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BOOK REVIEW

Indigenous Narratives of Success: Building Positive and Effective Communication in Group Conversation

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This book is the doctoral thesis of Janice Stewart; it aims to influence institutionalised practices and attitudes regarding both the learning environment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students and also research methodologies. Stewart presents an ethical, consultative model for research aimed at breaking down barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Her project explores conversational circles as a new approach to research which ostensibly provides the researched with influence over the direction of the research topic and process.

Clearly, judging by the warm recommendations and accolades of both Jackie Huggins and Sam Watson in the foreword to the book, the author is a respected long-term practitioner in the area of Indigenous education. The long-term aim of Stewart's project was to draw attention to current examples of academic success that could provide positive role models for Indigenous youth in education to been seen alongside the currently well promoted sporting and media personalities.

Stewart's more immediate goals were to

1. provide The University of Queensland with an understanding of how Indigenous students perceive tertiary success in order to contribute to improvements within the university learning and teaching environment

2. provide the opportunity for Indigenous students to explore the reasons for their success with the purpose of fostering a sense of self-efficacy which could engender success in their lives outside university

3. add to the collective knowledge regarding the ever changing perceptions of Indigenous student success

4. shift from outcomes based research to process based research by demonstrating this project's success in pro-

moting understanding between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

In her investigation into the standpoints of Indigenous university undergraduates regarding their academic success, Stewart employed a research methodology characterised as co-communication with cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry within a grounded theory perspective.

Stewart used conversational circles supplemented by individual interviews as her primary research approach. The research participants were 19 Indigenous University of Queensland undergraduate students who were close to completion of their studies or had recently completed them. Stewart aimed for a sample with gender balance, the inclusion of some mature aged students, and representation across a broad range of university departments. The students were recruited by a letter of invitation which was sent to selected students at the university.

The data consisted of recorded transcripts of conversations and interviews of two discussion group cohorts. A phenomenological hermeneutic perspective was used in the analysis whereby Stewart explicitly interpreted the students' conversations and then corroborated the interpretations with the students.

Stewart aimed for 'joint ownership of research through all its stages' (p. 65). The students had control over how much they would each disclose in the conversations and they were aware that they could choose to participate or leave. They also had the opportunity to take control of the agenda to promote their own personal and political agendas if they had wanted to. The students could move the furniture in the room to make the room more comfortable and they could bring and eat lunch during the sessions.

Over time, the conversation groups blossomed as the groups became 'less structured and more able to be manipu-

lated by participants' (p. 98) and both researcher and students became more relaxed with the process. In the final sessions, Stewart tried to remove any sense of obligation on the students' parts to say what they thought she needed to hear by explicitly giving up of her role as the 'key co-researcher'. Despite the self-proclaimed 'falsity' (p. 211) of this notion that she could be anything other than key co-researcher, in the final sessions, the students did become more 'relaxed, involved and even bold' (p. 212) and directed the conversation to suit their ends.

Stewart's theoretical framework is eclectic starting with a grounded theory base but with a strong poststructuralist influence exploring such concepts as voice, cultural authority, representation, power, and agency. From the start, Stewart aimed to 'disrupt' and critically examine grand narratives around Indigenous success, arguing that these impose restrictions, limiting the ways that Indigenous people are viewed and responded to. She effectively demonstrated how the discourse generated in the conversation circles opened up new possibilities for the Indigenous students within their own eyes.

Throughout the book, Stewart demonstrates familiarity with a diverse cross-disciplinary range of theories, respectfully drawing upon theorists from Marx to Harris to Bruner to Foucault to Bakhtin, to name just a few. Clearly, she is very well read and supports every assertion with a theoretical principle so that for much of the book, her theoretical explorations are central and the students' voices are peripheral. This balance shifts in chapters 9 and 10 of the book where the students' voices and Indigenous theorists' views come more to the foreground. From my perspective, this shift was welcome.

Stewart reasoned that these Indigenous university students' feelings of success were tied up with their achievement of a life balance between attending to conflicting responsibilities to their university studies and to their communities and families. They also held a sense of collective responsibility causing them to constantly weigh the personal risks and benefits of their own actions against a desire to advance or reconcile 'the places of Indigenous peoples in Australian society' (p. 217).

Their discussions portrayed a university environment which varied between being a place of nourishment and support to a place of intimidation and confusion. It was a foreign environment where their status seemed to oscillate between being predictable and uncertain. The students found that their interactions and relationships within the university were very complex and demanded constant vigilance and decision making regarding what they would say or do. They survived through their resilience and a belief in themselves to achieve but also through the presence of other Indigenous students who were generally found to be nurturing and supportive.

Stewart argues that many of the students gained the impetus to be successful from their desire to be educational

role models for their children, families and communities. This entailed risks including of being negatively labelled. Their Indigenous identity could be challenged by non-Indigenous university people if they were not sufficiently dark skinned or by Indigenous community people for allegedly abandoning their culture and assuming a White lifestyle in a White institution. Many students were the first in their families to be studying at university and family and community members were not familiar with what that entailed or what potentials it offered. Therefore, community members were not familiar with the possibility of achieving in the world outside the community while also remaining connected to culture, family and community and they saw the university as a hostile and unsafe place, accessible only to those who were extremely clever. The role models which were readily embraced within the community were skilled and successful sport people whereas success at university seemed irrelevant and an enigma to many.

