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Practice Led Research: An Indigenous academic pathway?

Prof. JOSIE ARNOLD

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Swinburne University of Technology
Hawthorn
Australia



ABSTRACT

This paper works towards alerting the academy itself that scholarship needs to be less resistant to ways of knowing that come from another cultural background and, more importantly, to understand what richness such knowledge structures bring to scholarship. In this paper I consider action research methodology and practice it so as to unpeel the connections between First Nations people in Canada and Australian Indigenous scholarship. This paper illuminates the possibilities inherent in developing the nature of the border crossing between Indigenous knowledge models and current academic constructions so that it is not one way. That is, dominated by euro western models. It is the scholarly conversation about this delicate balance and tension that this paper identifies and enters into, proposing that postgraduate level yet uncredentialed students as well as those with academic credentials can both enter Western knowledge systems and retain their own cultural modes of developing knowledge within them through practice led/based research (PLR).

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Indigenous Research and the Canadian First Nations Connection.

Methodology

Are reflective experiential observations able to be placed within action research?

I acknowledge that many Indigenous Australians also relate to First Nations' people assertion that they have knowledge methodologies that contrast with Western ways of knowing. Their cultural transmissions, like those of Australian Indigenous peoples, have been replaced and diminished by cultural as well as geographic colonisation. In this paper I am trying to bring forward an understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing as relevant to the academy. So this paper explores how PLR in PhD candidatures gives us an opportunity to increase the Indigenous educational opportunities of postgraduate teaching and learning by accepting individual and quite possibly uncredentialed entry points as leading to accredited exit points.

Underpinning academic discourse is the scholarly methodology employed in its production; for the re-emergence of action research this means '...how we go about generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the well-being of individuals, communities, and for the promotion of larger-scale democratic change' (Brydon-Miller et al 2003:10). In recognising the play of interests and the cultural formations of contributors to research, it also notes that such scholarship is never objective and value-free. I have nominated such insights as showing scholarly writings to be subjective academic

narratives (Arnold 2012). By this I mean that all research involves the cultural and personal backgrounds of the researchers and that it is all constructed as a scholarly story. Action research has at its base what Mary Brydon-Miller et al describe as ‘...a profound dissatisfaction with where we are’ (12). All research involves the complementary aspects of practice and theory and methodology is the bridge connecting these 2 vital aspects of scholarship. In action research, the action both leads the research and aims for social change due to the insights arising from the research. This is the purpose of the reflective personal narrative in this paper.

Such subjective academic narratives have often been seen as disruptive and even messy research practices described thus by Brydon-Miller et al: ‘messes are complex, multi-dimensional, intractable, dynamic problems that can only be partially addressed and partially resolved’ (21). As such I propose that they fall under the umbrella of action research (Huang 2010: 94) that tolerates -and even rejoices in -ambiguity in scholarship. Dawn Chandler and Bill Torbert say of this: ‘...action and research are entwined in real life, not polar opposites of one another, as they appear to be under the assumptions of empirical realism’ (2003:134). They describe action research as bringing together research and/as practice, as involving personal narrative and as consisting of multiple models.

As the purpose of action research is both to ‘understand social arrangements’ and ‘to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders,’ (Huang 2010:93), This paper claims its methodological position under the umbrella of action research as it is by a practitioner interacting with other practitioners about practice within the academy and urging action for change.

The ‘very broad movement’ (Altrichter et al 2002:125) of action research doesn’t lead to a neat definition and I would see this postmodern dispersal of certainties (Caputo 1988) as its most basic and positive aspect. It certainly leaves room for personal narratives as ‘action research reports are often narratives, located in the context of the evolving experiences of those involved’ (Heikkinen et al 2007:5). Indeed, Hannu Hakkinen et al refer to the postmodernist concept of bricolage or making a work-person-like do-it-yourself report as a form of a literary text that can be deconstructed (Derrida 1983). Narrativity and action research, then, can be seen to be under the same theoretical and methodological umbrella and it is this broad spread of action research that I utilise in this personal narrative of my ongoing research interactions with Australian and Canadian First Nations.

Introduction to the subjective academic narrative

I am not an Indigenous Australian and I do not speak for Indigenous scholars, but I would like to propose my acceptance as what Karen Martin identifies as ‘...*jarwon* meaning friend’ (2004:9) who is an outsider accepted by Indigenous peoples but certainly not speaking on their behalf. In undertaking research, Karen Martin states that Indigenous people are getting their stories back (2004:148). She tells all researchers, particularly non-Indigenous ‘outsiders’, to respect relatedness as ‘Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing’ (9). For her, ‘the implications and challenges for western research and researchers is to engage research as an interface where conceptual, cultural and historical spaces interface or come alongside each other based on new relationships to knowledge, to research and to self’ (10). For her this is ‘transformative and works towards achieving Aboriginal sovereignty in research’ (10). This exemplifies the 2 way border crossing where both ways of knowing are acknowledged and respected within scholarship.

