Introduction

Course evaluations are now a serious matter for universities trying to meet stakeholder needs and expectations, quality assurance, improvements and strategic decision making. Typically, participants are invited to participate in surveys that concentrate on how well the design and delivery aspects meet predetermined learning objectives, quality of teaching, and the types of improvements needed for future delivery. In order to avoid overloading participants with time consuming tasks, and even where opportunities for the provision of “qualitative feedback” are made, such surveys rarely, if ever, seek in-depth self-reflection by learners, and thereby fail to provide any insight into the real impact of the learning program on either learners or their workplaces. This is because universities are principally interested in evaluation for improving products, processes and services, with less interest on the impact of courses and programs on participants or their workplaces. On the other hand, organisations that sponsor employees to engage in leadership development have the opposite focus, being principally interested in the impacts on individuals and their workplaces.

The context of a Master of Education in Educational Leadership course as part of a national capacity building program for 18 Pacific Islanders, delivered both in their home country and here in Australia, provided a particularly pertinent example of the inappropriateness of conventional university course evaluations to inform the employer about the impact of the course on the participants and their communities. We were therefore prompted to seek more contextually and culturally appropriate alternatives and elected to explore the potential of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique first developed by Dart and Davies (2003). The Most Significant Change approach is participatory in nature and is based on the analysis of stories about the impact of the training as experienced by the learners. This paper reports how the MSC approach was used for gathering qualitative evaluative data on the impact of a Master of Education course designed to develop the leadership capacity of 18 senior education officers in a Pacific Island nation.

In this paper, we present a case for the MSC technique as a useful approach to course evaluation and provide an overview of the MSC technique as we interpreted it. A summary of the leadership course provides the overall context for the degree. This is followed by an outline of our approach to its implementation in the context of the academic study and capacity building offered to the 18 Pacific Islander public servants. We reveal the most significant positive and negative changes experienced by our participants before offering our conclusions on the pertinence and effectiveness of the MSC technique for future evaluation of academic courses.

A Case for the Most Significant Change Technique

Many organisations across all sectors invest heavily in leadership capacity building and, as a result, expect high returns evidenced by changes that improve both performance and productivity of staff. Those participating in leadership development programs are expected to integrate and apply their new knowledge and skills as they lead changes in
their organisations. However, in order to “make a difference” in their organisations, individuals also need to engage in learning that has personal significance because it is their personal transformation, when mediated with organizational goals, that promotes mutually beneficial outcomes (Franz, 2005). Personal changes, combined with newly acquired knowledge, skills and attributes assist individuals in enhancing their performance and productivity. Conventional university evaluation approaches rarely measure changes that have personal significance to learners so we adopted the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique in order to reveal the wider impact of a leadership course for 18 Pacific Islanders who completed a Master of Education (Educational Leadership) course as part of a national capacity building program.

Systematic and consistent measures are integral to effective evaluations that provide evidence for informed decision making about the merits of any training courses. Appropriately, the main goal served by course evaluations in universities is, typically, to encourage continuous improvement of content and teaching effectiveness (Sproule, 2000). However, such evaluations place greater focus on the teaching than on the learning that occurs (Denson, Loveday and Dalton, 2010). Indeed, a meta-analysis by Frick, Chadha, Watson and Zlatkovska (2010) found that current evaluations provide little practical information for instructors on how to improve their teaching strategies in the areas of learner-centred instruction, problem based learning and complex learning which are often claimed as the intended outcomes of such courses. That aside, the data collected are of primary interest to the facilitators and their institutions, and only to a much lesser extent serve the interests of either the participants or their sponsors. Moreover, standard evaluation practices rarely investigate the impact of the course on the lives and work performance of those to whom the courses are targeted. This is because conventional evaluation of university courses tends to rely on standardized surveys which require learners to indicate their level of satisfaction with sets of items based on the learning content, aspects of teaching, and method of delivery, although such surveys may sometimes be supplemented with other sources of data gathered by individual facilitators.

