Curating a connected community in virtual space: Solomon Islands Research Mentoring Tok Stori

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This article examines the relationship between academic mentoring and *tok stori*, a Melanesian orality, in a digital environment. This relationship is significant where dispersal is an unintended consequence of the way development aid intersects with academic opportunities for scholars from less developed countries, and, consequently, country-focused academic communities remain undeveloped as education becomes individualised. This situation occurs despite the fact that the self is social and education is a common good in many contexts, such as Solomon Islands in Melanesia. Using the contributions of participants in the Solomon Islands Research Mentoring Tok Stori (SIRMT), we discuss the various kinds of support and outcomes that become possible when deliberate attempts are made to create a connected community through mentoring in virtual space. Among the findings are the significance of mentorship to personal and academic growth, the potential of deliberate community building through virtual means in Solomon Islands and virtual tok stori as a catalyst to developments the physical world.

Keywords: Solomon Islands, mentoring, tok stori, leadership, digital, orality

Introduction

When pursuing leadership development, a good fit between form and function is essential. What we understand as leadership should be reinforced by, and reified in, the ways we seek to foster new leaders. This article investigates productive relationships between mentoring as an academic activity and *tok stori* as a Melanesian orality (Sanga & Reynolds, 2023) when exercised through an online mentoring platform. The argument follows the relational turn (Hollway, 2008) so that light is shed on the significance of mentoring as a relational activity during the doctoral journey, the operation of tok stori in a mentoring context and the potential of the relationship between the two. Elements of context that make this approach significant include the geographic dispersal of scholars from developing countries as a result of the way donor aid works, and collective identity as an aspect of the social self.

The doctoral journey is as much about identity construction as the production of knowledge (Green, 2005). That is, doctoral candidates are involved in a process of imagining who they could be or might become in the academic world (and beyond), as well as generating the knowledge that will afford them

standing and influence. Within this process, participation by candidates in academic communities "is not a neutral act" (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007, p. 61), but one in which relationships provide opportunities for agency, influence and shaping. In some contexts, academic community involvement may be adequately described through a nested context of a framework of department, university and society (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007). However, further consideration is required in the case of doctoral students from less developed countries on scholarships away from their home locations who are generally studying in more developed countries.

The United Nations (2015) sustainable development goals (SDG) include international scholarship programs as a tool of progress. For example, SDG 4 includes the aim to "substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, [including] small island developing states … for enrolment in higher education" (4b, p. 21). Campbell and Neff (2020) review the large scale of the field—around 5 million students in 2017. However, they also draw attention to diffusion of purpose that underpins many of the programs involved, finding a range of motivations that includes skill and human capital development, diplomatic relations, social change, economic development, internationalisation and increased access to higher education. Matters of academic identity development, academic community building and engagement feature weakly in this picture.

Students from less developed countries who are involved in international scholarship programs that fit under SDG 4 are academic migrants (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020b), scholars who travel across physical space but who also move between thought worlds. Physical movement may entail changes of weather, food, language and so on. However, movement between thought worlds involves engagement with ways of understanding and living well that differ from those of one's home community. Thus, academic migration should be read in complex ways, extending beyond the physical to include the relational. For example, Gegeo (2001) suggests that when Indigenous Kwara'ae people of Solomon Islands move "place" to a temporary location that is not of their identity or origin, they do not leave their "space" because it expands with them. As a consequence, "because of the possibility of space, a person can be anywhere and still be inextricably tied to place. Place is portable and, as we Kwara'ae say, 'It's in our blood'" (Gegeo, 2001, p. 495). Considering place and space in this way suggests that the requirements of new locations do not reduce existing ties of obligation and reciprocation, but provide a new context in which to exercise them.

Where the social self, "we" rather than "I" (Gegeo, 1998; Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017), is prevalent, as in Solomon Islands, education is a community rather than a personal asset. Various layers of ties between people are identifiable in the case of Solomon Islands academic migrants. These include ties with one's clan and/or village, culture and/or language group, and island and/or nation. Thus, for academic migrants from communitarian societies such as Indigenous Solomon Islanders, an adequate context framework for academic identity development must include those who belong to one's native thought world/s and with whom one shares senses of community. The contribution and shaping of the identity aspect of the doctoral journey by communities—however geographically distant—should be recognised. Mentoring is a relational path that can support academic community growth while simultaneously supporting academic identity formation. This is particularly true when mentoring is structured through an appropriate orality or traditional discursive patterns of engagement. Tok stori as a Melanesian orality is helpful in this context.

