

Teaching the “Truth” in Tautilau: Clashes Over Developing Curriculum After Conflict

Sheena M. Harris

Ph.D. Candidate, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Email: harr2204@umn.edu

Tags

Crisis-Management; Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Partnerships; Primary and Secondary Education

Setting

Tautilau is a small, island country that lies southeast of Hawaii. Since 2006, the country has been recovering from a twenty-year period of violent ethnic conflict and oppression which resulted in the deaths of over 400,000 people out of a population of just over one million. The origins of the conflict largely stem from ethnic divisions that were first put into place by the island's former French colonial power and sustained by the succeeding government. Following an end to the conflict, the United Nations, the World Bank, and other organizations sent teams of developers into the country to help with rebuilding the infrastructure, including replacing school buildings that had been destroyed by the violence.

Due to the sensitivity of the conflict, curriculum development for primary and secondary school history and citizenship courses did not begin until 2013 and was spearheaded by a group of “experts” from France who became involved in creating the curriculum with the Ministry of Education in Tautilau. According to the Ministry of Education, before the implementation of this curriculum in 2016, teachers relied on any available textbooks from the French colonial period and their own personal experiences of history. In 2020, the Ministry of Education decided to overhaul the curriculum, viewing it as largely irrelevant to Tautilauns' lives and not accurately portraying the conflict period. Despite the prior curriculum being deemed unacceptable for educators and students, Ministry of Education officials again contracted with outside developers for this second time, hoping that they could write the “correct” history.

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Case

Chlöe, a French-Canadian education professor from Grosse Rivière University, which has a highly regarded Curriculum and Instruction Department that has played a key role in helping other countries develop new curriculum for primary and secondary schools, was asked by her department head to lead the curriculum development project in Tautilau. Chlöe, a new professor with little knowledge of the country, saw this as an opportunity for her own professional development and for community outreach and readily agreed to travel to Tautilau and meet with Ministry of Education officials to assist them in the curriculum revision process. Before leaving for Tautilau, Chlöe is informed that her main task will involve working with various stakeholders to collect information on the conflict for inclusion into the revised history curriculum.

After a few days spent recovering from jetlag, Chlöe begins work with the Ministry of Education officials. Henri-Kalani, the Minister of Education, explains to Chlöe that she is to lead the revision process, working with others from the Ministry of Education, Tautilaun teachers, and other outside developers. Since Chlöe does not speak Tauti, the main language of Tautilau, or any of the local languages, she uses French when conversing with the others on the curriculum development team. She thinks nothing of it, since Henri-Kalani spoke to her in French when they met and, she was told, all Tautilauns born before 2006 speak French fluently. Teachers from all over Tautilau are invited to the capital city, Mogabai, to participate in revising the curriculum and are encouraged to provide their perspectives on what happened during the conflict for inclusion in the curriculum.

During her third week working with the team, Chlöe holds a focus group with the history teachers to learn about their impressions of the previous curriculum for history classes and what should be done to improve it. While the youngest teachers appear to be willing participants in the focus group, Chlöe notices that those who are older seem to be more reticent and annoyed, which puzzles her because in her own research using focus groups, she never had trouble getting participants to express their opinions. Chlöe decides to call on one of the quietest participants to ask for her opinion about the curriculum.

The woman, Iolani, responds angrily in a local language unknown to Chlöe. The younger woman sitting next to Iolani translates her response. “That language you speak at me. It’s not mine. We don’t use French, only the government wants us to use it. The young people won’t say this, but we don’t need the French people or some other foreigner to help us with our country. We can develop it by ourselves. We can teach our children the right history by ourselves.” Chlöe, taken aback by the response, apologizes, and then asks if she can share her opinion about the curriculum development process or history of Tautilau and have it translated. Another teacher, an older man named Léo-Makani, intervenes in French, pointing at Iolani. He says that she knows the French language. He then says, “You know that what the colonialists did for Tautilau was good for us. They built Tautilau into what it is today, and when they left, they gave it to the Maiuans to make it even better.” The translating teacher explains that the Maiuans are an ethnic group in Tautilau.

Iolani’s expression quickly turns from anger to sadness, and with tears welling up in her eyes, she fires back at him. She accuses his people of coming to her village and killing her sister and mother. She continues on describing the burning of entire villages and how her remaining family hid in the nearby caves for weeks without food, catching her breath between words as she struggles to tell her story while sobbing. The focus group quickly spirals out of control as others from the older generation voice their opinions in languages Chlöe cannot understand, before Iolani stands up and points directly at her, tears streaming down her face. “And YOU.” She

says that the French colonialists started the problems on Tautilau and that before they came it was a peaceful island. She explains that the divisions created by the colonialists caused separations between Tautilaun people and that this is the true history to teach to their children.

Chlöe stands in the middle of the room, stunned in silence and unsure of what else to say to the teachers. The focus group ends without Chlöe being able to collect complete information from the teachers. A week later, Chloe returns to Grosse Rivière University without completing the curriculum development project.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- How, if at all, could Chlöe have better navigated this situation with the teachers?
- What responsibility does Chlöe's university bear for putting her in this situation? What support could they have given her in working with the stakeholders in Tautilau?
- What could Chlöe have done differently to better prepare for her assignment in Tautilau? How might Chlöe have acted differently in her role?
- What ethical concerns arise when outside educational "experts" or programs work with stakeholders in other countries in developing history and citizenship education curriculum?
- Should Grosse Rivière University maintain connections with the Ministry of Education in Tautilau and again attempt to aid them with the curriculum development process?
- How could the Tautilau Ministry of Education provide support to the teachers and other stakeholders involved in this project?
- How can an international education consultant like Chlöe be more sensitive to the psychological needs of individuals in post-conflict countries like Tautilau?