There is no attempt here to propose that the experiences of the First nations people in Canada and Australia countries are the same. (Cornell 2006:3-4). However, Canadian First Nation people represent a similar percentage (2.5%) of the total population as Australian Indigenous peoples (Ball 2004: 455). They have other commonalities that this paper proposes. Stephen Cornell states that ‘they are among the world’s wealthiest nations. It is an often noted irony –and an occasional source of embarrassment to the governments of these countries-that the Indigenous peoples within their borders are in each case among their poorest citizens’ (2006:1). He goes on to note that the British settlement of nations such as Australia and Canada ‘has entailed enormous Indigenous resource losses, the eventual destruction of Indigenous economies and a good deal of social organization, precipitous population declines, and subjection to tutelary and assimilationist policies antagonistic to Indigenous cultures’ (2006:5).

Aikenhead sees cross-cultural education as being what he describes as a movement that is a ‘cultural border-crossing for students’ in this journey, teachers ‘facilitate those border crossings by playing the role of tour guide, travel

agent, or culture broker, while sustaining the validity of students' own culturally constructed ways of knowing' (1997:217). For Indigenous students, however, this is a very dangerous border crossing and success at making it is limited. For non-Indigenous scholars, this crossing is seldom even contemplated much less undertaken. This paper participates in proposals that such a one way crossing diminishes both Indigenous knowledge structures and dominant ones within the academy.

'Please Knock Before You Enter' Karen martin 2004.

In knocking before I enter, I acknowledge that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples is ongoing and that, as Martin says, '...research is as much an instrument of colonialism in the dispossession of Aboriginal *Peoples* from Country and knowledge as are legal, educational, social, welfare, political, religious and economic institutions' (2004:25). A central part of post colonialism is the reclaiming of the past in the present for the future. For example, Jessica Ball states that:

Many First Nations in Canada are ... engaged in multifaceted efforts to revitalize their cultures, assert the legitimacy of their culturally-based values and practices as integral to the fabric of Canadian society as a whole, and foster among First Nations children positive identities with their Indigenous cultures of origin. Indeed, throughout the world Indigenous groups are seeking ways to use education, training, and other capacity-building tools in order to maintain, revitalize, and re-envision cultural knowledge and ways of life (2004:456)

In discussing the depressingly familiar colonisation of Indigenous First Nations, Aikenhead states that:

In the 19th and 20th centuries, attempts (such as residential schools) at assimilating First Nation students into North American culture only succeeded in extinguishing the students' own culture and failed to provide an alternative cultural support system...consequently, First Nations peoples are the most disadvantaged minority in North American education...apart from abject poverty, the main issue is *control* over education (1997:218)

I propose that it is changing this negative and disadvantageous element of control that PL/BR facilitates in the 21st century as it may provide a two-way bridge over educational 'border crossing' for postgraduate students. Aikenhead describes this as 'autonomous acculturation' which he defines as: 'a process of intercultural borrowing or adaptation in which one borrows or adapts attractive content or aspects of another culture and incorporates (assimilates) it into one's indigenous culture' (1997:230.) This paper identifies another mode of 'autonomous acculturation' in which western knowledge systems borrow from Indigenous storytelling as a mode of producing knowledge within the academy. Aikenhead, in his discussions of Indigenous science curricula for First Nations people, describes 'an emerging paradigm of research and practice' (2001:183) that draws together the students' life world cultures and worldview with the knowledge content. PL/BR takes another view on this by beginning with life world practicum and drawing from that to research based upon that practice.

Jessica Ball describes how:

Many First Nations in Canada...have made repeated attempts to strengthen community capacity through education and training. However, they most often have found neither cultural relevance in training curricula nor cultural safety on "mainstream" campuses with one-size-fits-all curricula or with European-heritage instructors' (2004:457).

This paper adds to the scholarly conversation about how PL/BR could develop a model that enables such students when PhD candidates bring together cultural practices with research so as to increase the knowledge of the academy. Ball suggests strongly that:

Researchers and practitioners need to become aware and appreciative of the many effective or promising practices in human services and education that reflect the diversity of human experience, individual and collective goals, and social ecologies rather than searching for "best practices" with universal applicability (Ball 2004:459).

