Ka ulana ‘ana i ka piko (In Weaving You Begin at the Center): Perspectives from a culturally specific approach to art education

MARIT DEWHURST
City College of New York
LIA O’NEILL MOANIKE’ALA AH-LAN KEAWE
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
MARSHA MACDOWELL
Michigan State University
CHERIE N. K. OKADA-CARLSON
Ka Ulu Lauhala O Kona
ANNETTE KU‘UIPOLANI WONG
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

“It starts at the piko.”1 For Kanaka Maoli, the piko is extremely important. We have at least three “piko.” There is one located on our head, at the fontanel. The second is located at our navel, the third, our genitals. Each has a significant purpose, function, and meaning. The phrase “It starts at the piko” is a poignant frame for our reflection on Hawaiian lau hala weaving as a source of knowledge, spirituality, and genealogy.

Much of the literature on and current approaches to arts education are built on Western European aesthetics, theories, pedagogies, and histories. While the cultural composition of our classrooms—especially those in the United States—represents increasingly diverse culturally situated world views, our visions of art education are largely based on those of one cultural group. Although other educational domains, such as those in critical literacy or criti-
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Classical math education, have begun to explore culturally specific analyses of learning and teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), the arts have been slow to examine the perspectives of culturally based art forms.

Brought together by our engagement with lau hala, a commitment to education, and a shared vision to preserve the knowledge of the kūpuna, this collaboration in writing about our experiences is deeply informed by a Hawaiian perspective that we must honor the ‘ike of the kūpuna by living it, feeling it, teaching it, and, most of all, actively sharing it. Our writing team includes Kanaka Maoli and non-Hawaiians, educators who work in higher education and K–12 schools, those who study and practice traditional arts, and both novice and practiced weavers. We share a keen interest in documenting and understanding the ways in which community-based knowledge is effectively conveyed from teacher to learner, from one generation to another.

Over a period of several years, we have recorded interviews with kūpuna and participated as students in weaving gatherings where we not only advanced our own weaving skills but were able to listen to and observe kūpuna as they taught us and others. Through discussions at these events, subsequent informal meetings, and in cyberspace, team members began to realize how ‘ike pāpale relates to and is embedded in a Hawaiian world view. Our desire to document, analyze, and share this knowledge is rooted in the belief that through participation in culturally specific art forms, we can come to a more expansive and nuanced understanding of ourselves and others. This essay examines the experiences of lau hala weavers for the pedagogical philosophies and strategies embedded in this Hawaiian art form in an effort to broaden the ways in which we understand and practice art education in any setting.

In informal gatherings and, more recently, in structured workshops across Hawai‘i, people have come together to learn the local tradition of ulana baskets, mats, and hats. From learning to harvest and prepare the lau, to learning the stories of each pattern one weaves into the pāpale or hīna‘i, how people learn and teach within this culturally specific art form is rooted in Hawaiian perspectives on art, learning and teaching, values and relationships, and knowledge. Drawing on personal experiences as lau hala weavers and educators and from interviews with kumu ulana and haumāna, we highlight the unique shape of learning and teaching within this artistic expressive tradition. In looking closely at the ways in which Hawaiian weaving is described, taught, and experienced, we identify specific lessons that redefine conventional views of art, learning, and teaching to move the field of art education toward a more inclusive and expansive future.

We consider ulana lau hala as ‘ike kūpuna. We like to think that learning this knowledge is like receiving a makana wrapped in many layers of ‘ike. The importance of examining this type of learning creates the invitation for the haumāna to learn ulana itself as well as the cultural values associated with ulana lau hala. We invite the reader to pull back the layers with us as we reflect on what ulana can teach the field of art education.
Beginning at the Piko

The piko is the beginning. It is where the life of an object or being originates. In ulana, the piko refers to the center of the woven object, for example, the pāpale or moena. Because the three meanings of the piko each provide rich lenses for understanding the lessons learned from this culturally specific art setting, we rely on each meaning to frame our analysis. We start with an analysis of the knowledge that emerges out of weaving the object at hand and how this can expand our definitions of art. Building on this, we move to an analysis of the weaving of the relationships between the kumu and haumāna to deepen our understanding of the spiritual nature of this relational arts practice. Finally, we consider the weaving of the community as we examine the nature of the learning and teaching as an act of cultural genealogy, legacy, and rebirth. For each level of analysis, we identify the ha‘awina that can expand the field’s understanding and practice of art education.