Several researchers including Cohen (1981), Denson, Loveday and Dalton (2010), Feldman (1989), Frick, Chadha, Watson, Wang and Green (2008a, 2008b), Kulik (2001), Spiel, Schober and Reimann (2006), Shortland and Mark (1987), and Wagner (1999) have highlighted the limitations of current approaches and strongly recommend extending data collection beyond student ratings to a more systematic approach to evaluation designs that offer greater understanding of how the learning is translated into the socio-cultural contexts of learners’ personal and work lives. Learning is essentially a socio-cultural activity, where knowledge requirements are shaped by local “rules, values, attitudes, expectations etc” (Ellstrom, Svesson and Aberg, 2004, p. 479) and the material, social, discursive and historical conditions and relations of work contexts (Kemmis, 2005), are well documented. Peacock (1988 cited in Naysmith & Corcoran, 2001, p.81) defines culture as ‘the taken-for-granted but powerfully influential understandings and codes that are learned and shared by members of a group’. Not just work cultures, but ethnic cultures and languages also influence learning (see Leask & Wallace, 2012). Nonetheless, wider appropriation of knowledge requires personal reflection and collaboration with other workers and interlocutors (e.g. clients). Such socio-cultural
impacts are rarely targeted directly by course evaluations, despite their importance for individuals, their workplaces and communities, and the employers who sponsor participants. This is where the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, developed by Dart and Davies (2003), can supplement traditional data sources to present a more holistic evaluation. Although it has not been widely adopted in the evaluation of education and training, the technique provides information permitting a better alignment of the curriculum and delivery with learners’ and their workplace needs, whilst still maintaining the quality standards for education and training providers. Strong alignments are now demanded by students, workplaces and the community.

Our interest in using the approach was driven by a concern as to how the course contributed to outcomes that were personally valued by the learners and their work institutions and what types of outcomes were of most significance to them. The next section briefly describes the MSC technique.

**Most Significant Change**

Davis (1996) first developed the MSC approach to monitor and evaluate complex participatory rural development programs with diverse implementation and outcomes. Instead of an evaluation against pre-defined indicators alone, the approach is based on the stories told by participants about the changes they experience during and as a result of a particular project or program. In 2000, Dart applied the theory of evolutionary epistemology (Campbell, 1969), which focuses on the learning process, to re-conceptualise and advance Dart’s original MSC technique. Dart explained and defended the relevance of such a constructivist-subjective epistemology on the grounds that the meaning of stories on the most significant changes experienced by individuals and groups of learners is constructed and derived from their socio-cultural contexts, as explained by Lave and Wenger (1991). The benefits are consequently translated and constructed in socially meaningful outcomes. Such a perspective on learning offers scope for applying MSC to the evaluation of capacity building interventions through study courses. The qualitative nature of the data derived from MSC reveals a diverse set of outcomes with wider implications for development within a wide range of work and socio-cultural environments. Given the effectiveness of the MSC approach in identifying previously unidentified secondary outcomes, such as those of personal significance to the participants, the use of MSC is becoming increasingly popular as an evaluative tool in developmental programs across the world (see for example Sigsgaard, 2002; Kelly, Kilby & Kasynathan, 2004; Fehring, Pettenon, Fagan, Goyen & Connor, 2006; and Willetts & Crawford, 2007).

The MSC data collection process requires participants to reflect critically and analyse the outcomes and changes they have experienced or observed throughout their participation in the course. In contrast, traditional evaluation tools do not allow this level of in-depth criticality. The non-threatening nature of MSC (where there are no right or wrong answers, nor assumptions of opposing outcomes such as expected/unexpected or
agreed/disputed meanings) permits total acknowledgment and recognition of participants’ (often culturally specific) perspectives. Being participatory in nature, it reveals data on impact and outcomes, and often highlights unexpected changes manifesting distinct values to individuals and their organizations or communities. Dart and Davies (2003) contend that a dialogical story-based evaluation identifies the unintentional, complex and diverse outcomes that frequently emerge beyond the formally stated objectives of the course. Stories allow people to share their experiences in a holistic yet concise manner, in a way that is powerful and promotes dialogue. Stories describing MSC also enlighten individuals’ value systems and the broader influence of the learning program. In cultures where story telling is a key mode of communication such as in many Pacific Island communities, MSC de-formalises evaluation and encourages participants to express openly what is valuable and most important within their socio-cultural contexts. As ‘cultural insiders’ and having knowledge and understanding about the dynamic and multifaceted contexts of their environments, the participants themselves are best placed to relate stories about the most significant changes or outcomes. This makes the process relational and interactive, and hence leads readily to transformational learning which is particularly important for leadership development. These individual stories are analysed from the perspective of the participants rather than those of ‘cultural outsiders’ as represented by, for example, academics who remain at the periphery of the socio-cultural boundaries where participants apply what is learned. In the case reported here, this is of particular relevance since the participants shared a common culture of story-telling to express the essence of learning.

