the context of *tok stori* is to see culture as “a system of logic with its own underpinning assumptions and internal coherence” (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009,

p. 115). This draws attention to the connections between what people do, make and believe, rather than atomising life into actions, objects and thoughts. In this view, culture is what joins the various things we do and think, giving pattern to a shifting and negotiated network of observable occurrences and abstract ideas. From this position, flexibility in the way something is manifested does not undermine the idea of culture. Instead it speaks of the coherent logical underpinning through which flexibility in action is validated, giving evidence of the tenets through which sense is made. It is this logic which connects being a *wantok* and *tok stori*.

Some Melanesian participants in the session recognised *tok stori* as a cultural form from their village experiences with *wantoks*. One participant (referred to as Participant 1-P1) described how a layered series of traditional contexts can fall under the general term *tok stori*:

The very basic concept of *tok stori* in my language is *faghaja*. That is the term we use. *Faghaja* is a space; a space wherein two familiar people are interacting; a space which is easy. The next layer is *toutomu*. *Toutomu* is much more formal than *faghaja* and involves many more participants than *faghaja*. The next layer is *haidu*. *Haidu* involves talking about actions which we are to take. This involves talking about what we are to do; about the outcomes. (P1)

Here, the general Tok Pisin term *tok stori* applies most comfortably in a wide and general context, *faghaja*. *Tok stori* as *faghaja* is spatially focussed: space can be understood as both the form and site of *tok stori* as *faghaja*, an “easy” space, based on relational and physical closeness. Variations arise contextually on numerical and functional grounds. This unpacking is similar to Van Heekeren’s (2014) discussion of the understandings of the Vula’a outlined above. In both cases, although specific linguistic terms are offered for talk according to context, the generic term *tok stori* operates to reinforce the relational and interactive nature of many discursive encounters.

Melanesian participants, while not contributing taxonomic accounts of spoken encounters at village level, also attested to their familiarity with *tok stori*. For instance, one said, “*tok stori* is something I am familiar with. Culturally, I use *tok stori* with family and relatives, every day, in the village” (P2). However, familiarity can depend on context: “I am a novice in *tok stori* as a research approach, I am actually a practitioner of *tok stori* in a cultural sense.” (P1) The use of the word culture by participants echoes the findings of the Talanoa and Development Project (2005) cited previously regarding the importance of familiarity and ownership to the significance of *tok stori*.

The levels of people’s understanding in *tok stori* can vary. One non-Melanesian participant with much experience in the region commented, “To really *tok stori*, you’ve got to be fluent in the language. Not just the language but the names of people, places and things. If you do not know, you will not fully *tok stori*.” (P11) This draws attention to the way meaning is encoded in language at more than one depth, and to the role of linguistic knowledge in appreciating information beyond immediate denotation. Comprehension is also layered by the degree of contextual cultural awareness. A Melanesian participant pointed to the way metaphoric language and other contextual aspects present in *tok stori* can either facilitate or limit understanding:

In *tok stori*, people use metaphors all the time. Recently, I was in [an area] and was having a conversation with a teacher who told me that in her school, teachers are not performing because most of them sit down in front of a big mountain and breathe on it. If you do not know that, you won’t understand. In another situation, another teacher was telling me to receive what she was telling

me as “a snake rotting in your mouth.” The matter is confidential, you cannot share it. So, in *tok stori*, you might miss so much. (P3)

In addition, paralinguistic expression is not universal. It can contribute to understanding, but is contextual and demanding of participants: “In *tok stori*, it is easy to miss many things. If you look at gestures, people’s faces, etc., you can miss many things. Someone might say, “I am alright,” but their faces will tell you that they are not.” (P3)

Thus, the distinction between *tok stori* where all members are deeply embedded in a cultural or situational niche and *tok stori* between people whose prior-connection is more functional or short-lived points to the significance of context in reading what is said. This variation attests to *tok stori* as a mutable form of communication organised around a relational core. In the words of one participant, “the process of *tok stori* involves interactions—it is about relationships.” (P1) The processual development of relationships as a key aspect of *tok stori* is part of its logic.

