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*Featured Fellow*

**MAY 28, 2025**

Cultural Exchange

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Language Teaching

## ***Meet Featured Fellow Garry Fourman: Blending Talanoa, Critical Thinking, and Culture in Fiji Classrooms***



*Garry Fourman with students after class at Fiji National University (FNU)*

Being an early riser was definitely an advantage for Garry Fourman during his year as an English Language Fellow in Fiji (2023-2024). With a 4 a.m. wake-up call, his daily routine started with breakfast of fresh roti and fruit, followed by a 45-minute run or walk in his neighborhood in Lautoka, on the island nation's west side. Heading to his bus stop by 6 a.m., Fourman was on the Fiji National University (FNU) campus with time to spare before his first classes at 8 a.m. Sharing late morning milk tea and conversation with colleagues was always a welcome break.

By mid-afternoon, it was time for his return commute. "I never use the bus at home," explains Fourman, "but I've found it's a great way to connect with the local culture when abroad." And in his case, this meant discovering – in many ways, throughout the year – the unique cultural dynamics of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Fiji, particularly how Fiji's different communities and languages are gradually merging into a shared culture.

Known affectionately as Dr. Garry by his students and colleagues, Fourman taught academic English and linguistics, engaging with several hundred students across his classes over two semesters. His linguistics lectures alone drew around 78 students. As a secondary project, he trained local K-12 teachers and university faculty to use critical thinking, storytelling, and effective assessment in their classrooms.



*Fellow Garry Fourman interacting with his students in class at FNU.*

## ***Discovering Talanoa as a Teaching Strategy***

Fourman's time in Fiji highlights the value of using students' cultural traditions and beliefs as important tools for teaching English. He found cultural exchange to be a two-way process, saying of his students that "It often feels like I gain much more from them than they do from me." One key example was



Talanoa, a South Pacific practice of open and inclusive dialogue, which naturally became part of his teaching. Reflecting on this, he said, “Although I had unknowingly engaged in Talanoa on several occasions, I first learned of the concept five days before I was scheduled to leave Fiji.”

Before leaving, Fourman led a workshop on U.S. student services at FNU, using discussion questions to guide the session since he wasn’t an expert on the topic. A Fijian colleague pointed out that his approach resembled Talanoa. Now aware, he presented that particular session as a Talanoa and was surprised by how deeply it resonated with participants, highlighting the power of using culturally familiar methods to foster engagement.

Fourman’s teaching practice also incorporates storytelling and critical thinking as well as Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle, which he finds particularly effective for engaging teachers and faculty.



*Fellow Garry Fourman celebrating Dawali with friends.*



# Connecting With the Local Culture and Sharing American Culture



*Fellow Garry Fourman having dinner with students in Fiji.*

Fourman found that connecting with a new culture in Fiji required patience, openness, and a willingness to adapt. He built relationships through daily interactions, expressing his interests in education with colleagues and his curiosity about life with his students. In the classroom, his frequent stories about his family and travels were as much a window into American culture as the folk songs he taught with his guitar in hand. Viewing cultural exchange as ongoing, Fourman says that “the cultural exchange doesn’t end with the fellowship. I’ll continue sharing with the people I met in the South Pacific over the coming months and years.” Indeed, since leaving Fiji, Fourman has helped a Fijian

colleague review a series of short stories he had written, which is soon to be published.

# *Exploring and Making Connections*



*Fellow Garry Fourman relaxing with students under a Mango tree.*

Making connections over meals was common in Fiji, as it is everywhere. Occasionally, Fourman dined out with colleagues or joined them for dinners at their homes. “One memorable afternoon, students prepared a traditional Fijian meal for me on campus,” Fourman reminisced. During his free time, he explored the city of Lautoka, hiked the mountains with stunning ocean views, read books, or relaxed by streaming a movie or show. Fourman lived on a quiet street about a 25-minute walk from downtown Lautoka. Frequent visits to the same market, bakery, and restaurant helped him build friendly relationships with local

employees — so much so that, during a video call, he introduced his sister to them, and they cheerfully greeted her with a warm “Bula!” These everyday connections, along with his landlord’s welcoming gestures, such as including him on family trips to inland sites, made Lautoka feel like home. Those regular visits to local markets kept him connected to the community, while online chats with friends and colleagues across China, Europe, and North America allowed him to stay in touch with his global network. Additionally, he documented his experiences through weekly reports and photos shared with friends on social media.

## *Professional Growth in TESOL*

Prior to the fellowship, Fourman had been exploring the connection between cognition and imagination. In the month leading up to his departure for Fiji, Fourman read *Learning to Imagine: The Science of Discovering New Possibilities* by Andrew Shtulman. The book explores how children’s imagination tends to be imitative, while adults use imagination to solve real-world problems by drawing on their life experiences and knowledge. Inspired by these ideas, he wove them into a workshop on storytelling, emphasizing its role in nurturing imagination across all ages. His experiences in Fiji—where storytelling plays a central role in learning, literacy, and teaching—inspired him to delve deeper into this research. He regards the opportunity to co-author an article with Khemendra Kumar, a colleague at Fiji National University, as an unexpected and rewarding experience. Fourman remarks, “We both write and have published poetry and fiction, and we share a deep interest in literature, philosophy, and storytelling. I look forward to continuing our collaboration over the next few years.” This collaboration highlights how cross-



cultural academic partnerships can spark new ideas at the intersection of cognition, creativity, and language education.