Dart and Davies (2003) assert that the academic and scholarly rigor of their proposed ten step process consists in the grounds that MSC acknowledges, qualifies and dignifies anecdotal evidence. Dart and Davies’ ten steps of MSC are:

1. Getting started: establishing champions and getting familiar with the approach;
2. Establishing ‘domains of change’;
3. Defining the reporting period;
4. Collecting stories of change;
5. Reviewing the stories within the organizational hierarchy;
6. Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process;
7. Setting in place a process to verify the stories if necessary;
8. Quantification;
9. Conducting secondary analysis of the stories en masse; and
10. Revising the MSC process.

These ten steps are most suited for evaluation of rural development programs. Dart and Davies (2003) do not claim exclusivity for the MSC approach and advise that MSC needs to be used in combination with other techniques. This is the approach we adopted for our project. Furthermore, not all steps are appropriate nor relevant for evaluating academic programs. For instance, the objectives of the academic courses and domains of change are pre-set. The reporting period is scheduled towards the end of each course. We selected Step 4 and secondary analysis in Step 9 as most appropriate to gather data, and then supplemented this with the traditional surveys recommended by our university.
The leadership course

The leadership capacity building course on which this paper is based, comprised 8 units of study over four semesters. It was customized with six objectives:

(i) Develop high level understandings and skills that reflect issues pertaining to government policy development, curriculum implementation and research in relation to education planning and inspections activities;
(ii) Develop professional-as-researcher skills in work contexts;
(iii) Develop skills of observation, evaluation and appraisal to facilitate professional work and creative working environments;
(iv) Develop management and supervision skills that promote effective work practices, learning and teamwork in the workplace;
(v) Work with fellow colleagues, in a collaborative context, to develop more enhanced understandings related to specific work contexts; and
(vi) Reflect upon, develop and value personal and cultural values, beliefs and goals as they relate to learning and knowing in work places.

These specific course objectives reflect the broader university approved graduate capabilities. The theories and examples of leadership presented in the course content originated from a western perspective and the teaching focused on course objectives that were probably more appropriate for Australian students. However, these objectives were maintained since they were already approved to meet the Australian standards for a Master of Education degree course.

Throughout the duration of the program, the part-time participants maintained their usual professional responsibilities and were therefore able to apply new knowledge and skills as they were acquired from the course. The university’s standard process of course content and teaching evaluation was undertaken each semester.

Method

As facilitators and teachers, we believed and hoped that aspects of the course which were of personal significance would cause gradual transformations, and prompt changes in leadership practices needed to implement reforms in national education in the participants’ home country. Intentionally, some illustrative data was collected to demonstrate how the MSC technique brings to light impacts of the course that could not be identified by conventional evaluations. The use of MSC to supplement the formal evaluation processes was fully supported by the university as well as the participants’ employer – the department of education of their country - and both institutions approved ethical clearance. Individual participants were also asked to provide written consent to data collection, use of their assessment materials (reflective essays) for research purposes and for our use in subsequent publications. The fundamental research question adopted was:

What was the impact of the leadership development course on individual students?
The impact was interpreted in terms of the most significant changes experienced and identified by the individuals.

Sample

The eighteen participants enrolled in the Master of Education degree were invited to participate in the evaluation of their course using the MSC approach. All of them agreed to participate. Among them were seven women and eleven men. Eight participants had a role in education planning and ten were “standards officers” (equivalent of school inspectors). The group had diverse learning styles, spoke different native languages, held distinct values and came from seven different ethnic cultures - quite different from those of the mainstream on-campus students studying similar units.