Tok stori as process

Tok stori is an example of what Smith (1999) means when she writes of the success of Indigenous communities “to work out ways of knowing ... to predict, to learn and reflect” (p. 13). In the Nouméa session, *tok stori* was characterised as a way of coming to know, an important process because, “particularly in Indigenous knowledge systems, certain knowledge is hidden in the practices of communities.” (P4) This points to the *tok stori* process as a revelatory practice. In the session, the facilitator invited participants to ‘do’ *tok stori* – to engage in a ‘practice’ intended to ‘draw out insights’ – reveal their understandings to themselves and others through a dialogical process. (P4)

The *tok stori* process is active. Listeners and speakers alike are expected to have an ongoing commitment to sense making. One participant in the Nouméa session illustrated this in a reflection about intergenerational *tok stori*:

In my own cultural background, when you ask a question of an elder, instead of giving you a direct answer, they’ll tell you a story. The young person will say, “I don’t want to hear a story. Tell me what to do.” The whole point being, the elder uses a metaphor or a story or a parable and the younger person is to figure it out. That is the power of storytelling. (P5)

In this example, the passivity of being told is contrasted by the activity of responding to *stori*: linear narrative is contrasted with a more circular structure. Because people’s experiences are different, *tok stori* is a space where each person can learn from others by re-shaping the understandings they hear to make sense of their own context. The meaning is in the process—in the *stori* told, the responses made, and the relationship between them. In this instance, the elder is the expert in what they tell, but the young person must become an expert in what it means to them at this point in their life.

Spatial arrangements can reflect the ongoing processual nature of *tok stori*. In the *tok stori* session in Nouméa there was “no one ... standing up front to talk. Instead we are sitting in a circle. Our sitting arrangement demystifies the concept of expert knowledge holder by making us sit together in a circle.” (P4) Relationships and power dynamics always condition interaction but “*tok stori* is a creation of space for people to tell their own *stori*.” (P4) *Tok stori* is an adaptable process which “depends on who it is that is present. *Tok stori* is about the people who are there” (P4) and about their relationships.

Tok stori as relationality

The importance of relationality in Melanesian life is clear through the cultural reference of being a *wantok*. As has been discussed, the “*wantok* system provides the basis for social interaction among actors that otherwise would have little in common” (Okole, 2005, p. 47). *Tok stori* is practiced amongst *wantoks*, and although taking part does not necessarily make one a *wantok*, the process provides a space whereby greater levels of connection can be identified and/or developed. Close relationality among strangers may take time to develop, and for *tok stori* to deal with private, difficult, or contentious issues, trust can be important. Culturally, “Solomon Islanders are suspicious of each other. They may sit around together but they will not readily give you the information you seek. You need to establish relationships first.” (P6) In new situations, especially in contexts which are not directly informed by shared understandings, the depth of *tok stori* “depends very much on how the environment and climate for *tok stori* is created and built. Because of this, it is very important to build a trusting relationship.” (P2) To pursue a specific subject in an unfamiliar context, time and the willingness to adapt may be required, for “*tok stori* is about knowing people and not about keeping to procedures and certain processes.... When you understand people, then you begin to understand the procedures and processes they use.” (P2) When close and trusting relationships exist or are assumed, *tok stori* can be “a co-created, self-created, sustainable, and owned development ... a people-enhancing development.” (P4)

Tok stori interfacing with the West

As has been previously discussed, *tok stori* is an umbrella term which has come to cover many distinct forms of talk in Melanesian village contexts. *Tok stori* is also an umbrella term denoting a growing field of activities in contexts where the Melanesian world meets ideas and structures from the West. Participants’ understandings of *tok stori* in the contexts of research and leadership development provide examples of situations where Melanesian and Western thinking meet.