She describes a project undertaken to provide educational resources based upon culture but also giving Eurowestern qualifications; that is, one that would enable First Nations people to 'walk in both worlds' (459). This paper pursues that goal too. Ball describes this as a 'biculturally respectful stance (that) has created a safe and supportive context for communities of learners to become engaged in co-constructing culturally grounded training curricula that combines two knowledge "traditions" (2004:460).

Such a pedagogical model combines reflection and dialogue with traditional academic knowledge. This paper looks at how PL/BR postgraduate degrees can facilitate this further. Ball describes how:

The First Nations Programs embody a postmodernist valuing of multiple voices and insistence upon situating alternative constructions of experiences with reference to the historical, cultural, political and personal contexts in which these constructions have been generated...This approach illustrates how Eurowestern self-assertive thinking and values can exist in creative dialogue with the more integrative thinking and values that are characteristic of many Indigenous cultures, resulting in positive transformations for all individuals, institutions, and communities involved.' (Ball 2004:461)

Known as an activist intellectual pursuing the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly those in Canada, Dr. Gerald Taiaiake Alfred is an internationally recognised academic, a Kanien'kehaka, and a political advisor who is currently a professor at the University of Victoria. His work evokes awareness of the continuing encroachment of the dominant settler/invasor societies of contemporary colonialism upon Indigenous peoples and nations. This is no small struggle as he identifies 'approximately 350 million Indigenous peoples situated in some 70 countries around the world' (2005:599). With Jeff Corntassel (2005), Alfred defines this struggle as of peoples who are: 'Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire' (2005:597) and states that their relationship to the dominant political and social structures is always 'oppositional'. By this they mean that all indigenous peoples, whatever their heterogeneity, have in common that they:

struggle to survive as distinct peoples on foundations constituted in their unique heritages, connections to their homelands...natural ways of life...as well as the fact of their existence (being) in large part lived as determined acts of survival against colonizing states' efforts to eradicate them culturally, politically and physically (2005:597).

This 'struggle' has lived veracity as well as academic insights and overviews: the experience of contemporary colonialism hidden within the dominant culture is readily identifiable by him as a form of 'post-modern imperialism' that affects Indigenous peoples 'culturally, politically and physically'. The eradication of Indigenous peoples that was actual and physical in the first wave of colonialism is now, Alfred and Corntassel state, a form of psychic as well as physical degradation and depletion. Indigenous peoples, then, are still being 'dispossessed and disempowered in their own homelands'.

Indeed, they identify the state of aboriginality in contemporary colonialism as being a way in which the state organises the Indigenous peoples to define themselves within its own terms. In doing so, they are moved away from the particularity of their pre-colonial backgrounds to a form of censored homogeneity that denies their original heterogeneity. Alfred and Corntassel identify this quite uncompromisingly as: 'a powerful assault on Indigenous identities that is based upon relying upon the state for 'physical survival' (2005:599).

Moreover, this is not merely a political matter: cultural matters such as the social dominance of big business, and the neo-imperial influence of dispossession of lands and the loss of ceremony and language are also involved in 'threatening their sources of connection to their distinct existences and the sources of their spiritual power...' (2005:599) This reconstruction of Indigenous identity by the neo-colonial state, society and local and global cultural imperatives, then, is one leading to 'disconnection, dependency and disconnection,' and hence continuing negative and harmful 'colonial legacies' (2005:600).

Border Crossing

In what ways, then, might such pressures be resisted? For Alfred and Corntassel the answer is that 'it is ultimately our lived collective and individual experiences as Indigenous people that yield the clearest and most useful insights for establishing culturally sound strategies to resist colonialism and regenerate our communities' (2005:601). Within the context of this paper that considers the narratives of individuals being accepted as a contribution to knowledge, this assertion has much power to it.

Neo colonialism is described by Alfred and Corntassel as being a form of 'shape-changing'. That is, pressures brought to bear upon Indigenous people, even those activated by a type of common-good domestication-style argument, are insidious and hidden and also extremely powerful in counteracting Indigenous resistance. In what ways can such suggestions as practice led research brooded in this paper refuse to accord with 'shape-changing', 'domestication', and accommodating to a neo-colonial 'common-good'? The suggestion that there can and should be 'zones of refuge', and

'spaces of freedom' (2005:605) seem at first glance to resist entering into the established academic knowledge domain even through such a new doorway as practice led research.

Perhaps one answer becomes possible when we consider that such academic publications will also be practicum published within a broader scope such as books, art, sculpture, dance (etc) as well as within the academy itself. In this way, too, Indigenous practitioners will choose what they place within the dominant cultural practices and in doing so will also bring greater heterogeneity both for the meta-culture and for their own Indigenous cultures.