Data collection and analysis

We believed that it was important for all participants to understand the theory and application of MSC, not only for the purpose of the evaluation, but also to add MSC to their own repertoire of evaluation techniques as part of their professional development in leadership for change. Accordingly, in the third (of four) semester, the group was initiated into the processes of implementing the MSC approach. Data were collected from three sources: individual interviews which focused on the participants’ experiences of their most significant change; focus groups; and reflective essays completed in the final semester of study. These approaches met the requirements for methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1988).

Interviews

The purposive interviews during Semester III focused around three questions.

1. What positive or negative changes have you observed in yourself and your working life during the time that you have been studying for the Master of Education degree?
2. Which of these changes do you consider to be the most significant?
3. Why do you consider this change to be the most significant?

Each interview lasted about 20-30 minutes. Their personal stories about the most significant changes they experienced were recorded digitally before being transcribed verbatim for analysis. Using an inductive approach, as suggested by Tesch (1990), text segments from each interview were coded and analysed to identify common themes around the most significant changes. First the data were coded independently by two analysts (first author and a research assistant), using NVivo software. The codings were compared and discussed to reach an agreed set of codes which reflected the main themes. Thematic analyses were conducted and then the two sets of analysis were collated. The independent analysis here is analogous with the peer review process that Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend. To verify the interpretations, the findings were presented to
two separate focus groups of eight and ten participants. The focus groups facilitated member checking, as recommended by Glesne (1999) and verified major themes.

**Focus groups**
The focus groups were facilitated by the second author and recorded by a research assistant. Limited guidance for discussion was provided by the facilitator to allow for the free-flow of discussion and debate over 30 minutes. The standards officers and education planners met as separate focus groups to enable us as teacher-researchers to establish if their perception of the most significant changes was influenced by their roles. The whole group of 18 was then called together for final discussions on a short list of the most significant changes identified, and explanations of why these were significant.

**Reflective essays**
The reflective essays, written in response to questions similar to those for the interviews and submitted by the participants at the end of the course, were analysed to reveal any additional data to that from the interviews and focus groups. No additional information was noted so the analysis and findings verified at the focus groups were accepted as conclusive.

**Findings and discussion**

The participants related a number of significant changes that were positive with only a few negative changes. No differences were noted in the responses from education planners and standards officers. A short-list of most significant positive changes highlighted six thematic areas:

- Increase in self-confidence (89 references by all participants);
- Change as a person (63 references by all participants);
- Recognition and respect by others (33 references by all participants);
- Ability to make more informed decision (24 references by 16 participants);
- Now engaging others more frequently (19 references by 12 participants); and
- Now accepting others’ viewpoints (11 references by 6 participants).

The first three changes in the list were of a personal nature and the next three related to changes in the way the participants practiced leadership. Interestingly, none of these changes identified by the participants coincided with the learning objectives that were pre-set for the course. Although the positive changes experienced by the participants in this research may sound expected and perhaps even trivial, but for the Pacific island participants these are very significant because unlike leaders in developed countries, most of them have little access to research, information and publications or exposure to a range of leadership practices. Further, the remoteness of their work locations isolates most of them for most of the year. Hence changes are rare and slow.
Most significant positive changes

Of the six most significant changes identified by the participants, the most fundamental was a boost in their self-confidence which led to major transformations within themselves, and in turn stimulated and facilitated changes in other areas.

(i) Increase in self-confidence. Comments from peers, supervisors and the community, on changes they noted in the participants’ attitudes and practices following the first year of study, enhanced their level of confidence. For instance, the participants felt that they were now able to participate in meetings and public events without fear, and challenge current thinking by asking critical questions. One student related this as follows:

Well the positive changes is [sic] my bosses now have a high regard for me. Yes, because I can speak confidently in meetings. I can contribute. I can share some of the knowledge that I acquired during my course of study with them. So they tend to appreciate that. [P10]

The women in the group seemed particularly confident, as noted in the stories by participants 09 and 06.

