

Hawaiian Students Advocate for Local Sacred Spaces through Technology and Design

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The Waipi'o Valley in Hawaii is one of the sacred sites students visited to learn from land caretakers.

Dr. Colby Tofel-Grehl, associate professor in the School of Teacher Education and Leadership (TEAL), is partnering with a rural middle school in Hawaii to support classroom teachers in developing culturally responsive computing projects. This partnership creates meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in consequential learning as they advocate for the island's *wahi pana*, or sacred spaces.

When people think about Hawaii, they rarely think about issues like human waste disposal or graffiti. Though Hawaii's economy is fueled by tourism, these issues are contributing to a growing tension between Hawaiians and the people who visit their lands.

For the past two summers, Tofel-Grehl developed and co- led a summer technology camp for her school partners where local Hawaiian youth could study and learn about the island's *wahi pana*. Youth took fieldtrips to these spaces where they learned from land caretakers about the challenges of protecting them. They then used this information and their localized expertise as youth on the island to develop a series of phone-based apps that articulate the respectful and caring behaviors expected of tourists on the islands. It is the students' hope that these apps can better inform tourists of the right ways to behave when visiting.

"Very early on, children, and particularly children of color, learn that their classrooms are not *their* spaces," said

Tofel-Grehl. "As children get older, they lose more and more space within classrooms. Their art and class work are less present on the walls; by middle school they no longer have their own desk as they rotate classrooms. More importantly, they often fail to see themselves and people like them present within the curriculum. This creates an unspoken erasure of students' identities and selves from school. Our work seeks to recenter learning around meaningful topics that are localized and community-centered."

In addition to her own funded research work with the school, Tofel-Grehl has supported the school in securing nearly \$200,000 to support teachers in their professional development. As part of that collaboration, Dr. Nicole Pyle, TEAL associate professor of adolescent literacy for at risk youth, will bring her expertise to the school this spring to support the school's literacy teaching. Through professional development, Pyle will engage teachers in best practices for supporting adolescent reading skill development.

"Dr. Pyle's expertise in adolescent literacy will be such a profound asset to this community and school," said Tofel-Grehl. "Rural teachers typically receive less professional development, and this is particularly true in schools in Hawaii. Students in our partner school struggle with gaps in their reading skills, so having a scholar of Dr. Pyle's caliber give their time to support youth will impact learning and teaching on the island for years to come."

Tofel-Grehl's work was named a finalist for the 2023 John C. Park National Technology Leadership Initiative Fellowship by the Association for Science Teacher Education, which honors the top scholarship presented at the Association's annual meeting in educational technology.