Indigenous Research – a communal act.

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Abstract.

In this paper, an Indigenous researcher who has just submitted a doctoral thesis that examines Indigenous success within the context of university study, reflects upon the research methodology she used to embed a sense of ‘community’, within the research act. She indicates that she had sought to use the research process as a means of providing opportunities for Indigenous respondents to take control of what they wanted to share in terms of their own knowledge and understandings of the issue. She also sought to use a process that would encourage respondents to contextualise their own learning so that, in developing such skills, they could make more informed decisions concerning the outcomes they sought from their own engagement with the academe.

I have entitled this paper “Indigenous Research – a communal act”, because, in reflecting upon the process I went through in undertaking my research, it seemed to me that it was not an isolating activity, rather it was one in which I engaged in endless consultation with others. For example, initially I linked into several of my professional networks to consult with colleagues regarding the choice of a supervisor. This was followed by many discussions, regarding ‘what I wanted to do and why’, that eventually enabled me to determine the research topic and methodology. And, of course, the act of collecting data involved me in the most significant consultation of all, consultation with those whose educational experiences were the focal point of my study. Interestingly, it was during this stage of the consultation process that I began to realise the value of my own experiences, as an Aboriginal woman, in establishing the rapport that was a vital component, both in accessing informants and in encouraging them to engage in the research act. In retrospect, it was our shared sense of ‘community’ that provided the catalyst for such engagement and that led me to perceive of research undertaken by Indigenous peoples as essentially a ‘communal act’.

Choosing the research methodology.

Having determined that I wanted to explore the notion of Indigenous success in universities, my next dilemma was to determine how I might do that. While I knew what I needed, I believed that student respondents should also get something out of the study, hence, the choice of an appropriate research methodology was a critical issue for me.

I was drawn to a qualitative methodology after reading Glesne and Peshkin’s argument that "Qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect" (, 1992: 1). My life experience, informed me that much of the data I was seeking would come in the form of personal stories,
used as a tool to relay the individual's response to the question. As an Aboriginal researcher, I considered I would have the capacity to "make sense" of those stories that, while allowing me to access the knowledge I needed, would also provide students with "access to their own lives in a way that they might not have access otherwise" (Peshkin, 1996: 6).

I also perceived a strong degree of fit between the way in which many Indigenous Australians share knowledge and develop understandings, and the methods qualitative researchers use in gathering their data. One of the dilemmas I faced in determining my approach was that of how to address the diversity of the Indigenous experience for there is a tendency within the wider Australian society (including the academe) to refer to Indigenous Australians as if they constitute an homogenous group, a grouping that appears to ignore the high degree of cultural, linguistic and physical differences that characterised Australia’s Indigenous peoples during the invasion history. Furthermore, this practice tends to favour “the tribal (traditional) versus non-tribal (non-traditional) polarity, to argue that urbanised and non-tribal Aborigines are not representative of traditional Aborigines” (Jennett, 1987: 70), thus implying a division that allows the argument that “structurally and politically Aborigines have less diversity than they do culturally (in terms of life style and values)” (Jennett, 1987: 71). This may reflect a convenient means of overlooking the long-term oppression that has been the outcome of the colonial policies and practices of Aboriginal dispossession. It seemed to me that qualitative research that is underpinned by a belief that all reality is socially and systemically constructed (Glesne, 1992: 6-7), (Denzin, 2000: 8), would enable me to effectively cater for the diversity of my respondents’ experiences. In particular, it would accommodate the notion that culture is ever-changing and that through a process of "cultural ecology . . . people are seen to interact with their social, economic, political and natural environments, to influence decision-making and consequently socio-cultural patterns" (Eckermann, 1992: 102). It seemed that the use of a qualitative approach would set the stage for a dialectic relationship that would enhance the discovery process because it would encourage the respondent and myself, as the researcher, to co-operate in investigating the complexities of their ever-changing, socially-constructed realities (Glesne, 1992: 6). This aspect of the researcher as research instrument, engaging in a dialectic with the researched, was an important consideration for me as my purpose was not merely to describe people’s experiences but to understand the meaning of those experiences in such a way that I might interpret them, that I might learn from them.

