



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

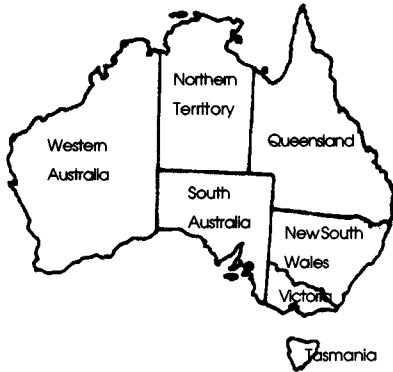
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Native Approaches to Decolonising Education in Institutions of Higher Learning

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Introduction

A growing number of Native scholars are involved in decolonising higher education through a range of processes designed to create space for Indigenous realities and Indigenous ways of managing knowledge. Basing their educational approaches on Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, they are developing Indigenist approaches within higher education. Ward Churchill (1996: 509), Cherokee scholar, explains that an Indigenist scholar is one who:

Takes the rights of indigenous peoples as the highest priority ...who draws on the traditions – the bodies of knowledge and corresponding codes of value – evolved over many thousands of years by native peoples the world over.

In this article, I discuss some of the ways in which Native scholars are decolonising the formal educational processes found within Western universities. In the first section, I discuss Indigenous scholars' knowledge management that reflects Indigenous realities. In the second section, I discuss the inclusion of holistic experience within Indigenist education. In the third section, I discuss Indigenist scholars' use of informal language as a tool of decolonisation.

Indigenist Paradigms: Knowledge Management that Reflects Indigenous Realities

An increasing number of Native scholars are refusing to set their research within Western research paradigms which distort Indigenous realities and ways of managing knowledge. Scholars such as Martina Whelshula (1999) of the Colville Tribe in Washington State, and Edward Begay and Nancy Maryboy (1998) of the Navajo Nation, have based their doctoral dissertations on American Indian ontologies and epistemologies. Their use of Indigenous realities and ways of managing knowledge has increased the ways in which their research can more adequately serve the communities involved in the research. Prior to the current decade, Indigenous scholars wishing to complete a doctoral degree within most Western universities found themselves prohibited from working within their own worldviews. For example, in their book *Postcolonial Psychology*, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran (1995: xv) Native American scholars, describe the ways in which Eduardo's doctoral research was restricted by university requirements. Eduardo explains that in writing his doctoral thesis, he:

was constrained by the rules of dissertation writing and had to comply with an Institutional lack of understanding for many things that are true and real to us and to other Native American people.

In contrast, David Begay and Nancy Maryboy (1998) based their doctoral dissertation on Navajo cosmology. They wrote one thesis between them, emphasising the importance of the balance of male/female in Navajo worldview. They did not set their research within a Western paradigm. However, their use of an Indigenist paradigm did not prevent them from making links between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. They expressly recognise the similarities between Navajo ways of knowing and Western ways of knowing as defined by quantum theory (Bohm, 1980; Peat, 1994) and chaos theory (Briggs and Peat, 1999). Begay and Maryboy's (1998) approach reflects decolonisation of higher learning in their refusal to force their research to fit within Western paradigms which cannot adequately portray Navajo realities.

Martina Whelshula (1999) describes her doctoral research as a healing journey of decolonisation. Her thesis privileges Indigenous paradigms and stresses the ways in which participating in Indigenous knowledge management provides a process through which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students experience healing of the wounds of colonisation.

Informal Language as a Tool of Decolonising Education

The power and control of Western academic language impacts upon Indigenous university students. For example, in most Western universities Indigenous students are required to express themselves in the language of academic discourse (Meyer, 1998a; Stanfield II, 1993a: 11-12). However, formalised academic language is most often dispassionate, highly coded insider language, indecipherable to many of the Indigenous people whose daily lives are greatly affected by formal research (Huggins, 1998: 71-77). Furthermore, the language of academic research is far removed from Indigenous peoples' everyday experience of passion and pain. When Indigenous

university students write in a style that distances discourse from emotion, their real life experience is silenced. Such Westernised discourse further alienates many Indigenous peoples from the processes of higher education (Huggins, 1998: 71-77; Meyer, 1998a: 3). Stanfield II (1993: 11) describes the ways in which academic discourse misrepresents the experience of Indigenous peoples:

In qualitative research, the leeway given to subjects to speak their minds, to speak from their hearts, is translated and reproduced in the language of the academic elite ...researchers must report their findings using professional discourse styles that are understood and rewarded by their peers. Writing in the discourse style of the racially oppressed is viewed as unprofessional...This is tragic, because the conservative character of professional jargon, particularly about racial issues, often stifles if not outright destroys the passion that is an important element for understanding the complex depths of race, racism, ethnicity, and ethnocentrism.

