

Wa'a Through 'Ōlelo No'eau

Teaching Reference: Effort • Movement • Coordination • Awareness • Decision • Balance

Source note. Five sayings below are documented in Mary Kawena Pukui's *'Ōlelo No'eau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings*. The first saying is a modern oral canoe-club teaching attributed to Arnold Nathaniel of Hilo, Prince David Kawānanakoa Canoe Club, 1973. It is presented here with that attribution and is not represented as a Pukui-recorded traditional proverb.

Teaching Sequence

Theme	Hawaiian saying	Teaching idea
Effort	'A'ole loa'a ka 'iako maika'i i ke kū wale ma ka honua.	Knowledge and skill require active effort.
Movement	'Au i ke kai me he manu ala.	Knowledge makes movement through the environment possible.
Coordination	Pūpūkahi i holomua.	People move farther when they act together.
Awareness	'Ike i ke au nui me ke au iki.	Expertise recognizes both large and subtle forces.
Decision	Lele ka 'iwa, mālie kai ko'o.	Observation becomes useful when it informs action.
Balance	La'i lua ke kai.	Appropriate relationships and action help maintain balance.

1. Effort / Initiative

'A'ole loa'a ka 'iako maika'i i ke kū wale ma ka honua.

Arnold Nathaniel, Hilo — Prince David Kawānanakoa Canoe Club, 1973 (oral canoe-club teaching)

"A good 'iako is not found by merely standing on the ground."

Begin the lesson in the forest rather than on the ocean. On the surface, the saying is practical advice from a canoe builder. A person seeking a good 'iako cannot simply remain beneath the tree and wait. The builder must search, climb, inspect, judge, and select the wood.

The deeper lesson is that worthwhile knowledge is not gained passively. Seeing a promising branch from the ground is not the same as examining it, understanding its qualities, or knowing

whether it will become a good ‘iako. Effort must be joined with ‘ike — the knowledge required to recognize what is suitable.

This saying therefore establishes the foundation for the lesson: one must engage with the world in order to learn from it.

Teaching question: If you need a good ‘iako, can you simply stand beneath the tree and wait for one to come to you?

2. Movement

‘Au i ke kai me he manu ala.

Mary Kawena Pukui, ‘Ōlelo No‘eau No. 237

“Cross the sea as a bird.”

The lesson now moves from the forest to the finished canoe. The human body alone cannot cross long distances of open ocean, but the wa‘a changes that relationship. Through accumulated observation, experimentation, engineering, and skill, the ocean becomes not only a barrier but a pathway.

The image of moving over the sea “as a bird” expresses what technology joined with knowledge can make possible. The wa‘a extends human ability and allows people to travel through an environment that otherwise limits them.

Teaching question: What does the wa‘a allow a human being to do that the human body alone cannot do?

3. Coordination

Pūpūkahi i holomua.

Mary Kawena Pukui, ‘Ōlelo No‘eau No. 2758

“Unite to move forward.”

A canoe does not move effectively because it contains several strong individuals. It moves effectively when those individuals coordinate their effort. Paddlers who take powerful strokes at different times can interfere with one another; the same people paddling together become a single working system.

The lesson extends beyond paddling. Aboard a wa‘a, individual skill remains important, but successful movement depends upon people understanding their roles and responding to one another.

Teaching question: What changes when several capable paddlers stop acting independently and begin moving together?

4. Awareness

‘Ike i ke au nui me ke au iki.

“Know the big current and the little current.”

The experienced canoe person notices more than the obvious forces of wind, wave, and current. Small changes also carry information: a shift in swell direction, the texture of the sea surface, cloud development over land, the behavior of birds, floating material, or a change in the way the canoe feels beneath the body.

This saying makes an important distinction between simply looking and actually seeing with knowledge. 'Ike includes an ability to recognize relationships and subtle changes that an inexperienced person may overlook.

Teaching question: What does an experienced canoe person notice that an inexperienced person might not see?

5. Decision / Judgment

Lele ka 'iwa, mālie kai ko'o.

Mary Kawena Pukui, 'Ōlelo No'eau No. 1979

“When the 'iwa bird flies out to sea, the rough sea will become calm.”

Observation becomes valuable when it guides judgment. The behavior of the 'iwa is not merely something to notice; to a knowledgeable observer it can carry information about changing conditions.

The canoe lesson can be expressed as a sequence: observe, understand, anticipate, decide, and act. Knowledge of the environment has practical consequences — whether to launch, which route to take, whether conditions are changing, and when it may be wiser to return.

Teaching question: What is the difference between noticing a sign in nature and understanding what that sign means for your next action?

6. Balance

La'i lua ke kai.

Mary Kawena Pukui, 'Ōlelo No'eau No. 1941

“The sea is deeply calm.”

The lesson ends with a condition of calm and settled order. A successful canoe journey is never the result of only one factor. The canoe must be properly built; the crew must work together; wind and sea must be read; changing conditions must be recognized; and decisions must be made at the appropriate time.

This provides a useful way to discuss balance. Balance is not necessarily a permanent or motionless condition. The ocean changes continuously. A balanced condition is maintained through attention, adjustment, appropriate relationships, and appropriate action.

Teaching question: What must be working together for a canoe journey to remain in a good condition?

The Complete Progression

Effort: You must make the effort to seek knowledge.

Movement: Knowledge allows you to move through the world.

Coordination: Movement becomes more effective when people work together.

Awareness: Successful action requires attention to both large and subtle forces.

Decision: Awareness must lead to judgment and appropriate action.

Balance: Appropriate relationships and actions help create and maintain a balanced condition.

The wa'a is therefore more than an object. It is a working system of relationships among material, people, wind, sea, knowledge, timing, cooperation, and judgment. The six sayings provide a way to teach those relationships as a continuous journey from the forest to the ocean.

Sources and Attribution

Pukui, Mary Kawena. 'Ōlelo No'ēau: Hawaiian Proverbs & Poetical Sayings. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Special Publication 71. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1983.

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Editorial note: English discussion and teaching themes in this reference are interpretive explanations developed for He Make'e Wa'a. They should not be confused with Pukui's original explanatory notes unless specifically identified as such.