Indigenous researchers themselves identify 'peoplehood' which Alfred and Cornthassel define as 'four interlocking concepts: sacred histories, ceremonial cycles, language and ancestral homelands' (2005:609) as the main area of contestation against contemporary colonialism. I believe that these 4 interlocking concepts are quite readily correlated with dialogic learning and practice led research.

Rather than a pan-Indigeneity, they identify a 'fourth world' wherein there is a resistance to neo-imperialism and a number of common needs can be recognised and met. Such fourth world commonalities are described as being 'founded on active relationships with the spiritual and cultural heritage embedded in the words and pattern of thought and behaviour left to us by our ancestors' (2005:610.) These too, I propose, can be both seen and accommodated in the contribution of recognising different modes of knowing within the academy such a practice led research. The most effective argument for such a commonality resides in Alfred and Cornthassel's assertion that a process of Indigenous regeneration 'begins with the self', as 'decolonization and regeneration are not at root collective and institutional processes' (2005:611).

Indigenous peoples have all too often been domesticated and tamed, their resistance diverted, by patriarchal and imperial government policies that have increased their reliance for daily living upon the state. (Alfred 2009:42) As a result, there has arisen what Alfred describes as:

a complex relationship between the effects of social suffering, unresolved psychophysical harms of historic trauma and cultural dislocation (that) have created a situation in which the opportunities for a self-sufficient, healthy and autonomous life for First nation people on individual and collective basis are extremely limited (2009:42)

Alfred states that this is caused by a significant dependence upon the 'very people and institutions that have caused the near erasure of our existence and who have come to dominate us' (2009:42). A defensive but destructive enervation has resulted, he argues, because such 'oppression experienced over such a long period of time effects people's minds and souls in seriously negative ways' (Alfred 2009:43). I propose that such negative energy can be transmogrified if we see the present as a hallway through which new ways of perception might be discovered and that it is in this liminal space that the opportunities offered by Practice Led/Based research, dialogic knowledge and other knowledge bases that recognise different modes of knowing within the academy may take up their existence (Arnold 2010).

Disempowerment is the most significant element in the formation of such negative energies within Indigenous persons. Thus the empowerment involved in recognising Indigenous ways of knowing within the academy, rather than co-opting such knowledge for analysis and comment by non-indigenous peoples or Indigenous peoples within the given framework of traditional knowledge bases within the academy, is an important contribution to resistance towards cultural meta narratives that form neo colonial pressures upon Indigenous peoples. Alfred suggests that such individuation may lead to 'atomization' of Indigenous communities and peoples: a sort of divide and conquer (2009:44). He argues that a return to a reintegrated Indigenous community is the baseline. However, this relies upon matters of such political, economic and cultural change that it may take many years of alienation to reach, if ever. For me this is the impossible dream of a return to the pre-colonial culture.

Practicum in research

Recognising Indigenous learning and knowledge within the academy is a small step that can take place immediately through practicum becoming the basis of research degrees. There is evidence that as Indigenous peoples in Australia have been more widely published and their works of art recognised there has been a lift in the spirit of the communities from which they come: the Papunya artists are an early example of this, but there are others such as Benterrick's co-authorship of *Reading the country: introduction to nomadology* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press 1984) or Dianne Bell's *Ngarrindjeri wurruwarrin: a world that is, was, and will be*. (Spinifex Press 1998) Of which the blurb relates:

This finely textured ethnography weaves written texts with the voices of women and men who struggle to protect their sacred sites. It provides a deeper understanding of lives profoundly affected by two centuries of colonization.

Moreover, there are many other personal narratives that have come to publication as an act of restoration including *'Dreamtime Nightmares'* by Bill Rosser (Penguin 1987); Ruby Langford's *'Don't take your love to town.'* (Penguin 1988) and Roberta Sykes's *'Snake Cradle'* (1997 Allen & Unwin). Much of this work occurred as Indigenous activists forced a space for Aboriginal studies within universities. This indicates the power of the academy to enable Indigenous scholars and others to walk in two worlds.

In this paper, then, I argue that this practicum I am advocating of such methodologies as practice led/based research is not another form of 'shape-changing' that comes about through integration and assimilation. Rather it is an opportunity for the academy to be expanded and enriched by the Indigenous knowledge involved rather than using it as a reflection upon Indigenous communities from a Eurowestern viewpoint arising from colonisation and continuing through neo-colonialism. Indigenous representation in the curriculum, in learning and teaching practices and in research and scholarship is not currently well-provided for in current University education.

