

# MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF PROVIDING HIGHER EDUCATION FOR 'AT RISK' STUDENTS: THE DILEMMAS, RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF STAKEHOLDERS AND GATEKEEPERS IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING RESEARCH.

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**Abstract:** Given the low access rate and high attrition rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at universities across Australia, it is reasonable to consider them as 'at risk' students when it comes to higher education. It is imperative that universities find a way of providing learning opportunities that lead to successful completion of the programs studied. This paper explores the risks and dilemmas associated with researching the possibilities offered by experiential learning in meeting the challenge. It focuses on two areas: risks and dilemmas in identifying and working with the stakeholders; and the role of ethogeny as a research tool as well as a strategy for addressing the dilemmas and risks.

## Introduction

The transition to university is difficult for everyone. University has its own culture, language, procedures and social and academic expectations. This paper will concentrate on one aspect of research into a program that uses experiential learning to introduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to an Australian regional university.

In this paper I will report on the risks and dilemmas I have encountered as a qualitative researcher and on the role of ethogeny as both a research tool and a strategy to address the risks and dilemmas. I will address two key areas of risks and dilemmas:

- The risks of researching experiential learning using a qualitative perspective.
- The dilemmas and risks of identifying and working with stakeholders.

These are the most significant risks and dilemmas I have experienced in this research.

### ***University an alienating environment***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in higher education in Australia began in the 1960s. Since then an increasing number have attempted tertiary study but the attrition rate is high (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2001). Tertiary education is a significant change for any student but particularly so for mature aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The educational environment and culture of a university is very different from their own lifestyles and educational experiences. For many of these students the university experience is alienating because there is a lack of fit with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' viewpoints, their value systems and their worldviews. This was acknowledged in the Department of Education, Science and Training's Higher Education Review, *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (2003), which referred to the feelings of cultural isolation felt by many Indigenous students attempting university studies (5:70). The review recommends that universities "through the education they provide and the values that govern the campus can help counter prejudice where it is found"

and provide services that help overcome cultural isolation (5:72). In the regional university that is the setting of this research some attempts have been made to build bridges.

### ***Bridges to the university culture***

The university has an excellent orientation and mentoring program, but most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not attend. They are shy and uncomfortable about joining in large group activities such as orientation. Many have experienced being shunned and excluded in other institutional situations and are not anxious to repeat the experience. They need to check out the environment and the people, and understand what is involved and expected before they take the plunge.

These students often are the first in their family to attempt higher education, so there is no family knowledge to help them. They need another way of checking out whether university is for them. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Entry Program offers such an opportunity. It offers a two-term program that introduces Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to university.

### ***The Tertiary Entry Program and experiential learning***

The program uses an experiential learning approach defined as:

the process whereby people, individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter and then *purposefully* reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential *learning* therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone. (Weil & McGill, 1989, p. 248, emphasis in original)

This definition emphasises the active role the students play in their own learning, both individually and in groups. It also stresses the *purposeful* nature of the reflection that they undertake in discussion, in journal entries and in their assignments so that their learning comes to have personal meaning for them. This in turn will lead to “individuals who are enabled to make sense of their personal stories by making links between autobiography, group history and social and political processes” (Weil & McGill, 1989, p. 12).

In the Tertiary Entry Program we begin with the students’ personal stories which they then link with group history and social and political processes. As they do this, there is the potential for their own experience to be validated and for their understandings of the world and their role in society to be transformed as they see alternative narratives. As a group they widen one another’s horizons by sharing their knowledge and experience and so discovering new ways of knowing and new possibilities for themselves and the group. This also covers the social and cultural aspects of life that can be forgotten in educational settings. Experiential learning allows this to happen whilst nurturing critical thought and analysis.

### **Risks and dilemmas of qualitative research**

Establishing both the program and researching it to find how students and their lecturer engage with it have involved risks and dilemmas. All research involves risks and dilemmas but qualitative research engenders its own particular risks and dilemmas. Peter Reason (1994, p. 9) says, “complete personal engagement, passion

and profound risk-taking are central to inquiry". It is my contention that, while this is true for the researcher, it is also true for the committed participant. Most of the students who were participants in my research were committed to the research about their learning and engaged in it by discussing, writing, challenging, questioning, opening their minds and hearts to others and doing all these activities with passion. It is very risky behaviour to declare to others who you are and what you think.

In the research referred to in this paper, I am both researcher and participant so there is personal engagement on two levels. I engage with the research as the students do, joining in the discussion, writing, challenging, questioning and learning from them. There is also a passionate desire to find out about my students' engagement with experiential learning. The risk-taking of qualitative research can be summed up as risking the security of having my worldview, presuppositions and even my prejudices challenged in order to achieve knowledge and understanding. It is on these risks and dilemmas that I will focus in this paper.

