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# Tell Your Own Story:

## *Using Data as a Tool to Advance Indigenous Education and Evaluation*

### The Bottom Line

How can Hawaiians as an indigenous group move from "evaluated" to "evaluating"? This report suggests that the best way—and ultimately the only way—is for indigenous peoples to take control of the data and to tell their own story.

### The Power of Data

The question of who gathers, analyzes, and reports data is a critical issue in indigenous education and evaluation. And, data is power. Too often, the control of data and information—which is often invisible or taken for granted—advantages one group while oppressing and marginalizing another. Especially in efforts to revitalize and perpetuate culture, it is imperative that indigenous people and those who serve indigenous communities consider the role of data in cultural education and become a part of creating the knowledge that data provides.

Indigenous education in Hawai'i validates and legitimizes Hawaiian society, knowledge, language, and culture. By building on indigenous ways of learning, we create more meaningful education for our students and perpetuate our culture and society. We generate greater control over our own cultural and social well-being. The creation of Hawaiian language immersion schools and Hawaiian charter schools is an example of current trends to develop meaningful cultural education programs for Hawaiians. Vitally important to the life of this movement is routine documentation and assessment, which includes identifying and communicating strengths and weaknesses to adjust our strategies accordingly and move our programs forward.

### Evaluation: Not a New Concept

Each of us is born to evaluate; even as infants we learn the best strategies for getting our needs met. Evaluation, too, has long been a basic function of daily life for indigenous peoples. Observation of weather patterns, plant growth and distribution, and animal behavior were some of the kinds of data collected on a regular basis that helped inform decisions about housing, farming, and civic affairs. Performance-based evaluation certainly informed oratory traditions and other performance arts.

Evaluation and data collection were an important part of Hawaiian tradition. Words in Hawaiian describe evaluation:

- **Ana** means to measure, evaluate, survey, or fathom.
- **Loiloi** means to look over critically, to search for flaws, or to scrutinize.

In former times, the Hawaiian value of po'okela (excellence) was evidenced in voyaging, aquaculture, and civic development, all areas in which Hawaiians reached high levels of sophistication unparalleled throughout Polynesia. Without the evaluative functions of loiloi and ana—which were a regular part of these systems—Hawaiian culture could not have evolved to such high levels of excellence.

#### HOLO MOANA (OPEN OCEAN VOYAGING)

Open ocean voyaging was an art Hawaiians had mastered long before European sailing reached its pinnacle. The kinds of data collected by Hawaiian navigational experts included swell patterns, ocean currents, wind direction, moon phases, surface water quality, bird migration, cloud shapes and patterns, and star, planet, and sun position. The careful assessment of these variables was crucial; lives depended upon it.

#### 'ENEHANA LOKO I'A (AQUACULTURE TECHNOLOGY)

Hawaiians had some of the most developed aquaculture science of any society. To sustain the multi-acre fishponds lining the leeward shores of many islands, Hawaiians constantly monitored and evaluated data such as water quality, temperature, tides, growth stages of stock, and the growth and quality of companion fish, crustaceans, and limu. Taken together, these data informed technological innovation in the farming systems that supported large populations, and did so without compromising the quality of surrounding land and water.

**ALIʻI**

The aliʻi (ruling class) relied on a large cadre of kahuna (ministers or experts in a given profession) as advisors for daily decisions or for governing the population in times of war, journeys, or construction. Several of the kahuna closest to the aliʻi were observational kahuna who studied weather, land, and sea phenomena. They measured and scrutinized winds, rains, clouds, and currents, evident in the thousands of individual place-based wind and rain names that we know of today. They combined the data and reported on their findings to advise the aliʻi on the best course of action. Based in part on their systematic efforts, Hawaiian government reached the most sophisticated level of any Polynesian society.

## The Here and Now

Evaluation and data collection are just as important now as they were in former times. By gathering data about our students and schools, we have the ability to improve the impact we have on our keiki. We can identify the child in special education who with a little help doesn't need to be there. Or, we can assess how a soda machine near classrooms contributes to obesity of children at our schools.

Similarly, just as ancient Hawaiians carefully monitored the limu and fish growth in aquaculture, today we monitor our children in schools to understand their progress and make changes that improve their learning and growth. Only through monitoring and evaluation can one really know if practical, hands-on activities stimulate certain types of learners. Only through monitoring and evaluation can one discover whether very young children experience bigger academic gains by studying more complex subjects in the morning rather than in the afternoon.

Educators also have access to "experts" through a growing body of literature on indigenous education. They can gather research through the internet, other schools, teachers, and researchers to inform the best course of action. This "best-practice" approach is at the center of research-driven decision making.

## The If and Then

The bottom line is this: If indigenous groups—including Hawaiians—do not tell their own story, then somebody else will. And history teaches us that the story told by somebody else can be distorted, discriminatory, and damaging.

Whether a school or a social service, the most effective way to tell one's own story is to use reliable data that have been collected using culturally responsible methods. Indeed, we can enhance the validity and legitimacy of research by conducting it in ways that respect indigenous values, perspectives and ways of knowing.

Through our kūpuna, we know evaluation was a well-used tool in traditional Hawaiian society. Data was essential to life. What we do today in the field of research is not much different, though we may use different terminology. The process is similar—we gather data systematically, we analyze the data to find patterns and trends, we interpret the results, and we report on them.

But the story does not end when the report is finished. Hopefully, decisions are made based on those data, changes implemented, and the process begins anew. For indigenous groups like Hawaiians, using accurate data to tell their own story will not only strengthen cultural moorings and influence policy making but will also minimize marginalization.

*by Shawn Malia Kanaʻiaupuni, PhD*

KAMEHAMEHA SCHOOLS