Research

Some participants spoke of their experiences of *tok stori* in research. One highlighted aspect was relational closeness. One participant explained: “*Tok stori* lends itself so well to research because it involves the actual coming down to the level of people in their contexts. This allows a face to face interaction which ensures an in depth drawing out of information. *Tok stori* is a space which is open.” (P1) The meeting of research participants as people in *tok stori* can lead to deep responses. When trust is established, no lack of knowledge or imagination on the part of the researcher constrains what people can contribute because they are free to tell their own *stori*.

The potential of *tok stori* in research in Melanesian contexts was compared to other research activities such as questionnaires and formal interviews. This can be in terms of participation: “I told myself, “I know these people but why are they not answering my questionnaire?” This led me to use *tok stori* instead.” (P6)

Relationships also affect the veracity of data: “Of course, participants wanted to please us by saying good things in answer to our questionnaire. They listed 5,5,5,5. But when we discussed ... we learnt that there were many layers of experiences and meanings. So that was a valuable exercise.” (P7)

The relationality of *tok stori* can lead to distinctive kinds of data: “We have seen that the *tok stori* data is very different, rich and complex. It seems clear to us that the kind of data which you cannot capture from a questionnaire will come out in *tok stori*.” (P2) Data is valuable to the extent it reflects the lives of those whom research aims to serve. If the Melanesian world is complex, relational and reciprocally constructed, *tok stori* has its place because of its consistency with that world. The above comments reveal the limitations in Melanesian contexts of research methods which construct wide relational distances between participants and the researcher. They also speak to the value of *tok stori* as a way of embracing closeness as an element in successful research.

Leadership Development

In the context of leadership development, one participant storied about the potential of *tok stori* to reveal the complex world in which leaders operate which demands a responsive rather than a pre-constructed programme. Comparing more linear approaches to *tok stori* in this context he recalled:

Instead of starting with an abstract idea of what we want educational leadership to look like, we asked leaders about their practices of leadership. We began by asking leaders about themselves, about the work they do as leaders in their settings. So, for example, we started to *tok stori* with leaders about what they did as leaders, the day before. And as they were talking about this, we asked about why they did what they did. (P2)

In *tok stori*, leaders start as experts in their own leadership and can explore their self-understandings on an equal footing with programme facilitators. Learning can be reciprocal under these conditions:

Leadership as seen in *tok stori* was different from one place to another. This was an important realization for me; that reality is not lineal. Reality is not simple. Reality is complex. Having understood this, we began to look for different ways of supporting leaders in their own contexts, to be of help to them as mentors. (P2)

In this way, *tok stori* is reciprocal learning. The outcome in this case was that the programme “learned.”

Negotiating between tok stori and the West

In intercultural situations, successful outcomes involve negotiation. Issues of time, recognisability and validity surfaced in the *tok stori* session as contested aspects of the relationship between *tok stori* and Western thinking and practices.

Time

According to participants, different understandings of time provoke the need to negotiate between *tok stori* and the West. This is because “there is no start and finish or end of a *tok stori*. *Tok stori* continues. It does not respect project deadlines.” (P8) However,

In an international project, we have deadlines. *Tok stori* often easily goes on for hours and days, especially when there are interesting things to talk about.... So you have to have a way of suspending or ending *tok stori*.... So, even when the

tok stori is sweet, you might need to say to people, “Ating hem naf nao ia.” (I think that is enough for now.) (P2)

Non-Melanesia participants storied about *tok stori* as reflexive learning. With more lineal expectations, it can be a surprise when “the *stori* would go round and round and I would be going, ok, but you already said that three times.” (P9) The ubiquitous Western value of efficiency is denied by repetition if *tok stori* is not understood as an ongoing process. Another non-Melanesian appreciated this tension:

Tok stori as a process needs to be kept front and centre. It is very easy to confine it into a box. (P8)

Short time frames, perhaps set up to match budget cycles, encourage “boxing”—the shaping of actions to facilitate programme demands rather than to respond to people in their context.