Weaving the Object, Sharing Knowledge

To weave is more than simply turning individual fibers into an object. As Aona-Ueko (2005) states:

Our mana is in what we do because we do not weave just to weave. We weave. We put in our Aloha. We talk story. We laugh, we cry, we sing, we dance because that is who we are and that is in all the things that are done. We document what we do but we cannot define it. It’s inside that piece and that’s why I feel that the mana of our ancestors is never gone. (p. 11)

Weaving is an act of participating in the infinite wisdom that belongs to our kūpuna, the collection of kumu that have touched our lives. Andrade (2005) expands on this, describing how weaving is informed not just by the steps necessary to weave but, more importantly, by the very world view of the weaver:

Our mana goes into it and our process of how we see the world goes into it, gives it a different kind of relationship to it. To us, it’s not just an object. We need our own native perspective in how we view the world, how we tell others about who we are, because these are not just objects . . . It is our kūpuna. (p. 51)

The lau represents the collection of diverse wisdom that is a representation of Hawaiian culture. When we pick up the lau, holding them in our hands to interlock them into an object, we also pick up critical elements of our culture. The act of weaving thus becomes an act of being in a culture. It is a way to participate in the history, epistemologies, responsibilities, and world views of a group of people. As a weaver works with the moe and kū to weave her mat, she gives form to her own cultural knowledge, translating her culture into tangible form. Nahoʻōpiʻi (2005) describes how weaving takes what is in our heads and hearts and translates it into the work of our hands:
One of the things that Aunty Gladys always says is when you are weaving, what you feel in your heart is what happens with your hands and you can see it in the hat. So if you’re feeling tired or upset, put down the lau hala and walk away. You can see the changes in your hat. If you’re feeling angry and start pulling real tight, you can see it. If you want a good quality hat, you have to have a good heart and put that into your hat. (p. 22)

Art is more than just a pretty picture; it is an embodiment of ourselves. The very definition of art in Hawaiian culture is connected to the ability to manifest a world view or way of being. Art is who weavers are, not just what they make. As Andrade (2005) describes, “There is no word in Hawaiian language for art. I see art as being a visual conversation . . . Some people talk in words . . . Artists do it in a visual way and it speaks about who we are and what we’re doing” (p. 51). From a Hawaiian perspective, the concept of art is expansive, blending the manifestation of an object with a way of creating and being in cultural knowledge.

Ha’awina—Art is as much about being as doing

In conventional Western arts education settings, emphasis is often placed on developing the skills and techniques of formal art media to create works of beauty. There is a moment when the art is finished, when it leaves the maker’s hands to exist on its own. There are rubrics and sometimes exams to evaluate this finished piece. The art either succeeds or fails. In ulana, the art does not
stand alone. The art is as much about the being as the doing. Even when a pāpale is finished, it is still seen as a living container of the knowledge of the haumāna and her kumu; it is still a breathing object.

Applying this concept more broadly in the field of art education, we encourage arts educators to consider that they are not just teaching students how to make the art at hand but also how to be in the world. If we ignore this, we neglect an important avenue through which we can connect learners to our rich cultural heritage—whatever that might be. If, however, we embrace an expanded definition of art, then we open up the opportunity to engage learners in making art and in connecting to our own culture.

Weaving the Relationship, Valuing the Spirit

Since weaving is more than the act of making an object, it follows that the nature of learning and teaching ulana lau hala is more expansive than simply dictating the skills of planting, harvesting, preparing, and working with lau hala. Here, learning and teaching is one process—a'o aku, a'o mai. Just as the act of weaving is an act of being in a culture, learning in lau hala weaving is an act of growing in relationship to others. It is a commitment to a relationship.