Solomon Islands

This article examines the issue of academic identity development and academic community building for a dispersed group of academic migrants from Solomon Islands. The focus is on the relationship between identity development and academic community building, and mentoring through the Indigenous Solomon Islands orality, tok stori (Sanga & Reynolds, 2023). Solomon Islands is an archipelago of around 90 islands located in the western Pacific (Coxon et al., 2020). A country of diverse languages and cultural groups with a population of around 721,500 (Solomon Islands Government, 2020) Solomon Islands became a British Protectorate in 1893 and subsequently become independent in 1978. Solomon Islands remains a recipient of donor aid from many nations including Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Japan, the United States and, latterly, China (Kabutaulaka, 2010). An element in aid is the provision of academic scholarships.

Academic identity development and academic community building are longstanding issues in Solomon Islands (Corbett & Wood, 2013). An ongoing aspect of this is the dispersal around the globe of masters and PhD candidates, a consequence of the way Solomon Islands academics receive donor aid. Aid often takes the form of travel to a donor country to undertake study. Since there are many donors, Solomon Island academic migrants re-locate to many jurisdictions, including places in Asia, the Americas and Europe, as well as Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Dispersal separates Solomon Islanders from their communities, and Solomon Island academics from each other. Thus, while individual academic identity development may take place in relation to donor communities, barriers exist to the development of academic identity in relation to other Solomon Island academics and communities. Consequently, dispersal leaves the progress of Solomon Islands academic community development to chance at best, seemingly a low priority in donor aid. Until recently, there has been no mentoring program designed to meet the needs of Solomon Islands academic migrants at a national (or transnational) level.

As a silver lining to restrictions consequent on the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an academic digital practice turn (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020a) such that virtual academic spaces have been established, developed, defined and deliberately shaped to sustain and (re)create academic communities. Tools such as Zoom have been licenced by universities for this purpose, making possible new forms of community engagement across time and space. This development has the potential through mentoring to moderate or shape the effects of dispersal for groups such as Solomon Islands academic migrants.

Tok stori and mentoring

This article presents the results of research into Oceania oralities in the digital realm operationalised as mentorship to support dispersed Solomon Island academic migrants. The research relates tok stori, an Indigenous orality or dialogic form of communication, mentoring as academic practice, and the potential of digital space in the context of dispersed scholars. The narrative begins by discussing Oceania oralities in general before turning to tok stori as a specific case. It then turns to mentoring as a practice with potential to build academic identity and academic community engagement. We next present thematically organised research results drawn from an online mentoring program. The results reveal layers of mentoring experience concerning affect, academic identity, academic community development and collective commitment to Solomon Islands as a nation state. Threaded through the discussion is attention to the strength of tok stori as a *kastom*, or customary, orality to deliver mentoring in virtual environments. Finally, a forward-looking discussion centres the benefits to similar communities of scholars from less developed countries of deliberate mentoring exercised in digital space through their traditional orality or oralities.

Oceania oralities are the focus of a growing area in which attention is directed at habitual conversational forms. Kovach (2010) explains that a conversational approach to research "aligns with an Indigenous worldview that honours orality as means of transmitting knowledge and upholds the relational which is necessary to maintain a collectivist tradition" (p. 42). We extend this thinking by recognising that multiple oralities or traditionally shaped and practiced oral conversational forms exist in the Oceania region, as beyond. Our interests include paying attention to contextual specifics in the way these oral forms operate, with the intention of supporting others to pursue their own specific inquiries. In this case, we explore how the field of Pacific leadership and mentorship can be further understood through tok stori, a Melanesian orality. Our exploration is achieved by charting academic identity and academic community development during the doctoral journey of a dispersed cohort of Solomon Islands academics.

Tok stori is an orality deeply rooted in Melanesia, an area of the western Pacific that includes the nation states of Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Tok stori is a plank in Melanesianism (Kabutaulaka, 2015), an understanding through which people relate across the region. It is a discursive embodiment of a relational understanding of the world also seen in the *wantok* system (Fito'o, 2019), a Melanesian framing of togetherness and mutually recognised obligation. Evans et al. (2010) describe tok stori in PNG as "an oral tradition where reflections on issues or problems are undertaken dialogically" (p. 83); and in the Solomon Islands context, Iromea and Reynolds (2021) refer to the tok stori space as open or free, relational and concerned with "balance, unity and safety" (p. 35). As an orality, tok stori has been used in leadership development (Sanga et al., 2021), development studies (de la Torre Parra, 2021), peace-making (Talanoa & Development Project, 2005) and project evaluation (Paulsen & Spratt, 2020). Tok stori also has much potential in framing mentor/mentee relationships and interactions.