It has given me the confidence as a lady, a female leader amongst all men, to take on any challenges that may come. [P 09]

Being a female as well, working with all the males, I don't have the guts to talk and I don't have the guts to really display myself as a leader, but after going through and after studying all this I think I have the courage to do so now…. I can make some strategic decisions; to have strategic thinking and then make some strategic decisions about the plans or the whole operation of planning in that system. [P 06]

In order to appreciate the significance of these statements, it is important to recognize that the Pacific island nation of these participants includes both patrilineal and matrilineal social systems. Women who come from patrilineal social systems tend to have less influence and ‘quieter voices’ than men. The few women who originated from matrilineal social systems, but worked within a patrilineal system faced different but equally significant challenges. They drew on their leadership strengths developed in their matrilineal backgrounds to perform successfully as leaders. Data from the MSC approach indicates that the course enhanced all women leaders’ placement in their male dominated workplaces and added to their self-confidence. The explanation by one of the women from a particularly remote area reflects the views of four others from similar locations:

As a woman in a society where male dominance is entrenched, sometimes you can hardly find a place to raise your voice or find an identity in the place of work. But I think I have grown to a certain degree where I can stand up and put out the voice there and even I have the support of my training inspectors… Now that I'm doing my masters, they are looking at me as if I'm an important person and I think that's an advantage for me… the principal advisor is - he realises that I'm around... He has never invited me to attend a senior's sectional meeting, but this year he has invited me to go to the meeting. [P04]
These statements offer rich evidence of respect for women – an equity issue embedded in the national education reform agenda with which participants are familiar. The findings here also reflect how these outcomes are shaped by the local rules, values, attitudes and expectations (Ellstrom, Svesson and Aberg, 2004) of the local culture. Although of significance to the students and their country, conventional evaluation sources such as LEX (Learning Experience) surveys would have inevitably failed to capture such an impact of the leadership development course on women.

Following the process of self-reflection, the participants expressed a degree of surprise about their levels of confidence, but from the academic team’s perspective this was an expected outcome of the course. Predictably, the knowledge and skills have boosted the leadership capacity of the entire group and empowered them with enhanced capabilities, consequently advancing their self-confidence. Several comments indicated that they were changed persons.

(ii) Change as a person. Increased self-confidence and personal transformation stimulated changes in their self-perceptions expressed as change from ‘old’ self to a ‘new’ self.

The old me is waiting for things to happen but the new me is taking the initiative to do things, so I think there’s been a lot of change in me… The way we can think and what we know has moved from one level to another. We can speak with some command because we have the knowledge power behind us. It's really helping us. [P05]

At the focus groups, the entire sample confirmed that each person underwent a significant self-transformation. “I’m a changed person… I do not talk like the way I used to talk. I do not think like the way I used to think”, said participant P04. Such a transformation was intended and can be attributed to the critical reflective exercises embedded in the entire course, and a distinct dimension of the first study unit when participants critically reflected on personal and professional theories about knowledge and learning in professional educational contexts. This was the first time they had engaged in such an exercise which increased their awareness of themselves as leaders and how best to lead and supervise staff in order to achieve better outcomes under their country’s reform agenda. Here, self-reflection facilitated wider appropriation of knowledge they gained from the course.

The self-transformation described by the participants is not surprising, particularly when they had not engaged in formal learning for some time and now felt rejuvenated. However, as Schein, (2004) points out, their energy and enthusiasm will inevitably remain short-lived unless their workplace cultures support and provide resources, for not just the creation of new and imaginative approaches, but also for their implementation. Without sustained support, they and their staff will quickly revert to old practices and norms, consequently limiting the scope of reforms needed by the country.

The participants explained that their transformed selves as leaders earned recognition and respect by others who will now expect more changes from the Masters graduates.
(iii) Recognition and respect by others. Two participants described how the transformation translated to a new standing in their professional, community and family circles.