While acknowledging that qualitative research initially emerged as a means for anthropologists and sociologists to undertake studies of the ‘other’, it is equally important to understand that the ability to hear the emic voice is now a focal point of many of the techniques used in qualitative research. This has critical implications for Indigenous Australians in universities for as argued by various writers, (Jordan, 1994: 109-130), (Coombs, 1994: 66-75 and 187-198), (Rigney, 1999: 1-26), (Nakata, ), it has not been the Indigenous voice that has directed their positioning in Australia’s educational institutions. In this study, I sought to open up a space in which Indigenous Australian respondents might speak back to non-Indigenous educators, thus becoming a part of the process that is needed to change the discourse about Indigenous Australian student achievement in higher education.
Nakata’s argument concerning the importance of creating a space in which Indigenous scholars might begin to talk back, is reinforced by the arguments put forward by Roberts et al. in exploring notions of “interrogating positions, creating spaces and future possibilities” (1999: 3), as critical aspects of Indigenous knowledge production; Smith’s reference to “spaces of marginalisation . . . (that) also become spaces of resistance and hope” (2001: 4); and Barnhardt’s contention that it is difficult for native Alaskan students to settle into university studies because of their different ways of thinking. A consideration of the work of these Indigenous scholars reinforced my belief not only in the importance of research in terms of effecting change, but also in the need for Indigenous peoples to engage in the process, so that they might become more proficient at making their own decisions about what knowledge and understandings they would be willing to share with others. For the message that is emerging from the growing body of Indigenous scholars, would seem to be that Indigenous peoples need to develop a greater capacity for taking control of their own education, for demanding that universities develop curricula and adopt an epistemological stance, that is relevant to their needs as Indigenous Australians, for there to be any hope of changing Australia’s educational agenda. This is a contentious issue for many Indigenous Australians who, like Nakata, perceive there is a lack of Indigenous scholarship as a result of the way in which Indigenous knowledge has been positioned within the Western canon. Martin also expresses concern about this issue, suggesting that “research is an activity that draws upon frameworks, processes and practices of colonial, western worldviews; the knowledges, methods and beliefs of these” (2001: 3). Again there is an implication that Indigenous Australians have been excluded from the process, especially in terms of establishing the rules.

I had concerns of my own about the issue, concerns that emanated out of my recognition and acceptance of the diversity of the Indigenous experience. While acknowledging the importance of Indigenous scholars speaking out, and claiming their own space so to speak, I was curious as to how important such positioning might be. I wanted to understand the degree to which their current positioning might impact upon individual Indigenous Australian students enrolled in university courses? I wanted to gain an insight into how important it was for these students to understand their position within the academy? I wanted to explore the degree to which having such knowledge might be an element in achieving success? I sought to collaborate with Indigenous Australian students in an attempt to understand the social processes that might have contributed to their current positioning within the university and to identify what circumstances in their lives had enabled these students to acquire the capacity for academic inquiry and an ability to engage in a dialogue with non-Indigenous Australians. For, in reflecting upon the contemporary arguments emerging from the works of Indigenous scholars (Roberts, 1999), (Martin, 2001), (Rigney, 1999), (Nakata, 1998), it seemed to me that such a dialogue must be the key to achieving the change that Indigenous scholars are struggling to achieve. Such dialogue, in opening up the discourse surrounding Indigenous involvement within Australian universities, would not only raise awareness of the issue, but would also alert Indigenous students to the need to engage in a different discourse, one that is of their own making. If, as Indigenous scholars such as Nakata, Smith and Barnhardt argue, effective change cannot occur until Indigenous people begin to
talk back to non-Indigenous peoples; correcting assumptions, re-defining beliefs and values, setting their own parameters concerning what is important knowledge; then the use of a qualitative methodology could allow that to happen. Hence, I sought to provide respondents with a process that would enable them to speak out from a position of individual power.