To better understand this, we look closely at the particular responsibilities and expectations of the kumu and haumāna.

Kumu

_Kumu_ has several meanings: a source, a base, the main part of a tree or trunk, and teacher. In traditional Hawaiian culture, teachers are specialists. According to weaver Gwendolyn Mokihana Kamisugi (interview with C. Kurt Dewhurst, June 2006, Washington, DC), “Kumu is a title that you earn. It’s a matter of respect. It’s not you’re given a piece of paper, you can answer all the questions correctly that makes you a kumu. Our culture does not do things in that manner.”

_Kumu_ draw not only on their own knowledge and experience with the skills needed to weave but also on the knowledge, beliefs, and customs of the larger community in which weaving has meaning. Kumu represent the wisdom and teaching practices of those who have taught them, and, when teaching, they invoke their stories of how they were taught and the knowledge about weaving (i.e., techniques, stories, aesthetic standards) that their kumu valued.

Haumāna

_A haumāna_ can be anyone who seeks out a kumu and invests time learning to prepare and weave. She is dedicated to learning and perpetuating not just the art form itself but also the cultural context of the art. A haumāna learns the stories, the language, the aesthetic systems, the chants, and the skills to care for the _hala_ trees—all of the customs and knowledge that a woven object represents. The job of the haumāna is to absorb the knowledge and perform her
best so she does not embarrass herself or her kumu. If a haumāna does not do well, it reflects poorly on the teacher. If the student truly values and respects her teacher, she is extremely motivated to learn quickly and perform well. Above all, humility and respect are highly valued characteristics of a haumāna.

The Relationship
To become someone’s haumāna is to become a progeny of that kumu—to be deeply connected to each other. The importance of this relationship has an impact on the shape of learning, shifting it from a conventional mode of teaching into a more immersive relational experience. The respectful relationship between the kumu and haumāna is bonding aloha. As such, successful weaving depends on reciprocal and interpersonal relationships: the relationship between the kumu and haumāna and among all the haumāna. Here another layer of the makana is revealed, where values such as trust, bonds, and kuleana are learned and established.

Within this relationship, there is overt instruction from the kumu, and there is the subtle teaching through the actions of the kumu. Learning is holistic; it occurs by watching, listening, and by doing. Omura (2002) describes how her kumu would say, “Look with your eye . . . not your mouth . . . or your hand” (p. 210), recalling the traditional saying, “‘Ōlelo No‘eau, “Nānā ka maka, hana ka lima, pa‘a ka waha, ho‘olohe ka pepeiao” (Look with your eye, work with your hand, close your mouth, listen with your ear). Formalized lessons or set curricular plans do not exist, yet it is the kumu who decides when the haumāna is ready for certain knowledge. If the haumāna only does what she is explicitly told, learning will be minimal and limited to the task at hand. However, when the haumāna pays attention to the verbal and nonverbal actions of the kumu—even when the kumu is talking to others or working on something else—there is much more to be learned.

For example, weaver Pōhaku Kaho‘ohanohano (personal communication with MacDowell and Okada-Carlson, May 18, 2010) describes how his kumu often invited haumāna over to weave but did not actually start weaving until forty-five minutes or more had passed. They talked, had a snack, and then started weaving. One could expect to spend at least three to four hours there, or until it got dark. There was no “I have to leave in an hour.” Such responses were considered rude and jeopardized an invitation to return. The kumu guided or chose the topics to be discussed. The kumu did not like gossip or “talking stink,” because that mana went into the piece and was passed on to its owner. In this way, the haumāna learned valuable lessons about respecting elders, nurturing patience, communicating with others, and participating in cultural protocols.