Mentoring is an activity whereby a relationship of support is conducted on an ongoing basis. According to its Greek roots (Awaya et al., 2003), the mentoring relationship is not based on rank but on the mentor's greater experience and enhanced level of wisdom (Chu, 2009). In education, mentoring has been viewed as an intentional interaction aimed at growth and development in which wisdom is transferred and applied, protection offered and role modelling is present (Shandley, 1989). Ruru et al. (2012) note that, although there is ongoing interest in the quality of mentoring relationships, many researchers have expressed concerns about over-dependence on cross-sectional designs, self-reported data, single-method studies and quantitative approaches to field settings—strategies that tend to separate the mentor from the mentee and to isolate accounts of experience from key relationships. Tok stori offers an alternative approach.

Pacific leaders have devised their own mentoring metaphors, each pointing to potentially appropriate investigative strategies. These include the Fijian *bure*, or house, a safe environment for storytelling that investigates life through imagination, motivation and emotion, and which provokes reflective growth; the Fijian *va vakada*, or scaffolding, surrounding the creeping yam plant to ensure sufficient sunlight for optimum growth, a metaphor that describes mentoring as a process of adaptive intervention; and the Tongan *fetākinima*, a practice where a person is led gently by the hand as an expression of a bond that runs deeper than physical contact, indicating honesty, trust, love and respectfulness whereby two (or more) move more safely together than alone (Ruru et al., 2012). A tok stori approach to investigating Pacific leadership and mentoring resonates with these metaphors. Tok stori offers storytelling in a safe space, the interactive adaptiveness of dialogue, and deep relationality that extends well beyond the moment and the task in hand. Data gained through tok stori is therefore likely to be soaked in context so that it includes affect, is responsive and deeply contingent, and is relationally rich because it is informed by an ongoing sense of commitment.

Methodology

Our inquiry into Oceania oralities brings together tok stori and mentorship through the Solomon Islands Research Mentoring Tok Stori (SIRMT). During the period of the research, this initiative involved 22 doctoral candidates from Solomon Islands who were pursuing a wide range of specialisms, complemented by 18 masters candidates. The 40 scholars were dispersed across seven countries: Fiji (9), Australia (7), Japan (7), New Zealand (6), Taiwan (6), Philippines (4) and Solomon Islands (1). The University of the South Pacific (USP) hosted the highest number of registered participants with 10 students altogether enrolled across the regional institution. Of the doctoral candidates, six were females and 16 were male.

The initiative was started by one co-author, Kabini Sanga, with an overall objective of providing support for emerging Solomon Islands researchers as mentees through relationships with established Solomon Island academic mentors. Mentorship exchanges involved regular virtual tok stori through the Zoom online platform. Four foundational purposes (FP) were communicated to all involved through email prior to commencement:

- FP 1 –To offer a safe relational and intellectual space for Solomon Islands academic migrant scholars to interact with each other and with established Solomon Islands academics.

- FP 2 – To offer wantok-based mentorship to complement the support provided to candidates by their own universities.

- FP 3 – To encourage emergent Solomon Islands academics to grow as a cohort of current and future generation thought leaders.

- FP 4 – To explore the use of tok stori as a relevant and effective pedagogy in institutionalised settings for mentoring and academic leadership development.

Of these, FPs 1, 2 and 3 coincide with our interest in the development of academic identity and academic community among dispersed Solomon Islands migrants; FP 4 informs our inquiry into the place of Oceania oralities in mentorship.

The first tok stori, held in May 2020 and attended by more than 25 dispersed Solomon Islands academic migrants, was an introductory session for group members. Follow-up tok stori sessions took different formats, including focused presentations on a given research topic by one or two mentors; open tok stori to discuss mentee research-related questions, matched with support or advice; and informal conversations. Each tok stori session was facilitated by a group of three co-conveners drawn from a pool of 28 established Solomon Islands academics based in 10 countries. Recordings were made and transcribed with the informed consent of all involved.

The research allows the dual aspects of academic identity and academic community development to provide different but symbiotic sources of information about the operation of tok stori. Aspects of mentorship that support individual development (as identity) and wantok-framed relational networks (as community) can be exposed in the way the experiences of mentoring were described by mentees. By these means, the discussion of Oceania mentorship is extended beyond the individual, consistent with communitarian ideas of "we" rather than "I" as the key to identity. The focus also responds to the issues surrounding academic migration discussed above. The inquiry adds to the literature on tok stori and mentorship generally in digital space in the era of COVID-19.