**Indigenous methodologies**

While I have previously indicated that I perceived my choice of methodology to be critical to the success of my research, I have to say that, at a personal level, as an Aboriginal researcher, choosing the most appropriate methodological approach to use in this study caused me considerable anxiety. While I had decided to use a qualitative approach for the reasons previously discussed, I was concerned that I should not dilute the respondents’ lived experience in interpreting the data. Engaging in an hermeneutic process enabled me to realise that in essence qualitative research would allow me to use “a research strategy that privileges my Indigenous experience (along with that of my Indigenous Australian respondents) that can be legitimated in the academy” (Rigney, 1999: 6).

I align myself strongly with Smith’s argument that Indigenous peoples must become active participants in the research act if the goals of Indigenous self-determination are to be realised (Smith, 2001: 125), hence, I sought to enable Indigenous respondents to engage in the research process in a way that would enable them to gain an understanding of how they, as Indigenous peoples, might use this Western activity to achieve their own goals. I considered the contention that many Indigenous peoples learn through listening, observing, imitating and participating (Boulton-Lewis, 2000: 1-20), (Ninnes, 1996), (Lave, 1982: 181-187). I reflected upon the importance of a sense of community in ensuring that Indigenous learners feel they are a valued part of the learning community, wherever it is situated (Herbert, 2000: 1-18), (Rigney, 1999: 1-26), (McTaggart, 1991: 297-325). I acknowledged the need for an approach that would enable students to contextualise learning, to understand relationships between bodies of knowledge (Forrest, 2000: 1-11), (Whelan, 1995: 1-8).

I heard Ernie Grant, an Elder of the Jirrbal people in north Queensland, delivering a lecture to a group of our students and talking about the importance of the “story-lore” of his people, in passing on knowledge [Grant, 2000 #344]. I explored Kawagley and Barnhardt’s “indigenous notions of an interdependent universe” [Kawagley, 1997 #307: 1], and compared their argument about the importance of having a sense of place with Weir’s explanation of the importance Indigenous student respondents, in her study, had attributed to being able to establish their own “Sense of Place” [Weir, 2001 #366: 27], within the academy. In asking myself how Aboriginal Australians establish our space (place) and demonstrate our connections to our place, I realised that it was through story. And, in thinking about the approach I had used in undertaking previous research projects with Aboriginal informants, it seemed to me that the most effective method I could use in this study would be one that effectively utilised a “story-telling” style, a style that embodied the epistemological stance that would enable me to embed a sense of ‘community’, within the research act.
Based on such reasoning about the ways in which Aboriginal people share knowledge, I decided that an ethnographic approach would allow me to use techniques that would be suitable in a cultural sense, for working with Indigenous Australians. I was also cognisant of the fact that adopting an wholistic approach would help me to make sense of the various social events outlined by the respondents, for, as Neuman argues:

Ethnography assumes that people make inferences - that is, go beyond what is explicitly seen or said to what is meant or implied. People display their culture (what people think, ponder believe) through behaviour (e.g. speech, actions) in specific social contexts. Displays of behaviour do not give meaning; rather, meaning is inferred, or someone figures out meaning. Moving from what is heard or observed to what is actually meant is at the center of ethnography (Neuman, 1994: 333/334).

Another factor that interested me in this approach was Geertz’ (1973) explanation that ethnography is “an interpretive science in search of meaning in contrast to an experimental science in search of law” cited by Schwandt (, 1990: 266). In adopting this “search of meaning” stance in analysing the data I aimed to enhance my own capacity to interpret the meaning of what was going on concerning Indigenous achievement in higher education for I considered that the interpretation of the respondents ‘lived experience’ would be a critical factor in establishing the validity of my research. Equally, I was aware that Clandinin and Connelly, in their discussion concerning the validity of using people’s experience as the basis for legitimate academic inquiry, had revealed that there had been considerable criticism of such approaches. There are those who argue that “experience cannot speak for itself and the focus needs to be on the meaning contained in texts and the forms by which they are constructed” (Clandinin, 1994: 415).