A growing number of Indigenous scholars are choosing to write in language that expresses the realities of colonised Indigenous peoples. Martina Whelshula (1999), for example, has chosen to write her doctoral dissertation in language that can be easily understood by any interested member of the Colville Tribe. Rather than writing in academic language, she chose to decolonise the language of her PhD thesis in order that her Native community might more directly benefit from her research.

Incorporating Holistic Experience in Indigenist Education

Native scholars describe university level educational experiences as incorporating a wide range of holistic experience including dreams, intuition, ceremony, ritual and communication with elders and ancestors. In her doctoral thesis, Native Hawaiian scholar Mariluani Meyer (1998a) shares her process of doctoral level education at Harvard University. When she first attempted to express Native Hawaiian ontology within a philosophy class at Harvard, the professor in

that class called her 'anti-intellectual'. She went on to successfully challenge that label, articulating holistic experiences within Native Hawaiian ways of knowing. She explains that Native Hawaiian traditional education comes through relationship with the land, through elders and ancestors, and through dreams and intuition.

Characteristics of Indigenist Research: Interconnectedness

Indigenous ways of knowing are characterised by interconnections between people, knowledge and the natural world (Duran and Duran, 1995: 15). Indigenist education contrasts with Western education which tends to present information in isolation (Begay and Maryboy, 1998: 69-73). In contrast, in the worldview underlying Native American research:

All things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is part of a single whole. Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is therefore possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else (Bopp *et al.*, 1989).

In worldviews based on concepts of interconnectedness, education is designed to recognise and support interconnections rather than analyse isolated bits of data. Education based on interconnections is characteristic of Native science in which:

there has been a different *emphasis* between Western and Indigenous science. Indigenous science places the primary emphasis on studying the *relationships* between things (Rupert Ross, 1996: 63).

Indigenist education also emphasises connections within human beings. For example, Indigenist education considers mind, body, emotion and spirit to be integral aspects of human experience (Begay and Maryboy, 1998; Cajete 2000: 2; Ghostkeeper 2001). Native Hawaiian scholar Mariluani Meyer gives examples of these interconnections

within her research on Native Hawaiian ways of knowing:

Hawaiian philosophy of knowledge recognizes the non-dual and whole nature of what is considered 'intellect'... We are not simply 'head thinkers' but our bodies, our larger sense of otherness, our culture, directs us (Meyer, 1997).

Furthermore, Indigenist education emphasises relationship (Cajete 2000: 66). In Indigenist education, knowledge occurs within relationship rather than in isolation (Begay and Maryboy, 1998: 50-55; Smith, 1999: 148). Meyer (1998a: 135) explains the importance of relationship in Hawaiian ways of knowing:

It was stunning to continually hear how wisdom, intelligence and 'smartness' were tied to connectability and relationship. As if being intelligent is impossible outside a context of other.

Recognising interconnections between people implies responsibility on the part of educators to ensure ethical involvement in the issues being studied. Decolonising higher education involves sensitivity to the impact of methodology upon the people involved in university level research. In Indigenist approaches, knowledge that breaks the awareness of interconnectedness with others is considered to be worthless or harmful and is to be avoided (Meyer, 1998a; Smith, 1999).

The Indigenist concept of interconnectedness includes the concept of reciprocity. Knowledge and understanding gained from others implies a responsibility to use that information in ways that support group aspirations and values. In Indigenous paradigms, knowledge is considered to be a gift to which those involved are expected to respond in ways that demonstrate responsibility (Meyer, 1998a: 116; Whitt, 1997).