In our inquiry, we ask what new knowledge the exercise of tok stori as an Indigenous Oceania orality adds to our understanding of leadership and mentorship in the region (and to leadership and mentorship more generally). This question is significant since the motivations and value dispositions of mentors offer insight into Oceania leadership. We assume that, in addition to the FPs provided, mentor motivations and value dispositions are made apparent in mentee experiences of the SIRMT. This assumption is based on the idea that mentorship in the SIRMT has no specific agenda in terms of skill development and so on, but values growth in a more open sense. Thus, mentee stories of growth offer nuanced information about the contextual achievement of mentor motivations.

Further, we interrogate Oceania mentorship as a coalition, a group-focused activity and means of influence, exercised through tok stori. The digital tok stori of the SIRMT provided a space where multiple mentors could engage with many mentees. This is a contextual adaption of the more normal close-but-closed mentor-mentee relationship (Smith, 2007).

This approach offers insight into more-than-individual changes achieved through mentorship when offered in kastom, deliberately relational, orality-shaped ways. It provides a way to look at the effects of mentees on each other and on community-focused growth.

In order to pursue the inquiry, four data sets have been mined. Data set 1 (D1) contains feedback on the initial SIRMT session from mid-2020, collected in the following days by email responses to one mentor. Data set 2 (D2) is an unsolicited written response to the same initial tok stori session emailed by one mentee to a mentor. Data set 3 (D3) is a transcription of a single SIRMT tok stori session from late 2020. Finally, data set 4 (D4) is a transcription of a tok stori from late 2021 that focused on reflections about SIRMT as an ongoing commitment.

The wide time coverage and varied nature of the data sets offer strengths of triangulation. The data draws on individual reflection and discursive interaction. The textual nature of the data mutes some aspects of tok stori such as silence, gesture, unspoken shared understandings and so on; and translation from Solomon Islands Pijin, a Melanesian creole (Jourdan & Angeli, 2014), to English, a procedure required at times, may also mask layers of intended meaning. However, because the data embraces more than a year of experience, it provides a window on changes in mentee perspective.

All data was thematically analysed to produce strands of meaning. The strands were subsequently organised to stage a discussion that marries content (mentoring) and process (tok stori). As a result, inquiry into tok stori as orality and investigation of mentoring as a relational process sit as dual, interwoven aspects of the research. The themes presented here offer a layered discussion, moving from affective support for individuals to academic identity for the individual as scholar, cohort-based academic community identity and community development at the national level. Speakers are identified by abbreviation. Unless indicated, extracts are from mentees.

Findings

Findings are presented in five themes: affective support, academic identity, academic community development, Solomon Islands academic cohort development, and mentoring as tok stori in a digital environment.

Affective support

The SIRMT mentees described the way they, as Solomon Islands academic migrants, were supported by the tok stori mentoring process in terms of affect. Across the data sources, mentees made clear the way their SIRMT experiences had met emotional needs created by their circumstances. Three typical comments illustrate this aspect:

> Foremost, being part of the inaugural SIRMT was emotional for me. Overall, I would like to say a big *tagio tumas* [thank you very much] for creating this platform, which most of us [research students] have been craving for. (J, D1)

> For me, this tok stori has been so helpful and encouraging and since this is the last one for this year, I have been looking forward to this tok stori. (A, D3)

> I always ask myself whether academia/research is worth it as it can be so lonely and isolating at times. Sometimes I look at myself and I feel is it cruelty to my soul. The PhD journey is so lonely and there is not many people around—so then I ask myself "is it good for my soul?" (sigh) … but this forum helps me to share my feelings, my anguish, this gives comfort to my heart. (C, D3)

In each case, mentees claim that tok stori mentorship provided by the SIRMT has contributed to their wellbeing. J's and C's comments show how being an academic migrant creates emotional deficits to which their experiences in the SIRMT responded. Support for wellbeing is an essential underpinning of academic growth; it is hard to push into the unknown territories essential in doctoral study without a secure emotional base. A comment from a mentor makes the connection between academic effort and wellbeing clear, consistent with tok stori's holistic focus:

> Let us not only focus on studies and work … as I have said, we do really want to talk about that which is personal. (K, mentor, D3)

This comment sits well with FP 1 since emotional safety is an aspect of safe space; and with FP 2 because holistic commitment is an aspect of wantok-centred relationality.

