

PEER TEACHING IN AMERICAN SAMOA-- FORGET IT!

by Ron Grant

Teaching and learning do occur in American Samoa, but in a rather unique socio-educational setting which often puzzles educators who visit from the Mainland, and when they depart from the Territory they leave shaking their heads. What works everywhere else may not have been successful there.

Consider peer teaching. It has most often been a failure when implemented in American Samoa. This article seeks (1) to point out why peer teaching ought to be for the most part "deported" from the Territory and (2) to alert TESL educators who live in non-American cultures—Polynesian, Melanesian, Micronesian and others in and beyond the Pacific Basin—that peer teaching will probably fail unless it has cultural acceptance and precedence.

Rooted in the concept that one learns best and retains most when taught by members of one's own age-set and social class, peer teaching has been employed to advantage throughout the United States. Pedagogical literature is replete with testimonials as to how peer teaching saved the semester for many instructors, allowing individualized instruction and released time for instructors bearing heavy class loads and large class sizes.

Naturally peer teaching would be imported to a United States territory south of the equator, and it was. Work-study programs implementing peer tutors have been established and funded. "Of course peer teaching will work in Samoa!" say confident Mainland educators. "I can cite state-of-the-art literature to support it and, besides, I've used it successfully myself."

Sociologically, however, American Samoa is in a class by itself. Following are a few unique reasons why peer teaching has already failed in American Samoa and will continue to fail each time it is tried—unless somehow it can be adapted to the Samoan culture.

1. Ego conflicts between the tutor and learner are common. The learner may be in the family of a high-ranking chief and may outrank the tutor. In the *Faa Samoa* (the Samoan life style into which the Samoan student re-enters as soon as he leaves the classroom), the roles are reversed and the tutor may descend instantly in the established "pecking order" while the learner assumes ascendancy to his rightful place in the *Fa'a Samoa*. Inherent in the tutor-pupil relationship is the sure, reciprocal knowledge of this fact, which hinders the efficacy of tutor-inspired learning.

2. The Samoan concept of a social pecking order also extends to relationships between the sexes. Men and boys are traditionally not taught by women and girls. Males, after all, are the sons of chiefs and, as such, manifest the active Male Principle, of which instruction (the *mana* or power of thought) is a vital part. Women, on the other hand, are embodiments of the Female Principles, the darker, reflective, passive world of intuition. It is not their business to impart the light of understanding—*mala-malama*—to males of the same age-set, or even of the same generation. Moreover, if a female tutor demonstrates that she is more cognitively able than a male learner, a lingering, covert jealousy may quickly surface and become overt during interaction. This, too, will hinder teaching and learning and may likely cause the tutor a great deal of frustration with which she will not know how to cope.

3. Frequently it seems that the Samoan learner will not exert a viable effort unless the stakes are high enough. Perhaps this has to do with his self-concept which, in many cases, is decidedly Copernican and me-oriented rather than Newtonian and self-effacing. The Samoan learner will, however, deal readily with his instructor; then the stakes are high enough and he will meet the challenge and make the effort. Furthermore,

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he achieves satisfaction when he is directly taught by the instructor, even when he is chastised, for he knows that he is getting the attention he wants and believes that he deserves. It often appears that the Samoan learner learns as an effect of the attention he receives from one whom he values as a mentor in the Samoan tradition.

Based on the above, this article recommends that those who would employ peer teaching in American Samoa and in non-American cultures anywhere be cautious, intelligent and informed about how they go about it. Anguish and frustration may result for the tutor and no learning gain may well be the outcome for the pupil.