Indigenous scholars involved in decolonising university education are seeking ways in which information can be shared with a wide range of community members (Begay and Maryboy, 1998; Smith, 1999). At the end of a doctoral research project, for example, Indigenous

community members may be involved in ongoing discussions of how the research findings are to be utilised. Rather than the relationship being terminated when an Indigenous student's doctoral thesis is released in final form, Indigenist researchers and participants work toward sharing in the processing and dissemination of the findings. A failure to respond to participants regarding knowledge dissemination is considered by many Indigenous people to be 'stealing knowledge', and such perceptions fuel continued Indigenous resistance to formal research (Smith, 1999: 176).

Characteristics of Indigenist Research: Focus on Process

The perspective of Native science goes beyond objective measurement, honoring the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, relationship, holism, quality and value.... Concerned with the processes and energies within the universe, it continually deals in systems of relationships (Cajete, 2000: 66).

The practice of Indigenist education is conceptualised as ongoing processes of creative change rather than time-bounded implementation of techniques (Begay and Maryboy, 1998:69; Cajete, 2000, Duran and Duran, 1995; Peat, 1994, Smith, 1999: 182). Indigenous science is based on a paradigm of creative, ever-changing process rather than absolute truth (LittleBear, cited in Cajete, 2000: 1-19). For example, Native American research involves 'process thinking as opposed to the content thinking found in the Western worldview' (Duran and Duran, 1995: 15).

The creative movement that characterises Indigenous ways of knowing is exemplified in Indigenous conceptualisations of time. In Indigenist education, conceptualisations of time include *right time*, the time at which all factors indicate the situation is ready to support the action being contemplated. Rather than base decisions solely upon calendar or clock deadlines, choices related to research

processes are made with regard to relationships with others and the natural world (Peat, 1994: 202-203).

Characteristics of Indigenist Education: Expanded definitions of What Can be Known

Cultural epistemology is no longer a novelty, it is a fact, and the time has come to expose its suppression (Meyer, 1998b: 40).



Culturally defined ways of knowing include definitions of what can be known, what is observable. In Western education, empirical information is defined as what can be perceived by one or more of the five senses. However, because senses are defined differently in different cultures, empirical information is also defined differently in different cultures (Meyer, 1998a, 1998b). Decolonising university education involves redefining *empirical* to include senses that are integral to the experiences of Indigenous peoples. Indigenist scholars define empirical data as including experiences of dreams, visions, and environmental signs (Begay and Maryboy, 1998: 203; Cajete, 2000: 75, 84-85; Meyer, 1998b: 40).

Just as sensory experience is culturally defined, interpretation of sensory experience is also a culturally mediated act (Meyer, 1998a: 34-40). For example, seeing a relative who has died and hearing the advice they have to

offer is considered valuable information to many Indigenous people and such experiences are often included in Indigenous ways of knowing, as Meyer (1998b: 40) explains:

If one views a past relative not as a ghost, but as someone to help and guide them through life's problems and hardships ... then when this person shows up ... they will be welcomed and listened to. Such is the nature of ontological diversity.

In contrast, in mainstream Western society seeing and hearing dead people is almost always pathologised as drug induced psychosis or mental illness. In very few cases would information from deceased ancestors be considered acceptable educational experience within Western universities (Stanfield II, 1998: 352).

Dreams are also a common source of information for many Indigenist scholars (Begay and Maryboy, 1998; Cajete, 2000: 84; Duran and Duran, 1996). As such, dreams form an integral part of the experience of many Indigenous students in Western universities (Meyer, 1998). Many Indigenous ways of knowing incorporate information from dreams both to guide research projects and to assist in analysing data (Ghostkeeper, 2001; Meyer, 1998a: 74).

Expanded Conceptualisations of Empirical Data: The natural world

The most fundamental clash between Western and Indigenous belief systems ... stems from a belief held by indigenous peoples that the earth is a living entity (Mander, cited in Smith, 1999: 99).

Indigenous concepts of the natural world as a living system are reflected in the decolonisation of education within Western universities (Deloria Jr., 1995: 55; Little Bear, cited in Cajete, 2000: xi). Many examples of decolonising educational experiences involve participation with the natural world (Cajete, 2000: 2). However, dialogue with aspects of the natural world continues to be one of the



aspects of Indigenous ways of knowing that is the most silenced within university education, as Cajete (2000: 3) explains in his text *Native Science*.