The data in this section suggests the effectiveness of tok stori as an orality to create a safe discursive space, even in the digital realm. An aspect of safety is the way emotions are expected and welcomed in tok stori because of its holistic orientation (Sanga et al., 2021). Because the presence of the whole person is anticipated, affective support can be offered through the warmth created when emotions are expressed, recognised, valued and subject to appreciative response. The motivations of mentors to admit and embrace personal matters is consistent with the way mentees experience affective support.

Academic identity

A second aspect of mentees' experiences of the SIRMT is support afforded for academic identity construction. Academic identity implies imagination exercised by mentees concerning who they as Solomon Island academic migrants are/could be in the academic world. Three examples illustrate the width of ways SIRMT mentees report academic identity development.

First, growth in academic identity involves recognisable progress on the doctoral journey.

> This platform helps and encourages me as a student to keep moving forward despite this pandemic challenge that we are facing right now. I know this kind of getting together via

> Zoom is hard as we have other commitments too, but your time and effort is appreciated. (D, D1)

Momentum is an aspect of academic identity development because the doctoral journey involves a progressive shift from novice to expert, or from receiver to creator of knowledge. Stalled progress does not feed academic identity development. However, in the life of academic migrants, particularly in times affected by COVID-19, commitment to progress needs to be matched by support such as mentoring.

A second comment reveals that academic identity involves self-view.

> For me, I am pretending to be an academic, coming from a monotonous or routine place of work environment. But I want to maintain this feeling of being an academic. (A, D3)

This suggests that the SIRMT is an environment where imposter syndrome can be eroded through mentoring as an academic practice. Perhaps the intensity of the mentorship relationship supports a "feeling" of being an academic. Mentorship through tok stori appears to provide a space in which the self can be re-viewed and, as a consequence, academic identity strengthened.

As a final example, academic identity can be strengthened through interaction.

> What I have found from this group the most is the motivation I gain from it. Research shows us that motivation must exist before anyone can be interested to pursue something. When I see and hear senior academics coming together and discussing ideas, it gives me encouragement and it brings me much motivation to attend. At the moment, I am doing my own research, working on papers and feedback, i.e., there is no supervision, so my motivation is to interact with others in this space. I appreciate it very much. (L, D4)

Motivation, affect and relational activity are linked as aspects of interaction. Dialogic mentoring supports wellbeing because interaction moderates academic isolation. More specifically, interactions that include role modelling by senior academics offer mentees a direction for their academic development.

The range of responses that touch on academic identity development suggests the efficacy of tok stori to embrace the positional experiences of individuals. In tok stori, all participants are understood to be experts in their own lives. As a consequence, mentors conducting mentoring as tok stori might expect mentees to conduct imaginative work that is deeply embedded in personal context. The adaptive nature of tok stori, where reality is a woven product of the stories of all rather than the assertions of a few, means that tok stori mentorship can value personal context as a contribution to a shared reality. Through woven stories, mentees move towards being part of the developing academic "we". Further, mentors who seek to embrace wantok relationships with mentees through tok stori (FP 2) evoke an unbounded relationship of obligation modelled (or based) on kinship. This form of relationship provides grounds for understanding momentum, self-definition and academic interaction as collective aspects of identity formation.

Academic community development

Solomon Islands academic migrants are dispersed by the way that donor aid is provided. In this situation, a significant aspect of the doctoral journey is the extension of a nested context framework to include Solomon Islands academic communities. However, as discussed above, participation by doctoral candidates in academic communities "is not a neutral act" (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007, p. 61). Instead,

participation includes shaping processes with mutual effects. Within the data drawn from the SIRMT are contributions that allude to the development of the Solomon Islands academic community. Claims about academic community expressed in general terms reference a "collective journey as Solomon Island scholars", "a sense of identity and unity" and belonging expressed as "opportunity to be part of this kind of forum". Three sets of specific examples provide nuance to this picture.

First, sharing space is important to academic community development. Members of the SIRMT describe the way academic community is extended when doctoral candidates and emerging researchers tok stori with established academics.

> The session … provides me with an opportunity to put faces to the names of some of our people *wea mi herem names blo oketa but no luk save* [people whose names I have heard but have not seen]. Also, good to meet some old friends in the platform. (S, D1)

> I had a sense of access to our own academicians most of whom I have never personally conversed with, although I've read some of their writings. (I, D1)

These statements suggest that the Solomon Islands academic community is extended when established academics become available to others, in this case through tok stori. An enhanced sense of community develops when Solomon Islands academics are encountered and regarded as "our own academicians", a term that suggests mutual belonging as an aspect of academic community.