This [the course] made big change in the way I do things, even in my family people are respecting me more than before. Even when I walk to the village - when I walk to the village I am respected as someone big in the department or something. [P02]

When you're at my college, people who know me, they're beginning to respect me… they've seen a change in some of the things I used to do as we leading…, changing what we are doing… I'm trying to do some things with an extra ordinary way of getting things done. [P08]

These forms of recognition and respect are not surprising because leaders and learned persons are highly respected and valued in Pacific cultures, and given higher status in the community. However, with such elevation come expectations of role modeling, high performance and delivery - all well known to the participants who were expected to demonstrate changes as they completed their post graduate degrees. Hence self-transformation was anticipated and unavoidable from the academic team’s perspectives because only then would the participants be well equipped to engage with others and make more informed decisions.

(iv) Ability to make more informed decision. The participants who gained the declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge (Biggs, 2003) from the course, already had a good grasp of local knowledge and were well enculturated into the work contexts, and they are best positioned to know what will, or will not work in both the short and longer terms. Above all, they, and not the researchers (academics), have the best idea of what changes are indeed significant. However, it was not just the new knowledge and understandings gained from the course that helped the participants make more informed decisions. A gradual advancement in their perceptions of leadership made participants realize that an authoritative leadership style was too limited. A change from old to new leadership practices was expressed by one student:

I've always thought leaders to be somebody who goes out and give instructions to people and tells them what to do and things like that. But with this course I began to understand myself as not somebody in authority all the time to go and give instructions, but I'm someone who is to go and give, facilitate new ideas things like that... I have to make the people understand that these things can improve their work, so they have to transform themselves. [P01]

This realization, together with new knowledge and understandings, increased the level of engagement and inclusiveness of staff at all levels to make more informed and shared decisions.

(v) Now engaging others more frequently. The positive comments inspired the participants to engage openly in conversations to jointly gather and share information, and make decisions. As explained by one student the new concepts of leadership that they learnt transformed their approaches to leadership. For instance they realised that they no longer needed to solve problems by themselves.
Before I took up this program – the Master’s program – leadership, to me, was just about myself – doing things myself. After the program, I began to realise that leadership is not one person, but a lot of people, working together, to make a lot of difference. That I applied in my workplace by getting the inspectors to get – to plan together, work together, more of a teamwork approach of our projects. [P07]

It was not just a matter of engaging others more frequently, but also accepting their viewpoints when making decisions.

(vi) **Now accepting others’ viewpoints.** Another consequential outcome of self-confidence and transformation was a greater awareness of the need to treat others with dignity and respect, and the importance of getting people to work well together.

I now invite other staff to discuss ideas openly and be involved in decision making. [P03]

As leaders, the participants began to apply the theories around leadership, supervision and team work and value the importance of listening and considering other staff and stakeholders’ problems and concerns, as well as to give others opportunities to show their capabilities. Notably, they began to engage openly with diverse staff and stakeholders and accept others’ views so that they could work in partnership and achieve better results. This type of engagement and consultation for change management for reforms in education is highly recommended by Kotter (1995). Not surprisingly, the inclusive approach also leads to more informed decision making. The participants now have greater appreciation of responding to others in helpful and supportive ways, and the need to inspire and support others to promote and accept change. Above all these participants not only challenged themselves, but also their staff to try out new and innovative ways in which to work.

Although self-transformation underpins the achievement of the six course objectives and is most significant to the participants, its impact on increasing self-confidence; enhancing recognition and respect by others; making more informed decisions; and more frequently engaging others was not captured through conventional evaluations of teaching, curriculum and delivery approaches. Here, the MSC technique draws attention to the importance of self-transformation for leadership capacity building. The findings from the MSC data stress the importance of fostering self-transformation as a fundamental outcome of leadership training. The changes these participants report have special significance socially and culturally within their work and community contexts. The analysis suggests a strong support for sociocultural theory in shaping the participants’ learning and perceptions of how the course impacted on them.

**Most significant negative changes**

While the participants were very forthcoming with positive changes that were considered significant, they had to think long about negative changes. Three main negative changes were considered significant. These were: envy (5 references); increased workload (3
references); and lack of recognition/appreciation of them as ‘new leaders’ by work supervisors (3 references). According to the participants, the potency of the positive changes minimized the impact of the noted negativity.

