University-based Research and the Seduction of Theoretical Knowledge: Rethinking Research in Indigenous Communities (0219)

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Research in indigenous communities around the world has been on the attack as representing academic thought that has invented the 'other' as the object of research. The academic view that has increasingly dominated research is that indigenous communities are significant "Others" who dwell in educational "borderlands". Quinnan (1997) describes significant "Otherness" as "a nameless, faceless attribute forced on disadvantaged groups different from the majority because of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or age" (p. 33). Both across and within research populations and paradigms, there is considerable variation in which one of these, or which set of them, is most powerful as a determinant of how research is conducted. Furthermore, up to the last quarter of the last century, research was based to a substantial extent on the tenets of positivism and an objectification of indigenous "other" cultures in which forms of theory, data, and analysis fail to measure themselves against the needs of indigenous peoples (Creswell, 2008). Set against this backdrop of research culture, it is clear that indigenous societies are accorded a marginal status, that is, the status of the "Other". The main purpose of this paper is to clarify the place of indigenous culture and epistemology within academic research. Concentration upon the general theme of this conference, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge" enables the place of indigenous knowledge to be examined within the service to society agenda of the University. Such an examination clarifies what is distinctive to indigenous knowledge as a major part of academic research. The paper describes a collaborative study between university-based researchers and Aboriginal communities to investigate key aspects of Aboriginal knowledge and culture that communities see as reflecting the curriculum needs of Aboriginal students, as well as the effective digital tools that would enhance and extend the delivery of the curriculum. The paper explores 1) the culture of the university; 2) how the research issues originated; 2) the functions that university and community researchers played in the process; 3) strategies; 4) the understanding of power relationships; 5) the prospects for collective learning; and, 6) the production of knowledge that is linked to action.

From its birth in twelfth century Italy and France to its colonization of the modern developing world, the university has maintained a relentless endurance over time with a stubborn resistance to change in spite of external pressures and internal needs (Perkin, 1984; Altbach, 1992). By tradition, the university celebrates particular kinds of intellectual content and certain types of performance in carrying out its missions. The university strives to remain protected from external interference and therefore unwilling to break the cultural mystique and behavioral codes built over time. One of such mystiques is to maintain some form of social differentiation with some types of knowledge valued or rewarded than others. One of the commonest criteria for differentiation is whether knowledge has been couched in theory or in practice. Palmer (2000) argues that the university regards anything practical as ultimately not an embodiment of worthy knowledge and rationality. Palmer offers a critique of how positivism has tended to dominate the idea that theoretical knowledge can alone be regarded as real knowledge and argues that because of the university's pursuit of

theoretical rationality rooted in the empiricist tradition that emphasizes the detachment of the subject from the object as the key role in the progressive unfolding of knowledge, "academic culture holds disconnection as a virtue" (p. 3) and that the university is intellectually committed to an inherent thought that "claims that if you don't disconnect yourself from the object of study—whether it's an episode in history, or a body of literature or a phenomenon of the natural world—your knowledge of it will not be valid" (p. 3). Palmer has pointed to the impact of marginalization of certain kinds of knowledge in universities by stating, "For a century and more, we have venerated 'detached scholarship' (while disciplines that require close encounters between the knower and the known—art, music, dance, and the like—have been pushed to the bottom of the academic totem pole)" (p. 3).

Traditionally, university-based research is positivistic and has the potential to deform the capacity for open dialogue with other cultures. It does not provide a base for mutual reciprocal relations between cultures, particularly those of ethnic groups. Gadamer's (1986) concept of fusion of horizons negates the notion of objectivity and absolute answers in favour of an open dialogue in which each party accepts that the understanding of each other as well as understanding themselves is considerably variable. Similarly, in searching for an acceptable as well as legitimate way of dealing with the 'other' Freire's (1970) concept of dialogue and problem posing is significant for collaboration between the university-based researcher and indigenous communities. The ideology of strategic rationality where the slavish imitation of natural sciences overwhelms the cultural authenticity of indigenous communities prevents adequate consideration of who should be the beneficial of research in indigenous communities. However, in contemporary times, collaborative research in indigenous communities finds its strongest justification in recent discussions of consumers of change and technology. Social informatics scholars (Kling, 1999, 2000; Star et al., 2003; Bishop et. al, 2003; Van House, 2004) argue that technology and the social are inseparable and mutually constituted: responsive, well-designed technologies empower users. To provide a base for mutual reciprocal research relationships and to develop intercultural relations that advantage neither party and protect the interests of both the university researcher and the community, research relationships need to be negotiated with the wishes of the local inhabitants. In contrast to traditional social science research paradigms that allow little or no space for the culture and protocols of the host community, participatory research acknowledges community cultures and protocols in equal terms with the research agenda. Accordingly, for real community service to occur, researchers cannot enter into communities simply as objects to be studied, controlled, and manipulated. The effectiveness with which university-based researchers fulfill their mission in indigenous settings depends upon acquiring the competencies necessary for them to function as effective collaborative researchers.

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