# ***Finding Joy in the Rain: A Lesson from Fijian Schoolchildren***

**A Story by Garry Fourman**

*On a dreary Friday afternoon during my second month in Fiji, it started raining heavily just as I was leaving the university. I was feeling a bit stressed—frustrated by the weather, communication challenges with some students, faculty, and administrators, and lingering remnants of culture shock.*

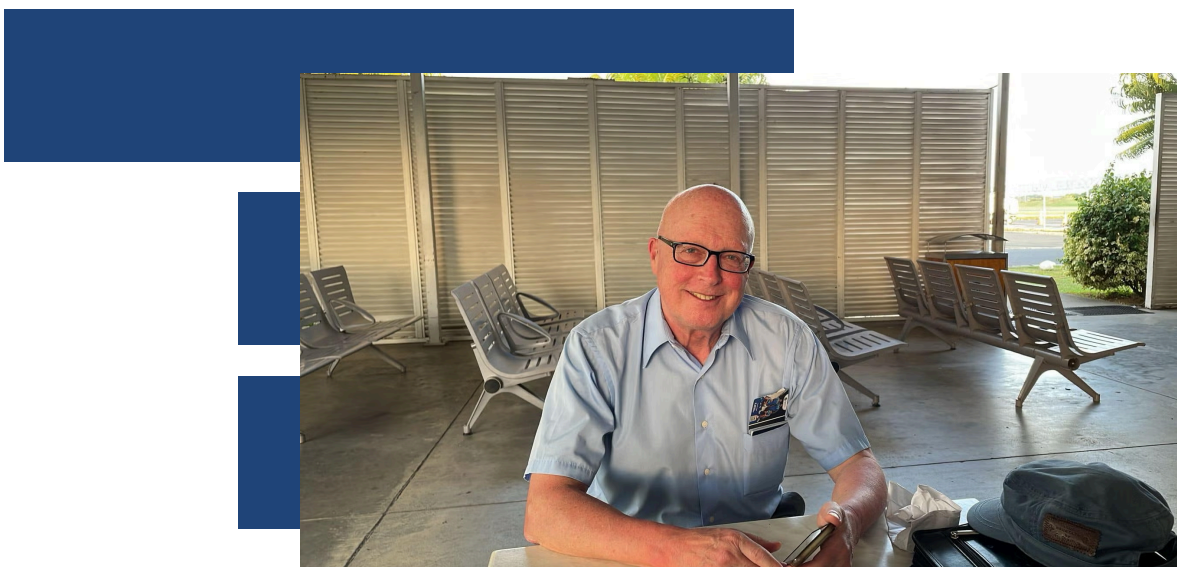
*When I arrived at the bus stop, I found about 50 primary school children already waiting. I considered taking a taxi to avoid the crowded bus and the additional half-hour walk from the bus station to my apartment. But just as I was considering my options, the bus arrived. I waited for all the children to climb aboard and then followed. The bus was packed, the air thick with a musky, earthy smell, and water dripping everywhere.*

*Two children got up to offer me their seats. I sat down and motioned for them to squeeze in next to me, which they did eagerly. My clothes were already soaked through, and water was pooling around us. About halfway to the bus station, the bus stopped in a low-lying area near the ocean, now flooded into a giant pool of water. The rain was still coming down in torrents.*

*I thought to myself, Surely they won't drop the children off here. But of course, they did. To my surprise, the children were delighted. Most had already removed their shoes and jumped off the bus, laughing, shouting, splashing, and thoroughly enjoying the rain. Their joy was contagious. They seemed thrilled and there would be no school tomorrow.*

*As I watched them running off through the rain, water, and mud, my spirits lifted. I marveled at the world these children inhabited—a world where natural, everyday events could bring so much happiness. I wanted to join them, but I had my electronics with me and, admittedly, have grown health-conscious about running barefoot through standing water and mud along a major highway.*

*The children's infectious enthusiasm stayed with me for hours, and even now, the memory fills me with happiness. I am grateful I chose the bus over a taxi that day. I also understand much better why so many students on campus look so cheerful when it rains. Many of them, like those children, take off their shoes and revel in this natural, regular event—a celebration of life, rain, and the moment.*



# Bio

*Dr. Garry Fourman's academic journey began in the late 1970s with studies in linguistics and German literature in Marburg, Germany, eventually culminating in a PhD from the University of Cincinnati. His early interests encompassed theater, folk music, 20th-century German literature, and psycholinguistics. Following 15 years of graduate studies and teaching appointments at various colleges and universities, he was invited to chair the newly established language department at Columbus State Community College.*

*Over the next 25 years, Dr. Fourman gained extensive experience in higher education administration, focusing on teacher training and evaluation, developing assessment methods with faculty, and addressing diverse issues involving students, faculty, and the public. He refined his ability to listen, secure resources, and lead his department through challenges and change. Despite his administrative duties, he remained dedicated to teaching German and ESL.*

*In 2020, Dr. Fourman retired to pursue a new path as a freelance writer, teacher, trainer, and volunteer. He is currently working on an article about storytelling and literacy.*

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