(i) Envy. Participants who held more senior positions noted elements of envy from others at their levels and a few subordinates who had been unsuccessful in gaining scholarships for the Master course. More women than men identified responses associated with envy. One senior woman leader explained:

The disadvantage is me as a lady. And in the middle management, there are some people, hmm, who don’t, let’s say, I think it’s just envy. I would call it, who envy me as a lady in that position and who’s doing so well in leading the region. [P10]

Although she identified this as a significant negative change, neither she nor other participants (including the men), were willing to elaborate further.

(ii) Increased workload. Studying for a Masters degree and at the same time having to deliver in their existing leadership roles became stressful for three participants who experienced diminished support from their work supervisors. One very senior officer was expected to be available at short notice, even on his previously agreed study days. Another explained that due to work demands, he was expected by his supervisor to study after hours even though the supervisor had signed an agreement for specific study days away from work. Statements from two participants performing leadership at different levels were:

So, many times it is the pressure of work that I am always called upon by the administrator and the governor of the province to brief them, and it takes a lot of time to come up with documents to give them at the same time with trying to concentrate on my studies here, yeah. [P15]

Even I explained to my boss that I needed time to do my write ups but, he told me that in weekends I also need to attend to my work. So the environment is not there for me. I am running into this on my own effort and trying to make sure that I get through this particular program. [P17]

Although only three of them expressed increased workload as a negative change, which they considered significant, surprisingly others did not state this even though all the participants were studying the same units and still performing their usual leadership roles.

(ii) Lack of recognition/appreciation as ‘new leaders’ by work supervisors. Because supervisors of three participants did not offer much support and rarely engaged them in decision making, the participants interpreted this as lack of recognition and appreciation by work supervisors. One student experienced blunt rejection of a point of view and was ridiculed as “little consultant”.

The results revealed those impacts of the course that were of particular significance to the participants and their workplaces. The findings also confirmed the value of using the MSC approach to providing academic teachers and mentors with a more comprehensive
understanding of the impact of their courses beyond the measurement of mere “satisfaction”. The findings reported here also suggest areas for improvements as reflected in the most significant positive changes, as well as unexpected outcomes (most significant negative changes) that influence the current objectives. These form useful considerations for course enhancement.

Conclusions

While the reported changes experienced by participants offer some evidence of outcomes relating to the collective objectives of the course, the details behind the transformation and its significance to the individuals and to leadership in the Pacific island country concerned would not have been identified without using the MSC approach. The application of MSC described here has confirmed three specific advantages originally listed by Davies and Dart (2003). First, MSC is both based upon and reveals cultural norms of the client group and in this case clearly identified the values that prevail in the cultural, workplace and community contexts of the participants. Second, the technique has encouraged participants to critically evaluate the changes they experienced and to explain those that proved to be most important in their current work contexts. And third, their stories have delivered a richer picture of the immediate impact of the course. As implemented here, the data reflect only the views of the participants. Although strongly recommended by Denzin (1988) and Glesne (1999), other stakeholders were not engaged in the evaluation so the wider impact of the course in the longer term remains unknown. Despite this possible shortcoming, the findings of this study suggest that the MSC approach is useful for gathering qualitative data for a comprehensive evaluation of capacity building courses. We suggest using the approach as a supplementary source of data, or including specific items (ie. emerging from themes and constructs that are most significant or are perceived as high impact by participants) in traditional surveys to extend the scope of quantitative data, and also using self-reflections over the course of the study to collect evidence of the types of changes experienced by individuals. These additional data sets can inform improvements to course content and designs. The findings can be used to enhance current course objectives as well as considering ones (eg. outcomes that increase self-confidence) that influence their achievement. It extends beyond conventional approaches to highlight the social benefits of education and training programs which are often claimed in proposals and final reports of developmental interventions, but rarely reported. This evaluation technique offers new perspectives on ways to improve course designs to enhance alignments between formal courses and the needs of the learners, their sponsors and workplaces.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Queensland University of Technology for approving the research, and to the research participants who generously offered insights into the most significant changes they experienced during the course of their study.

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