Validity

As has been discussed, *tok stori* is indigenous to Melanesia and endemic to Melanesian life. Yet, *tok stori* can seem invalid in contexts which interface with Western thinking, a result of the belittling consequences of colonialism discussed by Hau'ofa (1994). The invalidity of *tok stori* can be suggested by its absence. One participant storied about of the start of her research journey.

In PNG, I went in as a researcher. Armed with my questionnaire and survey guide, I went to work. However, some *wantoks* met me and asked us to go to a party instead ... the stories were so “in the present,” so full and rich. When I returned to university, I started to change my approach to research. I began looking for decolonizing literature. (P10)

In this account, experiential learning in a Melanesian context revealed what institutional programmes had not: “full and rich” data can develop through the researcher being with people in *tok stori* because *tok stori* makes sense in Melanesian contexts such as PNG.

The validity of *tok stori* can also be challenged by a failure to name it. Names give us ways of approaching, adapting and developing the things we do. Silencing a name impedes agency. One participant’s *stori* attests to this:

I have just recently been introduced to *tok stori*. However, in my own doctoral research, I was using *tok stori* in my data gathering and recording of data but I did not have a name for these, as *tok stori*. But now, I understand that what I was doing was *tok stori*.... I am grateful for the older Pacific academics that have helped us to understand such tools as *tok stori*. (P1)

In this case, naming *tok stori* has made it malleable as a tool and has linked the research genealogically to the well of Melanesian knowledge.

Recognisability

Related to time and validity is negotiation between *tok stori* and thinking from the West around recognisability. This concerns the willingness of programmes such as those developed by international aid donors to recognise the contribution *tok stori* can make in achieving their objectives. The *stori* of one non-Melanesian participant serves to illustrate this:

I think that we’re living in a world where processes and stories are not valued. Rather only the product at the end; the product that can be measured is valued....

The question therefore is, how do we make that process, the product that can then be more valued?... Immediately people [in the donor community] are wanting to reduce *tok stori* into a “thing.” (P8)

There is a tension between seeing people-centred activities in Melanesia as a technical matter requiring techniques and understanding *tok stori* as a processual way of being. If *tok stori* is recognised as a valid enterprise and given time, a recognition of its capabilities to create a context for learning may follow:

In terms of change, a project needs to be guided by a particular theory of change.

We need to know what particular factors are likely to contribute to change.

Because *tok stori* is contextual, the entire cultural setting will have to be taken into account in determining the appropriate theory of change. (P2)

Discussion

In the following section, we summarize the main findings of this study and explore the further implications for *tok stori* in international development and research. First, we argue that *tok stori* is ontological. To Melanesians, *tok stori* reality exists subjectively in the shared social interactions and social space between *tok stori* participants or actors. Such a reality is contextually defined and exists within relational settings. It is expressed authentically, using shared language and other cultural expressions, and owned as cultural by *tok stori* actors. Given that *tok stori* is highly relevant in Melanesia, its use in international development and research projects is appropriate and to be encouraged. Advocacy of *tok stori* use is made despite the limited research knowledge: much is yet to be known about *tok stori*. This includes any understanding of manipulative *tok stori* which may seek to use the form while denying its ontology.

Second, the study describes *tok stori* as a process which is active, revelatory and inviting of others. Unlike other forms of narrative which are linear, *tok stori* is circular in structure. Meanings are embedded in the *tok stori* process and are therefore discerned by interpretation. By implication, because Melanesian *tok stori* as process is active, it uses Melanesian rules of interpretation. As a result of its circular structure and processual nature, *tok stori* offers both new opportunities as well as challenges for international development and research projects. *Tok stori* also demands that sensitivities of Melanesian human experiences of space, time, value, order and change as yet unrecognised by scholarship are developed and used.

Third, in support of its focus on people, the study sees *tok stori* as relational. Pedagogically, *tok stori* enables relationships to be built between *tok stori* actors. In sharing *tok stori*, actors are invited into each other's worlds; thereby enabling people to explore, develop and deepen their relationships with each other. Within international development and research projects, a deliberately relational intervention is likely to be more liberating and socially just for all *tok stori* actors. Relational interventions promote understanding through the involvement and development of the whole person.