Second, sharing is a key driver of academic community development. Tok stori is a relationally focused process that frames sharing and collaboration through narrative interaction.

> The way some of you have already shared your papers and publications meant a lot to me. Just for the sake of coming and tok stori, I see other wantoks living in other places like other academics really motivates me. That is all motivating to me, sharing experiences and papers. (J, D4)

> It is especially good to see new scholars coming up and this allows us to share stories and ideas with each other and hopefully we can build on it to grow. (M, D3)

Further, the relational focus of tok stori as an iterative, open-ended orality invites ongoing collaboration because relational resources developed through the process extend through space and time.

> SIRMT is a "springboard" and "riding on" or rather, tapping on the shoulders of others, especially our senior academics and mentors. This is positive, and through some form of ongoing conversation, email and collaboration on specific research areas by PhD students and mentors it will make a lot of difference. (J, D1)

There is a fit between the adaptive natures of tok stori and mentoring within the doctoral journey when overtly relational activity informs academic community development through the orality of tok stori. Mentees are shaped by the processes that frame connection and can assume agency to contribute to the academic community as tok stori actors, regardless of their current academic status.

Third, academic community development is supported when a shared sense of momentum is experienced. When people move as a collective, momentum becomes a binding force as a shared history and a set of common understandings develop.

> I think this platform provides a way to learn from people who run the race before me and I tend to learn from them in their experience … At the end of the day, this interaction is what keeps us together and you see where we are going. (C, D4)

> I really learned from this forum and want to encourage this kind of spirit. I want to encourage, tok stori and move forwards with this spirit … Something that someone has planted, we can all move with it, we all grow with it with those we work with. This is how I sum up my experience in this virtual space. (A, D3)

Momentum and direction are significant aspects of academic community development. These aspects align with the aims of mentors as expressed in FP 2 and FP 4. Wantok-inspired relationships and the development of leadership involve active participation and the assumption of agency to discharge obligations through interaction. When operationalised through the SIRMT, mentees appear to be experiencing a process that generates a sense of academic community through the expectation that they will be actively involved.

The effectiveness of mentoring through tok stori to support the development of academic community is an aspect of the relational nature of tok stori. Tok stori is an orality focused on relationship enhancement. In tok stori, actors inhabit a common safe space, share storied experiences and contribute to an ongoing sense of oneness as they *tok as wan*, or converse as one people (Iromea & Reynolds, 2021). In the context of the SIRMT, these aspects feed academic community engagement as a collective. Established elements of academic community become shared with those still on the doctoral journey, and enhanced relationships between academics, the stuff of community, progressively reinforce the collective community momentum.

Solomon Islands academic cohort development

As discussed above, an effect of the way donor aid works in higher education for Solomon Islands is the dispersal of cohorts of doctoral students. Consequently, those who return to Solomon Islands post-study may find that their sense of who they are as a cohort of well-educated people with the capability to serve Solomon Islands is muted. Thus, community development through the SIRMT that steps beyond academic community engagement and centres academic leadership as service to the nation is valuable. SIRMT mentees provided comments that suggest that their academic identity development involves benefits to Solomon Islands consistent with the self as a social entity. Three examples are given to illustrate how academic community development and community interest come together in SIRMT mentees' thinking.

First, storying in the SIRMT process makes possible enhanced attention to the role of academic effort in national development.

> Regardless of different areas of study pursued by each individual, I was amazed to hear during the meeting how they all connected one or other to the wellbeing of our country Solomon Islands. (C, D1)

Working in a disconnected silo means that although one's work may aim to benefit the nation, it is hard to develop a sense of the common motivation of an academic cohort. A consequence of this may be that academics fail to realise their potential to deliberately contribute to the nation in a coordinated way. However, it appears that exposure to the work of others through the mentoring process has promoted a realisation of common commitment to Solomon Islands.

Next, there is a sense that coordinated action is a valuable resource when negotiating with the Solomon Islands status quo.

> My wildest vision for this group (I may not have the answer now but for future) is that what changes do we (as a group) want to make and how are we going to absorb the ideas into the current system? I see this not from a personal point of view but from a national perspective. (H, D1)

All systems resist change through inertia. However, the intent of SDG 4 is positive, active change that supports development. Individuals may find change hard to deliver, especially when their relationships with Solomon Islands-based leaders have been affected by academic migration. Consequently, thinking as a collective about how to deliver the communal benefits of education is a significant aspect of the SIRMT with great potential for the future.