Ha‘awina—The relational experiences of art making are sites of learning
The nature of the kumu-haumāna relationship reminds us that no matter what arts education context we work in, we enter into complex relationships with
our students that teach particular values. Whether we attend to them or not, these relational experiences carry deep meaning for both the teacher and the learner. Looking closely at these relationships can teach us about the cultural values we impart in creating art together.

As arts educators, we could deepen our capacity to connect to our students by simply acknowledging and nurturing these relationships. In paying attention to the subtle lessons we teach our students as we interact with them, we become more aware of how we pass on our own cultural values. These relationships, when built on mutual respect and sustained by a relational reciprocity, can transform the ways in which we make and value our art.

Weaving the Community, Nurturing Genealogy

Looking at the world through a Kanaka Maoli world view, we can locate the symbiotic relationships we have to the sea, the land, the heavenly bodies in the sky, the animals, the plants, and ourselves as Kanaka. This explains our existence and connection to each other. It is our genealogy. In this context, weavers across the Hawaiian Islands understand the interconnectivity of their work to other weavers, both haumāna and kumu, past and present. As they weave together strands of lau, weavers recognize they are also connecting strands of
knowledge from generations of weavers as well as the symbiotic relationships that define our worldview. This forms the basis of a critical cultural legacy: connecting both the kumu and the haumāna to a larger lineage and community. This thought is exemplified by the traditional phrase, “He lālā wau no ku‘u kumu” (I am a branch of my teacher). This reference to kumu goes back to its definition as a trunk of a tree. To become someone’s haumāna is to become a sort of progeny of that kumu—to be deeply connected to each other in a respectful way.

In Hawaiian culture, specialized knowledge is secret and guarded. Knowledge is not always open or free to whoever is interested in it. It is a source of power rooted in history and with a rich genealogy of the source(s). When a kumu shares specialized knowledge with a haumāna, there is mutual recognition that the knowledge is a treasure rich with history and meaning that must be understood and respected. This knowledge represents a bond that links the kumu and haumāna to a rich cultural legacy. As they weave together strands of lau, kumu and haumāna recognize they are also connecting strands of knowledge from generations of weavers; they are joining a lineage of weavers. Aunty Gladys Grace (interview with C. Kurt Dewhurst, May 2005, Kona, HI) describes the genealogical significance of weaving: “Weaving lau hala is like weaving a relationship . . . it is weaving together the older with the younger generation. It makes you a better person. It is like having a baby and protecting it from sun and wind.”

Along with receiving this knowledge comes a tremendous kuleana of protecting and guarding this ‘ike. To be connected to a wider community of weavers means accepting the responsibility of participating in that community. Weaving beautiful pāpale, though admirable, is not enough. Naho‘opi‘i (2005) reminds us that to be a good weaver, one must also be a good community member:

My kumu, Aunty Gladys Grace, says that for a weaver to be good, you also have to give back. She wants us to take in the knowledge that she’s passing on to us, but she also wants to pass it on to the next generation in a traditional way of learning. (p. 51)

This awareness of generations is ever present in weaving; we are each connected to and responsible for the generations that surround us.

**Ha‘awina—Creating art situates us within a collective cultural legacy**

When we engage in making art, we become part of a wider community made visible through our art. Through ulana, we become part of an unfolding history—connected to what came before and what is to come. With that identity also comes a great responsibility to those in the weaving community and those the work touches. To create art is to accept the kuleana to care for the ‘ike, the community, and the future before us.
Applying this concept outside of Hawaiian contexts could transform how learners are welcomed and nurtured to create art. If educators in any arts setting worked to instill a sense of commitment and shared responsibility among their students, it could encourage learners to approach their work with respect and to view it as a collective effort that connects them to each other and to other artists before and after them. Art making would shift from being an individual activity to one of collective participation in a wider social and cultural network.

