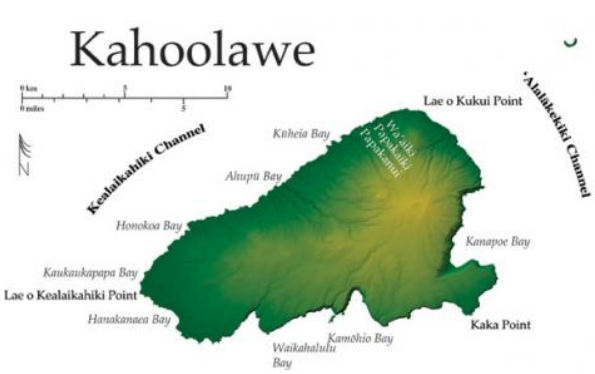
Stillness and Flow: The Impact of Kahoolawe-by Amy Perruso



It was a decade ago that my view of teaching and learning fundamentally shifted.

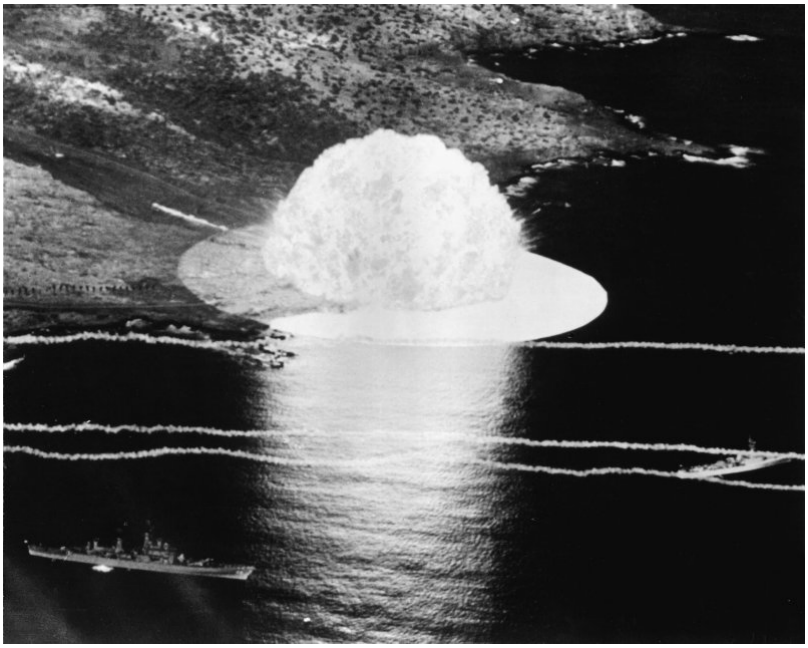
I had been invited to participate in a pilot program being developed by the Pacific America Foundation (PAF), in coordination with the Protect Kahoolawe Ohana and the Hawaii Department of Education (DOE).

This program was intended to create a cohort of science and social studies public school teachers who would be involved in intensive place-based curriculum development focused on Kahoolawe. The purpose of the program was to develop multiple pathways for secondary students to learn about Kahoolawe, its history, ecology and cultural significance, so that young people would be motivated to aloha ‘Ä□ina. Connecting public school students to Kahoolawe had never been done before in any systematic way, and it was clear, through the depth, complexity, and intensity of our curriculum preparation program, that this was an important and meaningful collaboration between the activists leading PAF, PKO, KIRC (the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission) and the DOE.

The shared purpose was to prepare these educators to connect public school students to the island. The DOE teachers went through the preparation program, spent a week on the island and piloted the curriculum with our students in the second semester. Some access opportunities were made available for the teachers of the pilot for the following year, and my colleagues Sandy Webb, Cynthia Tong and I decided that we wanted our students to join PKO in an access so that they could contribute to environmental restoration work. So we developed a rigorous preparation program that went beyond the curriculum content to include cultural protocol and physical requirements for the huaka'i– we first had an 'ohana meeting with PKO and the families, then started doing preparation work before and after school. Because we had raised the funds for the access, we asked the students to show their commitment to the shared purpose of the huaka'i in their after school work on campus or in the community, ranging from working in lo'i to planting native plants on campus, developing a recycling program and doing an energy study on campus. We asked them to do their History Day and science fair projects on topics related to Kahoolawe. We took them on a DMZ tour of Makaha with William Aila. We worked on cultural protocol, took them camping for a weekend to make sure they had strong swimming skills, collaboration and communication skills, and the commitment necessary to make the access, which we knew to be physically and emotionally challenging, a positive experience for them and for our hosts, PKO.