The final example involves preparatory thought regarding active intervention at the policy level.

> Most research mentioned in our meeting [is] Solomon Islands focused, and, therefore, I believe that this platform provides an opportunity to feed into the broader government policy as a group that an individual researcher may find it difficult to do individually. And we may start to think about this as we go along. (J, D1)

This kind of thinking extends beyond managing relationships with the status quo to include consideration of how a collective approach to policy innovation at the government level might be advanced. Considering the national future in this way suggests that the SIRMT mentoring process has prepared the ground for mentees to think about a shared approach to discharging their individual specific social obligations. A shared approach connects the holistic, positional and relational aspects of tok stori discussed above.

Storying one's obligation to the nation is an expression of the holistic, relatively unbounded parameters of tok stori in which one's relationships within the stori are inevitably connected to one's wider relationships. Mentoring through tok stori invites this kind of connection because tok stori is porous and exists in a dialogic, relational and processual ontology (Sanga & Reynolds, 2019). Tok stori makes apparent relationships that already exist, so that more deliberate connective and collaborative action can result. In the context of Solomon Islands academic migrants, the specific aspect of sharing the results of education by considering collective contributions to development moves beyond the general goals of SDG 4. This can happen because tok stori mentoring provides a platform that is social as well as academic for Solomon Islands academic cohort development. The SIRMT experience may be a lever to support the transformation of individual education and thought into collective service, policy and action.

Mentoring as tok stori in a digital environment

Tok stori developed as a kastom orality, as face-to-face contact shared in a physical space where hierarchical relationships are acknowledged but muted. By contrast, the digital environment provides tok stori actors with a different experience that requires adaption. This affects matters such as turn taking (eye contact that facilitates this is unavailable), open-ended time (Zoom can impose time limits, as do competing responsibilities in one's physical space), and the sharing of food (an act of bonding impossible online). In addition, mentoring as a practice implies relationships that are by nature hierarchical, based on perceived wisdom, experience, length in the field and so on, a situation that requires mediation in tok stori. For these reasons, the positive results of the SIRMT should be understood as the results of

negotiations between kastom, the virtual world and academic practice. Tok stori is processual, and an indication of the kinds of processes involved can best be seen in D2, a tok stori actor's reflective appreciation of this issue, and their subsequent reflection from D3.

First, the mentee questions naming SIRMT as tok stori.

> The tok stori from yesterday with the use technology can allow us to rename it to be e-tok stori. The purpose I guess it would be to provide guidance for each other at the different levels of lives that one is in. Yesterday I only saw people appearing and talking in the cloud without physically feeling the scent and presence of each other. (A, D2)

This suggests that the absence of the physical aspects of tok stori justifies renaming with a focus on the technological aspect of the experience as e-tok stori. This is despite the fact that the function of tok stori remains as a relationally centred orality to frame information exchange regarding how one might live better. This issue draws attention to balancing the potential of digital tok stori in the context of academic migrants with the changes to kastom that are involved. The "direction of naming" (Sanga & Reynolds, 2017, p. 199) is significant, since naming affects recognisability, familiarity and, potentially, ownership.

Second, a sense of hierarchy may exist at the outset of any group mentoring situation which can be exacerbated by the disconnection people may feel in virtual experiences. Hierarchies may be perceived between institutions, a factor particularly relevant for dispersed Solomon Island academic migrants, and between mentees and mentors. Flattening this relational aspect of mentoring in tok stori in virtual space demands the active negotiation of those involved. Reflections drawn from D2 and D3 offer insight into the demands made on tok stori actors as they seek to reconcile the virtual world and the mentoring situation with kastom tok stori.

> The virtual layout … created a personal sense of inferiority mostly due to the assumed stereotypical perception from being just attending USP. With that, I have decided to limit my contribution. This is an area that I need to escape from as we continue to move forward. The virtual setting challenges me on how to forge new relationships and who is responsible for its creation and establishment. (A, D2)

> Although, as has been said … there is no hierarchy in the virtual setting, yet I feel with the vast experiences of the Solomon Islanders working in the academic industry, a sense of hierarchy and respect have already been virtually established. It is a learning which is unprecedented and needs a development of new personal learning adaptive features. (A, D2)

Progress in this process is suggested by the following comment from the same tok stori actor drawn from D3.