Fourth, the study identifies two *tok stori* interfaces. In relation to research, *tok stori* lends itself to relational closeness with Melanesian people. In doing so, *tok stori* enables the sharing and celebrating of rich and complex social data in certain kinds of research. In relation to leadership development, *tok stori* reveals leadership as experience-based rather than theoretically driven, thereby demanding that leadership development interventions be responsive and adaptive to lived leadership realities. Given these interfaces, perhaps *tok stori* offers an opportunity for renewed re-creation and co-creation of international development and research relationships

which are enabling, respectful and reciprocal for Melanesian people (as *tok stori* actors and communities).

The fifth and final finding of this study relates to the issue of mediating *tok stori* and the West. In international development projects, it is noted that different understandings of time by Melanesians and the West need to be negotiated. Because *tok stori* is ongoing, it is easily boxed in development projects by abrupt, linear constructions of efficiency. In research, the study points out that there are two areas for mediation. The first relates to the observation that the validity of Melanesian *tok stori* can be enhanced by its deliberate and defensible inclusion in mainstream research. The second relates to the proposition that that when researchers name Melanesian *tok stori* as a valid research philosophy, methodology, approach and method, doing so supports the further use and development of Melanesian *tok stori* in mainstream research. Perhaps, beyond mediating *tok stori* with Western paradigms of international development and research, *tok stori* as ontology offers a more ethical space wherein communion, communication and enlarged understanding of people is centred.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued for the recognition of *tok stori* as ontology, underpinning its potential as a methodology in several fields such as conflict resolution, leadership development and research. Limits to its recognition are reinforced by thin literature, and this article is a small step towards developing a greater scholarship of *tok stori*. A comprehensive approach has not been possible in this forum, nor was it in the *tok stori* session about *tok stori* in Nouméa which provided the original data here. Indeed, participants' questions remain unanswered both there and here. Thus, areas for further exploration include: the relationship between *tok stori* and various forms of power and status: gender, age-related, culturally defined hierarchies, traditional restrictions on who can talk to whom, and so on.

There is evidence on the ways Indigenous orality and rhetoric can be negotiated in post-colonial spaces, such as in formal education in Australian Aboriginal communities (Ma Rhea, 2012). Therefore, the place of *tok stori* could be developed in the wider literature of Indigenous orality and rhetoric in similar contexts. Other contexts for *tok stori* also deserve future thought. These might include: the relationships between *tok stori* and restorative practice in education, *talanoa*, and other forms of dialogic human engagement. Despite these gaps, we offer *tok stori* as a way of negotiating a shared understanding of the world which resonates with an imagined Melanesian mind because it focusses on: reciprocal learning, the development of understanding, the validation of experience, and the enhancement of relationality—the drawing together of people as putative *wantoks*. For these reasons we consider this and future efforts of scholarship worthwhile.

Acknowledgement

Appreciation is offered to the following who participated in the *tok stori* at the Noumea OCIES: Emilie Sila'ila'i, Robert Early, Sapna Sharma, Martyn Reynolds, Nina Tu'i, Yolande Cavaloc, Julie McLaughlin, Rebecca Pratt, Hellen Marau, Roselyn Maneipuri, Joash Maneipuri, Billy Fito'o, Minerva Blancaneaux, Randy Thaman, Kabini Sanga, Rae Silata, and Irene Paulsen.