It is the depth of our ancient human participation with nature that has been lost and indeed must be regained in some substantial form in modern life and modern science. The cosmological and philosophical must once again become 'rooted' in a life-centered, lived experience of the natural world.

An example of an Indigenous student's participation with land can be found in Manulani Aluli Meyer's (1998a: 70) doctoral research on Hawaiian epistemology. She describes land as a powerful influence within her interview process.

I went to informants' homes and places of teaching...each site held an important message for this work; it was either the birth place, spiritual home, or place of responsibility for most of my informants ... Each site spoke volumes ... It is quite possible that the site was the interview. Place as passion. *Aina* as *kumupa'a*, *hupuna*, *aumakua* (Land as *foundation*, *elder*, *ancestor*).

Indigenous ways of knowing do not privilege humans in relation to the natural world. Indeed, in many Indigenous worldviews humans are considered lower than other creatures, as can be seen in the following quote regarding First Nations peoples in Canada:

The Aboriginal world-view holds that mankind (sic) is the least powerful and least important factor in creation...Mankind's interests are not to be placed above those of any other parts of Creation. In the matter of the hierarchy, or relative importance of beings within creation, Aboriginal and Western intellectual traditions are almost diametrically opposed (Sinclair, cited in Ross, 1996: 61).

In Indigenous worldviews in which there is no hierarchy of humans over nature, knowledge from the natural world is considered equally valid as information from other humans. For example, Deborah Bird Rose (1992) articulates the ontology of the Yarralin people of Australia who listen to the natural world as an integral part of their ways of knowing. 'In order to act responsibly humans and others must be constantly alert to the state of the systems of which they are a part' (Rose, 1992: 225). Furthermore, many Indigenous peoples understand land and other living creatures to be studying humans (Meyer, 1998a; Peat, 1994; Rose, 1992:228). For Indigenist scholars, such interactions form an integral part of decolonising educational processes.

Holistic Experience: Spiritual Experience

Whereas Western research is primarily secular, many Indigenous ways of knowing are 'inherently spiritual' (Begay and Maryboy, 1998: 93). Most Indigenous peoples define spirituality as different from the dogma that characterises many religions. For example, Meyer (1998a: 23) defines spirituality within her university experience as:

a way of discussing the organic and cultural mediation of experience, and hence knowledge, and should not be expected to conform to religious structure....It is not a separate 'thing' to be studied, but a deeply embedded notion of the connectedness of things, gods, people and land.

Many Indigenist methodologies openly acknowledge the fundamental role of spirituality in formal research (Duran and Duran, 1995: 44; Whesula 2000). Meyer (1998a: 99-100) speaks of the importance that her research respondents gave to the spiritual aspects of their experience. In describing her interview process, she relates:

A spiritual context was first to surface in the literature review and during interviews. Spiritual beliefs and practices began, ended and shaped most sessions. Each interview started with *pule*, with prayer...most mentors spoke of where their

inspiration flowed and the theme of spirituality was by far the largest of all seven categories. Inevitably, *every* mentor spoke and lingered within the arena of how knowledge is affected, acquired and shaped by spiritual forces.

The articulation of spirituality within the educational processes of universities represents resistance to the silencing of Indigenous worldview. Because the processes of colonisation have repressed Indigenous spirituality so severely, its revival as part of university education is of particular significance to many Indigenist scholars (Duran and Duran, 1995). In the following quotation, Maori scholar Linda Tuwaha Smith (1999: 74) describes the importance of interweaving spirituality throughout Indigenist research:

The arguments of different indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different world views and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the indigenous world. Concepts of spirituality which Christianity attempted to destroy, then to appropriate, and then to claim, are critical sites of resistance for indigenous peoples. The values, attitudes, concepts and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between indigenous peoples and the West.



Conclusion

I have discussed some of the ways in which Native scholars are decolonising the educational processes of Western universities. These Indigenist processes privilege Indigenous realities and ways of managing knowledge. Although a growing number of Indigenous scholars around the world are working to re-institute Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, further work needs to be done to redress the imbalances that were established during the European colonisation of Indigenous peoples around the globe.

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