## **The risks and dilemmas of researching experiential learning**

So what are the risks and dilemmas associated with researching engagement with experiential learning? Research into experiential learning is risky because the outcomes are not always predictable. They are only as predictable as human beings themselves. Details of the particular learning journeys being undertaken by particular students have not been mapped and so the destination is not specific although the direction may be clear. The outcomes of such a learning journey cannot be anticipated in detail and different students will have different learning outcomes according to their previous learning experiences, their mood on the day and what is happening in their life at that time. Qualitative research can, however, take this in its stride because it "...examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways...closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants..." (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 2). Even so, it is possible that the research may uncover something unexpected. This is what research is about. That is what makes it exciting, intriguing, unexpected and risky.

### ***Philosophy underpinning the research***

My researching of experiential learning involves a philosophical stance that underpins the research questions and informs the methods, but carries the risk of creating a dilemma. On the one hand, the nature of experiential learning means that when researching it from a qualitative perspective one generally needs to be a participant. On the other hand that approach invites the judgement of being subjective rather than detached and objective. "Objectivity means standing outside the phenomena being studied, separating the knower from what is known, refusing to contaminate the data..." (Reason, 1994, p.11).

However, I agree with Reason (1994, p.10, emphasis in the original) "that we can only truly do research *with* persons if we engage with them *as* persons." He goes on to say (p. 11):

If we start from the notion of an individual autonomous self, we must separate self from other, knower from what is known, parts from the whole, mind from the body, masculine from feminine: the whole

fragmentation of Western epistemology can be seen as starting from the establishment of the self.

This approach does not fit with me personally nor does it fit with the other participants or with experiential learning. I eschew this approach in both my teaching and my research. Rather than divide and fragment, I prefer to heal and connect.

### ***The risks of being both researcher and co-participant***

As a researcher into experiential learning I have chosen to walk with the participants as a co-participant, experiencing what they experience. My reflections may be different from theirs but we will learn from exploring one another's experiences. This does not mean disempowering myself or abrogating responsibilities; it means giving up the role of the fount of knowledge and wisdom. This is a different knowledge; it is knowledge that we construct together as we experience the learning journey together. No one can predict what that knowledge is. This way of researching poses some risks. One is that together we will achieve knowledge that will be uncomfortable, knowledge that we would rather not have because it will challenge us in our fundamental assumptions about life and our place in the world. Another is that I will not be accepted as a co-participant by the other participants but in their minds will remain the researcher.

### **Identifying and working with stakeholders**

In establishing both the program and the research it was necessary to identify and work with the stakeholders and this had its own problems and risks. Who are the stakeholders? How do researchers identify stakeholders? A helpful guideline is to ask the question: "Who will benefit from the research?" The point of the research was to benefit the 'at risk' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. 'At risk' people compound the risks because they are so vulnerable. The research is meant to help but will it? Is it better to do something rather than stay with the status quo which is not achieving the students' desired outcomes? How will this research affect them? These were some of the dilemmas I was to ponder.

### ***The risk of students as naive stakeholders***

The students are the most obvious stakeholders because they are the identified learners in the situation. There is a risk that the students may not be familiar with experiential learning in an institutional setting and may not be comfortable with the responsibility it places on the learner for his/her own learning. Thus their responses to research about their experiential learning would highlight the lack of engagement if this were so. Allowing time for adjustment to the experiential approach to learning before researching the engagement with it should give a clearer result.

### ***The risk of previous research producing gatekeepers***

Another risk that is particularly associated with any research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is that they or their family or community have been 'researched' before. As a result of such an experience, they know that research can "make you feel like an object, like an insect under a microscope, eh?" (Carol, (pseudonym), participant, personal communication, April 2002). Various Aboriginal people have talked of the fact that researchers come, collect data and disappear and they never hear from them again. They do not know how the data are used and they never see the results. A consequence is that these people and their family and community and all their connections become gatekeepers. Gatekeepers either deny

access to the people or information that the researcher requires for the research to be successful or carefully control the information and people so the data is not truly representative.

### ***The risk that lecturer stakeholders can become gatekeepers***

There is the risk that lecturers who are used to prescribed curricula and supposedly predetermined outcomes can resist accepting the change in philosophy and the apparent lack of control over the curricula and content. They do not wish to risk security and control to achieve understanding and engagement, relevance and contextual, connected learning. They prefer the stance of 'other' who bestows knowledge on the students. Although they are stakeholders in the research outcomes they can transform into gatekeepers. So the risk is that the whole research project could come to nothing if such people are successful with their gatekeeping. Ethically the researcher cannot influence the other participants to continue and so the possibility remains that all participants could be alienated from the research.