References

- Brigg, M., Chadwick, W., Griggers, C., Murdock, J., & Vienings, T. (2015). *Solomon Island National Peace Council: Inter-communal mediation*. Retrieved from https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:373816/brigg_et_al_2015_nat_peace_medn.pdf.
- Davidson, A. J. (2012). *Enlarging the field of credible experience: Supporting young Solomon Islanders as agents of positive change in their communities*. (PhD), Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- Evans, T., Guy, R., Honan, E., Paraide, P., & Muspratt, S. (2010). Reflections on conducting educational research projects in Papua New Guinea. *Journal of research and reflections in education*, 4(2), 72-89.
- Fa'avae, D., Jones, A., & Manu'atu, L. (2016). Talanoa 'i 'ae talanoa—talking about talanoa: Some dilemmas of a novice researcher. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 12(2), 138-150.
- Hau'ofa, E. (1994). Our sea of islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), 148-161.
- Houma, S. (2011). Leadership challenges and management strategies of women school leaders. In G. I. Lingam (Ed.), *Educational Leadership: Emerging Issues and Successful Practices* (pp. 139 - 153). Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific.
- Kabutaulaka, T. (1994). Cohesion and disorder in Melanesia: the Bougainville conflict and the Melanesian way. *New Politics in the South Pacific*, 63-82.
- Kabutaulaka, T. (2015). Re-presenting Melanesia: Ignoble savages and Melanesian alter-natives. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 27(1), 110-145.
- Kaiku, P. (2011). *Rethinking youth bulge theory and threat discourse in Melanesia: Listening in, and connecting with young people in Papua New Guinea*. (MA), University of Hawaii, Manoa, HI. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/24268>
- Koya, C. F. (2013). *Education for the future: Pedagogical approaches in the Asia-Pacific region. Case-study: Fiji*. Retrieved from <http://repository.usp.ac.fj/edprint/6781>
- Lawrence, P. (1975). The Melanesian Way. *Quadrant*, 19(6), 89.
- MacQueen, N. (1989). Sharpening the spearhead: Subregionalism in Melanesia. *Pacific Studies*, 12(2), 33.
- Mana, B. (1999). *An anti-corruption strategy for provincial government in Papua New Guinea*. Retrieved from <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/41606>
- McLeod, A. (2008). *Leadership models in the Pacific*. Retrieved from <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/10082>
- Mila-Schaaf, K., & Hudson, M. (2009). The interface between cultural understandings: Negotiating new spaces for Pacific mental health. *Pacific health dialog*, 15(1), 113-119.
- Nanau, G. L. (2011). The wantok system as a socio-economic and political network in Melanesia. *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society*, 2(1), 31-55.
- Nanau, G. L. (2014). Local experiences with mining royalties, company and the state in the Solomon Islands. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*(1), 77-92.
- Narokobi, B. (1983). *The Melanesian Way*. Boroko, Papua New Guinea: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies.

Vella, L., & Maebuta, J. B. (2018). Building national unity, reconciliation and peace in the Solomon Islands: The missing link. In B. Jenkins, D. B. Subedi, & K. Jenkins (Eds.), *Reconciliation in Conflict-Affected Communities: Practices and Insights from the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 57-74). Singapore: Springer Nature.

About the Authors

Kabini Sanga

The co-President of OCIES. Born and raised in a Solomon Islands village, he is using his cultural expertise to mentor a new generation of Oceania researchers to appreciate indigenous Pacific Islands intellectual traditions and research. This article is part of a wider research project on Oceania relationality. Kabini holds an Associate Professor of Education position at Victoria University of Wellington.

Martyn Reynolds

Of Anglo-Welsh heritage and grew up in London. He has lived and worked in Papua New Guinea, Tonga and the United Kingdom and now resides in Aotearoa New Zealand. He teaches at a Wellington secondary school and is a Research Fellow at the School of Education at Victoria University of Wellington.

Irene Paulsen

An Honorary Fellow with the College of Arts and Education at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. Irene's main research interest is in the area of secondary school transitions and pathways, with a specific focus on the impact of migration, labour mobility and socio-cultural factors on Pacific Islander learner migrant's experiences, trajectories and outcomes in education.

Rebecca Spratt

From New Zealand and has worked in international aid and development in the Pacific region for over 15 years. She has a particular focus in the education sector.

Joash Maneipuri

The Director of Education for the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) in the Solomon Islands. He also is the Chair of the Solomon Islands National Education Board. His interests include mentoring Solomon Islands school leaders towards school flourishing and students' success.