As an Indigenous Australian, I would argue that the written text is not the only source of reality or truth. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity’s “Bringing Them Home Report” revealed the treatment that was meted out to Indigenous Australians during the colonial and post colonial periods and explained the fact that “Many relevant files have been lost or destroyed” (Commission, 1997) and the inquiry’s use of a qualitative methodology that enabled the researchers to access people’s verbal accounts of their personal experiences, demonstrated the reality that such oral recounting is sometimes the only relevant record of the past. The legitimacy of this argument is clearly supported by the attempts of various bodies, during the past decade, to consult with Indigenous Australians and record their stories of their life experiences. Hence, the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity’s “Bringing Them Home Report”, have made a considerable contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the way in which the colonial policies and practices, of the past, have impacted upon people’s lives and may continue to influence the way in which people live their lives today. One of the dilemmas I had do address, was the notion of how important was the past in terms of this particular inquiry into Indigenous academic achievement?

In recent years, various writers (Reynolds, 1987 and 1990), (McGrath, 1995), (Read, 1999), (Kidd, 1997), (Haebich, 2000), (Elder, 1992), have re-written Australia’s history to more clearly demonstrate the violence of the invasion and
the utter despair of the dispossession upon Indigenous Australians. Many
Australians have finally begun to comprehend the devastation that has been
wrought by colonial practices such as “forced family disintegration” (Read, 1999:
171) and the post colonial policies of “segregation” and “assimilation”
(Commission, 1997: 250). In addition to the work of non-Indigenous writers,
there has been an increasing number of Indigenous academics such as
Mudrooroo, Morgan, Foulmre and Huggins, contending that it is time other
Australians listened and learnt from those past experiences. In their work, these
writers have discussed various concerns that highlight the negative aspects of the
historical representation of Indigenous Australians and provide valuable insights
into the need to re-visit the past as a critical component in developing more
effective and inclusive education practices in this country.

The strong arguments offered by each of these Indigenous writers concerning the
importance of listening to the Indigenous voice, provided me with significant
indicators in the choice of an appropriate methodology for this study. In their
discussion of the validity of personal experience methods, Clandinin and
Connelly cite Carr’s 1986 work, stating that:

... when persons note something of their experience, either to themselves
or to others, they do so not by the mere recording of experience over time,
but in storied form. Story is, therefore, neither raw sensation nor cultural
form; it is both and neither. In effect, stories are the closest we can come to
experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of
being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history

I would argue that this validation of “story” as a critical component of personal
experience methodology, is equally valid within the context of undertaking
research with Indigenous Australians because it provides people with the
opportunity to engage in an oral tradition. This can be a particularly effective
mechanism for capturing Indigenous viewpoints because story-telling is the
means by which oral societies pass on their knowledge for the “way things are
said are intrinsic to the culture” (Colorado, 1988: 22). Hence, in listening to the
respondents’ recounting their experiences in relation to academic success, I
used the process that Clandinin and Connelly refer to as “narrative interpretation” that
“understand(s) the beliefs not so much as generalizations but as experiential
artifacts” (, 1994: 417), that attested to people’s experiences, personal and social
histories and gave meaning to their present situation.