Whilst proposing the importance of PL? B research methodologies, this paper also acknowledges the importance of developing further understanding as to the personal, cultural, academic and socioeconomic significance of the recognition of Indigenous dialogic learning, inclusion of Indigenous materials in the curriculum, and narrative methodologies in research to the socioeconomic well-being of Australian Indigenous scholars, their culture, and the broader Australian and global cultures. Bolatti and Falk argue that the amount, as well as the particular qualities of social capital, are primary factors in maximizing the impact of socioeconomic well-being. The theory is that through the development of trust, networks, and shared values, people's and organizations' learning are of benefit to them and to the wider community (2002:282).

This paper addresses that need, as social capital is severely under-represented when it arises from Indigenous knowledge-structures being acknowledged and represented in postsecondary qualifications (Martin 2008). This is despite all Universities stating their desire to improve both Indigenous and low socio-economic status (SES) student representations, being signatories to The Australian Qualifications Framework, and having opportunities through their own Recognition of Current Competencies and Recognition of Prior Learning regulations. For Jerry Schwab and Dale Sutherland, Indigenous learning communities present powerful ways forward for educational opportunities, and family and socioeconomic wellbeing. (2001:3). In their study of secondary education, they describe alienation from educational processes that are also significant in postsecondary courses that have no insights into Indigenous dialogic learning, storytelling, practicum or other knowledges. They identify 'systematic inertia' that may also be a term applied to the recognition of Indigenous knowledge structures in academe. They see 'compensatory education' (2001:6) as continuing the disempowerment of indigenous learning even whilst structures are put in place that the political and educational rhetoric see as empowering. Furthermore, such bureaucratic and even research ignorance may well see proposed 'empowerment' being in fact 'disempowerment'. They suggest that this should be addressed by 'a focus on the meaningful occurrences in daily life, the quantitative ...to replace the obsession with the qualitative' (2001:7)

The struggle against cultural metanarratives has been nowhere more explicit than in the academy, wherein knowledge paradigms have excluded indigenous knowledge status, dialogic methodologies, content, experience and explication except as an object of study via eurowestern methodologies. Extending the dialogue between western and Indigenous knowledge-production provides both a fertile and a dynamic contribution to knowledge itself as it opens up new ways to utilise dialogic learning and also recognises new knowledge practices and paradigms not formerly available for recognition in the academy. This paper participates in this.

Conclusion

Implicating Indigenous ways of knowing within the academy can be read as another 'shape-change' or it can be seen in this sense of operating within the possibilities inherent in the liminal. I prefer the latter, whilst recognising the pressure of the former. The entry space is one of possibilities for all concerned. There are many doors opening from an entry space and many ways that we can go forward. There is in this liminal space a possibility of changing from an

oppositional to a new relationship that challenges the neo-colonial attitudes of the imperialistic patriarchy as well as the psychophysiological depression of the disempowered Indigenous peoples. There are many small steps that can be taken within the liminal space and changing from institutional paradigms that have depressingly resulted in a multigenerational 'system that remains the same and annihilates us spiritually and culturally no matter what the strategic outcome of the struggle' (Alfred 2009: 48).

I argue that recognising and valuing Indigenous knowledge within the academy is one of them. Further, such enrichment is not available only to Indigenous peoples. The apophatic nature of the liminal is able to enrich the dominant culture in ways that it has not previously either seen or valued. In the 21st century, and perhaps for the entire time of Western dominance, spirituality is not a guiding moral compass point for Eurowestern societies (Braudel 1981. Tawney 1948).

In addressing spiritual needs of Indigenous people, we need to see that their contribution to the academy could alert it to the spiritual deficiencies that exist within its own guiding paradigms. In this liminal space, an 'autonomous and authentic indigenous identity and cultural foundation' could flourish within a space in which Indigenous knowledge is neither consumed nor assumed but seen as an important and lively contribution to a complex Indigenous/Eurowestern society. This is an important contribution the academy could make/is making to a sense of liminality: of making new possibilities by being on the threshold. Rather than becoming 'cultural mirrors of the mainstream society' (Alfred 2009:52), such possibilities provide an opportunity to cut across repressive dominant cultural givens and societal metanarratives.

Action research methodology enables this research journey for me, providing ideas about validity and reliability being 'replaced by innovative concepts and approaches', but still subject to 'quality assessment' (Hakkinen et al 2007:7). Hakkinen et al propose five quality assessment guidelines (8-9), these add to numerous surveys about such qualitative research and this paper is in keeping with them, although such formulae are to be seen as useful and ongoing rather than didactic and restrictive. Hakkinen et al propose, indeed, that they should not be used as a checklist, but as 'general, flexible and mutually integrated perspectives' (17). This paper has used such personal scholarly narrativity not only to tell its story, but also to show the breadth of the action research umbrella.

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