### ***The risk of untrustworthy responses***

There is the risk of another stakeholder, the researcher, being told what he/she is perceived to want to hear rather than what the other participants really think. Are their responses trustworthy or are they producing a false version of their responses to satisfy the researcher? This is a risk in any form of research. I suggest that it has the greatest chance of being avoided when addressed by qualitative research that introduces an I-we relationship with the participants and provides for hearing their voices in a number of different ways. In general people disclose and conceal different things to different people and in different situations. By building up a picture from multiple observations and from different aspects and perspectives and by approaching the whole from a position of such interpersonal dimensions as respect, listening and acceptance, the researcher makes the trustworthiness of the response more likely.

### ***The problem of other possible stakeholders***

Students and staff are not necessarily the only stakeholders in this process. The students' family and community could be considered stakeholders in the program and the research because there is a change in the students' way of being as they study the program and that in turn affects their families and their communities.

When people have a significant learning experience it spills over into the rest of their lives. The students in my program discuss with their families and communities their learning experiences and the knowledge they gain. They interrogate the knowledge using cultural perspectives and in doing so they make explicit a lot that is implicit and in the process they value what they are doing and others value it too. Family members, then, are involved indirectly with the learning process as the student reflects on the experience. Other people are also involved. Research into experiential learning is a web that involves many people. It could be argued that all the people who engage with the students in an exchange of learning should also report their experience if the research is to produce a trustworthy picture of the event. Such people would add yet another set of perspectives to the picture.

### ***The dilemma***

Should member of these broader networks be regarded as stakeholders in the research? Is it ethically responsible to involve them? Would such research invade the

privacy of the student even if the student's consent were gained? For the researcher it is important to hear the voice of those directly involved in the learning experience. Will these other voices drown their voices? So there is a dilemma. On the one hand I want to include stakeholders and work with them and give them a voice while retaining my own voice as researcher and participant. On the other hand I have to ask where I stop because of the web of connectedness and how much influence any one person or group should have in directing the research (Scott & Usher, 1999). Different stakeholders can have quite contradictory ideas and can turn a simple research project into a battlefield. This is particularly true in the case of research into experiential learning because of the number of people potentially involved who could lay claim to the title of stakeholder. So family and community members could be considered stakeholders in the enterprise but stakeholders who can quickly turn into gatekeepers.

### ***The risk of other gatekeepers***

Gatekeepers are often people who do not wish to have their ideas challenged or their comfort zone changed. During the program when fixed, long-held ideas are questioned and new knowledge is gained the ripple effect involves the students' families and communities. Husbands become jealous of their wives' achievements and of their newfound confidence and newly discovered abilities. People who have exercised power over others are challenged about their assumption of power. Communities sometimes consider educated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to have sold out to the 'whites'. These kinds of reactions can affect the research and turn some stakeholders into gatekeepers. They deny themselves access to the research process and try to prevent others from participating as well. This is a risk but one that is countered by the freedom that all the participants have to decide whether to take part in the study or not, and the confidence many have in their ability critically to appraise the arguments of the gatekeepers.

### ***The risk of reflection leading to alienation***

When engaged both in experiential learning and in the process of researching it, students are learning to reflect on experiences and to make connections. This is a different learning experience for most of my students who found that schooling and other forms of institutional education tended to fragment knowledge rather than make connections. It is, however, a risk to ask them to reflect on their learning experience. Some students have difficulty in reflecting on their own thoughts, actions and reactions. This is particularly the case for students who do not accept responsibility for their actions and who need to sabotage other students' learning. They have difficulty in adjusting to the freedom the program offers and to the thought that they are making a valuable contribution to research. They do not want to continue in the program or the research themselves and they want to prevent others from doing so. As far as the research is concerned they become gatekeepers of their own experience and try to influence others to shut the gate too. Such students are alienated from others and from themselves.

### ***The risk of bureaucratic gatekeeper and the dilemma that ensues***

There is a yet another risk involving another gatekeeper. In this research I am interested in the intangible outcomes of a program based on experiential learning. Such outcomes are the transformation in the students evident in their confidence, pride in identity, commitment, struggle, passion for learning and renewed spirit.

These indicate engagement with the program. These are not the preoccupation of the funding bodies. The Australian Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training is apparently interested only in outcomes in the form of numbers in and numbers out. There is no provision for the quality of the students who graduate, or for those who find healing, wholeness, confidence and even the knowledge that tertiary education is not for them. How do we measure confidence, self-esteem and engagement? Do we want to quantify them? What makes a number more valid than a descriptive phrase? The dilemma for the researcher and program developer is whether to play the numbers game to get the funding or aim for the intangibles and risk not getting funding. This is a particular risk if there is a stakeholder such as a government department or a university administrator who holds the purse strings. They look for value for money, preset outcomes and demonstrable, quantifiable measurement of learning. They also demand course profiles and study guides that assume a preset knowledge path ready to be taught. This raises the questions: what is learning? what are universities for? and what are enabling or access/bridging programs for?