I align myself strongly with the concept of autoethnography because I perceive
that, in interpreting the data within the context of my personal life experiences as
an educator and as a student within the university, such experiences could
become a legitimate component of the research. In reflecting upon the reasons
for my deciding to investigate the issue of Indigenous academic success, I
acknowledge that my choice may have been influenced by a subconscious desire
to conduct research in an area in which I had some personal knowledge and
commitment. Ellis and Bochner suggest that “autoethnography has become the
term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to
the cultural” (, 2000: 740) and that reflexive ethnography is useful for those
researchers from minority groups who wish “to write about and interpret their
own cultures for others” (, 2000: 740). Bochner and Ellis also argue that
autoethnography impacts upon readers in that it enables “another person’s world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own” (, 1996: 22). During the 90s, a number of Indigenous Australians, such as Ruby Langford, Sally Morgan, Archie Weller, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Jack Davis, used a similar approach to begin the process of bringing Indigenous Australian knowledges and understandings of life into the public arena. The work of such writers has been critical in revealing the truth about Australia’s colonial history and the continuing impact that colonial policies and practices, or what Welch terms internal colonization (Welch, 1996: 33-4), has had, and continues to have, upon contemporary Australian life. The theory of internal colonisation is particularly relevant to this study for, as Welch argues, it “provides a useful framework within which to analyse the situation of Australian Aborigines, including in education. This is particularly so when class is integrated with race in the analysis, and not left to become a residual factor” because it “may reveal important explanations” regarding why, around the world, so many Indigenous groups “remain marginalized: fringe dwellers in more than the geographical sense” (Welch, 1996: 52). Welch’s work provided further justification for my belief that Indigenous peoples the research process could provide opportunities for Indigenous respondents to contextualise their own learning so that, in developing such skills, they could make more informed decisions concerning what they wanted from their engagement with the academe.

Peshkin suggests that researchers tend to choose research topics that reflect who they are because “there is potency in having research that comes out of your life” although he warns that “there is also the hazard of being blinded by what you care about so strongly that you are not taking account carefully of what you are hearing” (, 1996: 10). It seemed to me that while my role as an educator may have influenced my choice of research topic, it was my experience as an Aboriginal person that most influenced my choice of research methodology. Having given this issue considerable thought, I was particularly mindful of Glesne’s notion of the researcher as instrument (, 1992: 6) and the reality of my own subjectivity, as a successful Aboriginal person, in the subject of this study. I recognized that my experiences as a higher education student and my achievements as an educator, that is my personal narratives, would likely contribute to and shape my interpretation of the data. In acknowledging that, like many of my Indigenous colleagues who operate effectively within Australia’s educational institutions, I have developed a capacity to operate across two cultures in ways that allow me to be aware of the issues that continually confront, and confound, Indigenous students, I considered that this could provide an additional layer of understanding to the research. Whelan cites Weir’s (1995) explanation of this phenomenon:

The major difference I found was that in the western tradition there is a concentration on expanded levels of abstraction, whereas in my clan’s learning system we work on expanded levels of consciousness, so the mind functions in a different way (Whelan, 1995: 4).

In considering the problems inherent in taking up an insider’s position, prior to commencing this study, I examined the possible strengths and weaknesses of my assuming such a stance. For example, while I could argue the value of using my knowledge as an Indigenous person to establish a rapport with potential interviewees, I also had to consider how my role as head of the Indigenous unit
might have a deleterious effect in this regard. I acknowledged the difficulty some of the potential respondents might have in communicating openly with a person who was perceived to hold a position of authority within the system. In a previous research project, while a school principal, I had assumed a dual role as a researcher/principal to obtain information from Indigenous students and/or their families. In that instance, I dealt with the issue of the perceived authority of my role very directly. I talked to participants about the duality of my situation and received their approval to proceed on the basis that the research in itself was considered a valuable exercise.

Due to my concern, regarding the interpretation of the student information, within the framework of my own experience, I decided to introduce another dimension into this collaborative research act. In addition to the student informants, two key informants were used as another source of original data. Both were Aboriginal educators, one male and one female, who have had many years of experience working in the field of Indigenous higher education. Their views provided an additional layer of meaning to the analytical filter and were used to test the trustworthiness of my interpretations.

From my perspective, the critical elements in the process of effecting change in the academe are the emergent Indigenous voices of scholars such as Nakata, Oxenham, Rigney, Weir, Brady and Langton, people who have successfully negotiated the western style of education that is offered in Australian universities. These are the voices that guided me in determining the methodological approach I would use in my research, the voices that continually argued the importance of Indigenous peoples being involved in the research act.
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