Stewart pursued a thorough, ethical and sensitive approach to her research. She was humble and attentive to the needs of the participants and to ensuring that she provided a safe environment where all their voices would be heard. She was self-reflective and extremely conscientious about remaining true to her desire to facilitate a process whereby the students would genuinely be co-researchers able to influence the method and substance of the research. I believe her assertion that 'because I cared about their perceptions of me as an ethical researcher (the students) had the power to negate my efforts and erode my self-perception' (p. 56).

I believe that she does confirm the veracity of anecdotal narrative as valid data. She effectively facilitated the conversational circles so that they provided fertile environments for the students to conceptualise their experiences such that, over the three sessions, their standpoints grew and matured (p. 11).

In many studies aiming for joint ownership and genuine partnerships, particularly when they are part of a postgraduate research degree, the postgraduate candidate decides on the topic, selects the methodology and sampling procedure, records the data, interprets the data and finally writes up the findings in a thesis. If successful, they obtain the degree. This study was little different in these regards. Nevertheless, Stewart, as principal researcher selected a methodology, which, I believe, did allow the participants the opportunity to control the agenda to a certain extent. One or two students (e.g., 'Michael') objected to this but, judging from the conversational excerpts, it was clear that many of the students felt safe about reflecting upon and openly communicating their thoughts to one another and to the researcher. They raised many issues of importance to themselves including discussions of racism, identity, the position of Indigenous people in mainstream education, their responsibility to community, ways that they can assert their agenda within their classes and more broadly within university life, and non-

Indigenous people taking over successful Indigenous endeavours within the university.

Evidence of the positive effect on at least some of the students is clear in the example of 'Tina' who explicitly stated how participating in the discussions became a life changing experience for her. She said, 'you guys sound really powerful … you know where you're going … it's sort of like a tool to your success … it changes your perceptions of what success is, what failure is … I'm getting there … I'm working at it now … I just know it's all happening in this time and space right now where my whole life is changing both internally, spiritually …' (p. 215).

The conversation circles allowed the students to feed off the ideas of each other, possibly raising issues that the researcher may not have thought to raise had they only been interviewed on an individual basis.

Before the project began, Stewart introduced the potential participants to the research topic and proposed methodology along with its theoretical underpinnings. It is not clear whether the poststructuralist concepts were discussed during the conversation circles. However, Stewart claims that the Indigenous students 'were making theory "with" (her) about their past experiences as well as giving commentary on the methodological approach' (p. 56) during the group sessions. It is not possible to know to what extent the students understood the theoretical underpinnings of the author's analysis and interpretations. But there is no doubt that some of the students learned significantly from the discussions and the sharing of experiences and feelings. It is evident that Stewart facilitated the groups well, deftly dealing with the inherent tensions, shyness and hierarchy within participant circles. She identified which students were not comfortable in expressing themselves in the group and dealt with it accordingly.

With regard to ensuring that their voices were heard, seven of the 19 students were quoted extensively and every student was quoted at least twice. For me, not being a scholar from the poststructuralist tradition, I can nevertheless empathise with their drive to accommodate the complexities and contradictions in explanations of human social organisation. However, I found much of the language in the book to be abstruse and almost impenetrable in parts and believe that this would make the book largely inaccessible to many people who might have otherwise been keen to read it. Also, at times the theory seemed to put the data into a straight jacket. There is also a great deal of repetition as the author conscientiously explored theoretical concepts and applied them to the data.

The students saw themselves as being role models for other Indigenous people wanting to achieve a tertiary education. Their stories and ideas as presented in this book are inspirational. However, for me personally, at times the 'student voices' were buried in a quagmire of theory and complex and convoluted language.

I believe that this highly specialised technical language could impede to some extent the author's ambitions to

- project these Indigenous student voices where they would be heard within the broader university, and
- engender the respect of the university community for the conversational circle methodology.

I anticipate that education academics and postgraduate students exploring poststructuralist theories should find a wealth of ideas and interpretations in this book.

The methodology provided a safe and rich environment for the students to talk about issues of importance to them, around the theme of university success. The students took up the challenge that Stewart presented to them and appeared to have used each session as an opportunity to build on previous discussions.

The take-home messages for me regarding the educational implications of this research reinforces the findings of other studies of support programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students (e.g., Coughlan et al., 2011, Trudgett, 2009). This includes confirmation of the importance of

- dedicated spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within universities where they can get to know one another, support each other and be supported by empathic, academically skilled mentors
- recruitment of more Indigenous tutors, lecturers and general staff
- institutional-wide ongoing cultural safety programs for all university staff including using a cultural respect framework, cultural mentors, and communication strategies linking with appropriate Aboriginal organisations
- more widely promoted, dedicated Indigenous scholarships
- assertive and strategically targeted promotion of Indigenous educational role models along the lines of promotions within the sports sector, which reaches the greatest number of Indigenous people.

References

Coughlan, M., Taylor, K., & Bailes, D. et al. (2011, May). *Infiltrating research institutions and making our space: An evaluation of an Aboriginal PhD scholarship program.* Poster presented at the Coalition for Research to Improve Aboriginal Health (CRIAH) conference, Doltone House, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

Trudgett, M. (2009). Build it and they will come: Building the capacity of Indigenous units in universities to provide better support for Indigenous Australian postgraduate students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, 38*, 9–18.