To summarise, the following are the risks and dilemmas I have wrestled with in this research project:

- ❖ researching experiential learning as both researcher and participant
- ❖ identifying the stakeholders
- ❖ working with stakeholders who can
  - be naïve
  - become gatekeepers
  - give untrustworthy responses
  - become alienated
  - demand particular types of outcomes because of financial power.

So, when conducting qualitative research we need to find strategies that overcome these risks and dilemmas.

## **Ethogeny as strategy and research method**

I have addressed these concerns by using a qualitative perspective with ethogeny as the chosen method of research because ethogeny can provide a framework that is also a strategy for dealing with them. The framework underpins the research. It relates to the philosophy and value system that motivate and inform decisions and reflections and how I engage with the risks and dilemmas. My philosophy informs my experiences and my experiences have shaped my philosophy and they interact over time to develop deeply embedded principles that underlie all my interactions. This is the ethical basis on which I build a relationship of mutual respect with my students and out of which comes the pedagogy and research methods I choose to use. Ethogeny fits with the person and researcher that I am. I value people and relationships; I choose to walk with people rather than in front or over or behind them.

Ethogeny fits with how I interact with other participants as researcher and co-participant. So it can provide guideposts in negotiating the risks and dilemmas:

...ethogeny attempts to provide a theory of social being in which we can recognise ourselves, and in which our common-sense knowledge of everyday life is not negated...Ethogeny gives force to the intuitive being of the researcher and of the researched in their attempts to

understand the social processes in which they are each caught up. (Davies, 1982, p.16)

Davies (1982, p.16) goes on to explain that:

Ethogeny seeks to strengthen our understanding of the process of meaning-making, recognising at the same time the complex interplay between the meanings individuals give to their social worlds, and the identities made available to those people by their social worlds. Ethogeny views human consciousness as a critical but neglected element in research in social behaviour...The particular strength of the ethogenic paradigm lies in its theoretical recognition and empirical use of the understandings we have as researchers, and as people being researched, about what we do.

### ***Challenging the stereotypes***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have an even more complex interplay between the meanings they give to their social worlds and the identities allowed them by those social worlds than most other Australians. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at university. For many years they were told that they were 'dumb', unteachable, of low intelligence and other such descriptors. Some came to believe the stereotypical description, but some have successfully challenged the stereotypes. The students in the Tertiary Entry Program are in the process of challenging the stereotypes. Ethogeny as a means of research recognises their worth and the value of their understandings about what they are doing. It also provides me with a strategy for addressing the problems raised.

### ***Addressing the risks – ethogeny as strategy***

The position of researcher and co-participant while having risks also has benefits. It provides a way of getting to know the other participants very well as we share the learning experiences and they begin to understand that I genuinely mean that I learn from them. We have a mutually respectful relationship. This builds up trust and confidence. This is important when it comes to explaining the research. It helps to overcome previous negative experiences with research and persuades gatekeepers to become stakeholders. Walking with people, knowing them well helps the researcher to recognise the body language that signals engagement and excitement and genuineness in their responses. The ethogenic approach is one that fits well with experiential learning and extends the practice of reflecting on experience. Throughout the research as their thoughts and observations are valued the confidence of the students grows. The research becomes an extension of the learning experience and becomes a learning experience in itself. Thus connections are made and alienation is overcome.

### ***Ethogenic outcomes***

Using ethogeny for the research process helps the participants to see the connections. They explore where each one fits in relation to other people and processes. The ethogenic process recognises and values difference. It enables participants to say, "My role is different from that person's role but we are interdependent because I am walking beside them and they beside me and we are learning from one another."

The students experienced this when they went to Parliament House as part of an annual trip to Canberra. They began to understand and engage with the political process and particular political people such as their local Member of Parliament and the Prime Minister. Understanding how processes work and seeing behind the scenes connections while walking with a variety of other people led to confidence and engagement. When we began to research the Canberra experience we identified these connections and links to such people and to each other and to where we all fitted and how we had contributed to each other's understanding of the experience.

Ethogeny has proved to be an effective strategy in overcoming these risks and dilemmas

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the dilemmas, risks and opportunities of research I am conducting with 'at risk' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying a program using experiential learning. I have highlighted the dilemmas and risks associated with identifying and working with stakeholders. I have addressed the role of ethogeny as a strategy to overcome the risks and dilemmas as well as a research tool of choice to explore the students' engagement with experiential learning. The key concepts I want to emphasise in this paper are the connections between the philosophical values, the pedagogy, and the research method. Good teaching and learning outcomes involve connections that lead to the intangibles referred to regardless of the group of students involved.

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