> We all see each other in non-hierarchical ways—there is reciprocity in this space—give and take, empowering ideas, guiding thoughts, motivational thoughts, differences in our experiences of knowledge, experience and exposure. (A, D3)

At this point it appears that participation in mentoring as tok stori has eroded the separation implied by status in one form or another. There may have been a realisation that in tok stori people can have different roles but that their roles do not imply unequal value. Hierarchies can be forgotten, blunted or muted as participation in tok stori as an equal replaces the stori of inequality one might tell oneself. This is a function of shared narrative and reality construction at the heart of tok stori.

Discussion

The research suggests that tok stori is an orality capable of supporting mentoring for Solomon Islands academic migrants. Familiar among Melanesians, a factor that supports a sense of ownership, tok stori is holistic, values personally positioned experiences, is relational in nature and is processual in development. As a consequence, the whole person—including their affect—is welcome; individuals are regarded as experts in their own lives regardless of mentee/mentor position or physical location; relationships that transcend time and space are developed as a priority; and experience is continually shaped by the dialogical process. These aspects are salient within a dialogic, relational and processual ontology, and helpful in the context of mentoring.

Academic migrants from developing countries such as Solomon Islands are dispersed by the way donor aid operates. As a result, the doctoral journey is most easily framed by department, university and host society. However, given the complex nature of academic migration and the significance of ties to home communities, supporting academic identity and academic community development through mentoring with other academic migrants, in this case Melanesian Solomon Islanders, is a step forward. The rewards of mentoring in the SIRMT include affective support and growth in individual academic identity, but also encompass peer-based academic community development and Solomon Islands forward-looking academic cohort development. These aspects are particularly salient for those whose sense of the self is social and whose understanding of education is as a collectively held good.

When the kastom orality of tok stori is applied to new contexts, such as academic mentoring, and new environments, such as the digital environment, some negotiation is required. The absence of certain elements such as sharing physical space can be balanced by the virtual presence of people who live and study far away. A relational lens makes sense of this kind of negotiation because when space is understood in relational terms, closeness can be created across distance through relational warmth, acceptance and collective creation of storied reality.

The data also suggests that Oceania mentorship when exercised through tok stori can operate as a coalition across space, a group-focused activity and means of influence on individuals, cohorts and, potentially, the nation. Further, when mentor motivations and value dispositions are aligned with the holistic, relational and processual nature of tok stori, the orality can be a means of their achievement. As represented in this Solomon Islands example, Oceanic leadership is dialogic, practiced at a more-than-self level and seeks the common rather than the individual good. Leadership is about creating opportunity, such as through the SIRMT, for others to grow in identity, community and contribution.

For Solomon Islands government policy, the data suggests the value of deliberate academic community development among academics who are dispersed around the globe, and between dispersed Solomon Island academics and those resident in Solomon Islands. Benefits include: social and spiritual support likely to aid the successful completion of qualifications by individuals, academic socialisation that is relevant for the Solomon Islands context, the kinds of networking that can lead to less siloed approaches to future policy development, and development and succession pathways within the Solomon Islands academic community. Pathways are of great value when considering coherent and sustainable policy development.

Looking wider than the SIRMT and the case of the Solomon Islands, the research suggests the potential of Oceania oralities to bring benefits in a range of contexts and environments, including the digital environment. Tok stori is not alone in having holistic and enabling characteristics; neither is Solomon

Islands unique in the region in valuing wantok-type relationships where relationality is a way of understanding life and leadership is practiced as service. Seeking to harness the strengths of the locally practiced customary orality to anchor activities, such as academic mentoring, that are non-traditional in appearance but congruent with long-established value systems makes sense in changing times. This is particularly so in the digital age, and most especially in COVID-19-affected times. Honouring the wisdom of oralities developed in the past involves negotiation with new circumstances, remembering that community is the core of sustainable life and the essence of being human.

Concluding comments

This article has examined the relationship between academic mentoring and tok stori, a Melanesian orality, in a digital environment. This relationship is significant where dispersal is an unintended consequence of the way development aid to Melanesia intersects with academic opportunities and country-focused academic communities remain undeveloped. Using the contributions of participants in the SIRMT, we have discussed the outcomes possible when deliberate attempts are made to create a connected community through mentoring in virtual space. The practice has emerged as a catalyst to developments in the physical world such as personal, academic growth and community building—features of great value to Solomon Islands.

On a wider scale, the research points to the need for further and continuing mentoring platforms, and for inquiry into their potential to support individuals and shape academic communities. Research into these areas is especially relevant because aid results in academic migration and cohort dispersal. There is value in deliberately seeking to foster academic communities for the future service of communities where the self is social. This focus is well overdue given the long history of aid-related academic migration of upcoming academics from less developed countries.

Acknowledgements

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