Final Thoughts: Hi’i

Often, when we start a pāpale, we have a vision for what our finished design might entail, and we work toward that vision. But once we hi’i, and try on the pāpale for the first time, we are often surprised by the final result. This collaborative essay is no different. We began at the piko—each piko—to pull back the layers of the makana of ulana lau hala, and we ended with a piece that revealed to us the ha‘wina that we had not yet practiced articulating aloud. Through an analysis of the ways in which weaving allows us to cultivate knowledge, nurture meaningful relationships, and participate in a rich cultural community legacy, we have identified some of the most precious and powerful
elements of what it means to ulana lau hala. As kumu and haumāna ourselves, we believe that these elements can be applied to any arts education setting in ways that would expand, enrich, and deepen the quality of the learning experience for all participants. It is only a matter of beginning.

**Glossary of Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A'o aku, a'o mai</td>
<td>The conceptual idea of teaching and learning&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aloha</td>
<td>Love, affection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ha'awina</td>
<td>Lesson, assignment, gift, blessings, results, happenings, revelations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hala</td>
<td>The pandanus or screw pine (<em>Pandanus odoratissimus</em>), native of southern Asia east to Hawai‘i; grows at low altitudes, both cultivated and wild. It is a tree with many branches that are tipped with spiral tufts of long, narrow, spine-edged leaves; its base is supported by a clump of slanting aerial roots. The pineapple-shaped fruit is borne on female trees, whereas the spikes of fragrant, pollen-bearing flowers are borne separately on male trees. Its many uses include: leaves (lau hala) for mats, baskets, hats; the yellow to red fruit sections for leis and brushes; male flowers to scent tapa and their leaf-like bracts to plait mats (see <em>hīnano</em>) (Neal, 1965, p. 51). The aerial root (uleule) tip is a good source of vitamin B and when cooked in ti leaves is used medicinally, although unpleasant tasting. The tree is called pū hala. The hala lei is much liked today but formerly was not worn on important ventures because hala also means “failure.” For the same reason, some people will not compose songs about hala.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haumāna</td>
<td>Student or students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
<td>An identity of a specific group of people whose ancestors, by genealogical claim, were the first peoples of the Hawaiian archipelago. It can also mean “belonging to Hawai‘i.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hi'i</td>
<td>A plaiting process of turning a pandanus leaf back to give the product a neat edge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hīna'i</td>
<td>Basket or container made of pandanus or other material</td>
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<tr>
<td>'Ike</td>
<td>Knowledge, awareness, understanding, recognition, comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanaka</td>
<td>Human being, people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kanaka Maoli</td>
<td>A group of people whose ancestors, by genealogical claim, were the first peoples of the Hawaiian archipelago; Hawaiian individuals born in Hawai‘i who cannot make this genealogical claim are not referred to as Hawaiian or Kanaka Maoli. They are referred to as “locals.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kū</td>
<td>To stand upright; to bend or twist horizontal lau to an upright position; the warp in weaving</td>
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<td>Kuleana</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kumu</td>
<td>Main stalk or trunk of a tree, teacher, beginning, source, origin; the starting point of plaiting</td>
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</tbody>
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Kupuna  Grandparent, ancestor, elder
Kūpuna  Grandparents, ancestors, elders
Lau  Leaf
Lau hala  Pandanus leaf, especially as used in plaiting
Makana  Gift, present
Mana  Supernatural power, divine power, spiritual power
Moe  To lay down; the horizontal leaves through the weft in weaving
Moena  Mat
‘Ōlelo Noʻeau  Wise saying, proverb
Pāpale  Hat
Piko  Navel, navel string, umbilical cord, genitals
Talking Stink  Negative talk in colloquial or local pidgin
Ulana  To plait or weave

Notes
1. In the Hawaiian world view, language is culture. We cannot separate language and culture; without language there is no culture, and without culture there is no language. Understanding language is important because it allows the learner access to understanding the breadth and depth of a culture. Because of this, throughout this essay we rely heavily on the Hawaiian words related to weaving. As we do, we provide the English translations in a glossary.
2. In Hawaiʻi, Aunty (or Uncle, for a man) is often used to address a woman from a senior generational line or a generational line equal to the speaker’s parents. It is used to show great respect.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all definitions come from Pukui and Elbert (1986).

References