This was difficult work. It was a struggle. None of us were Hawaiian or sufficiently grounded in Hawaiian cultural practices to feel at all comfortable in this work – we were comfortable in the curriculum because it spoke to our disciplinary knowledge, but not in the social or cultural dimensions. I personally grappled with heavy feelings of inadequacy and illegitimacy – I knew both that there were many other much better qualified and knowledgeable teachers and also that none were teaching social studies or science at my school at the time. So I knew that I was both the wrong and the only person who could facilitate that experience for my students. It was also intimidating because we were doing work no one had done before, taking public school students to access this place that had experienced so much violence and trauma. We knew we were taking risks, as far as our administration was concerned, in terms of safety and public trust, and we knew the students had to absolutely understand and operate within the parameters of acceptable behavior on island.

As soon as we landed in Maui and were met by the organizers of PKO, something strange began to happen to me. I began to feel, more and more strongly, like I was floating, and that I had no desire to speak – which is very unusual for me. We camped in the wa’a hale that night, waking up in the dark to take a boat to Kahoolawe. Because there is no place to land a boat on island, we then had to swim all of our equipment, food and water in to the island, trending water in a line to the shore, as waves pounded against us. I had experienced this before, along with the appropriate cultural protocols, but not *with* my students. Over the next few days, we planted pili grass and worked on the hale. We offered the ho'okupu my students had prepared. We made the silent barefoot hike up the jagged peak of Moaulaiki, the site of a stone known as the Navigator’s Chair where Hawaiians still teach the science of navigating by the stars, where you can see Lanai, Molokai, Maui and the Big Island and the channels between the islands. I cried with my students as we looked out over the ravages done to the island through decades of bombing.



We cooked, cleaned and bathed together in the ocean. I began to feel myself slip into a very quiet, calm space, a place I had actually never experienced before while teaching as I watched my students engage in the work, the practices and the learning that now structure and ritualize restoration access to Kahoolawe for young people. That stillness and connectivity is what some scientists are now calling flow, where the very challenging becomes effortless and learning accelerates almost exponentially.

The more I focused on how my students were experiencing the intensity of the island and the incredible people with whom they were working, like Uncle Maka, Uncle Walter, Syd, and Kylee, the more I felt blurry, like my sense of self was expanding, with my focus shifting away from myself and more to the webs that connected people. This experiential space of learning, grounded in aloha ‘Ä□ina, which had been so challenging to create and so personally intimidating, was completely immersive – time did not exactly stand still but slowed down dramatically. I ‘saw’ my students, and they ‘saw’ me, in completely different ways, as we worked through the challenges of really hard physical, cultural and social work together, laboring during the day and engaging in deep discussions with the whole group in the evening. And this ‘seeing,’ this ‘witnessing’ of ‘becoming’ in the context of aloha ‘Ä□ina is, I think, the source of a change in the quality of breath, or hÄ□. All are sharing breath, all are both teachers and students, and the depth of relationship extends far past what is possible in the classroom. And the shift is not simply about ‘ma ka hana i ka ike,’ or learning through doing, but about a particular type of learning. We were very clear with these young people that we were bringing them into conversation around the challenges that Kahoolawe faced because we needed them to be involved in problem-solving. We needed their critical and creative ideas, and their leadership qualities to make the lessons we were learning on Kahoolawe relevant for aloha ‘Ä□ina work throughout the islands. This is part of why they were so engaged, so present, because they were taking leadership in this work at every turn.

I have spent the rest of my career doing everything in my power not only to get back to that space of stillness and flow with students as often as possible, but also to create the space to breathe for all public school teachers, so that they too at least have that kind of teaching and learning experience available to them, so that public education for our young people is not reduced to the narrow learning evidenced on a multiple choice test.

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Story by Amy Perruso

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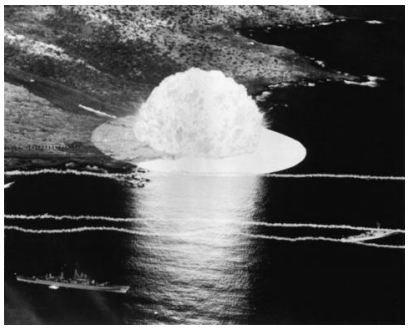

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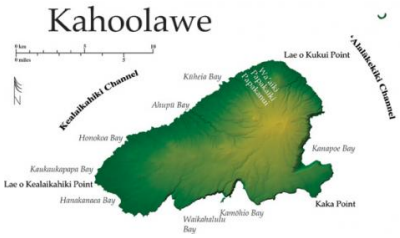

Map of Kahoolawe Island

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