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Re/researchers as Co-learners: Life Narratives on Collaborative Re/research in Aboriginal Communities

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Abstract: *Our goal is to share our lived experience of the unanticipated learning that occurred during our inquiry into educational issues in Aboriginal communities. What stems from this inquiry is recognition that re/researchers are co-learners rather than experts. Consequently, we are endeavouring to increase awareness of ethical considerations regarding re/research.*

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge the direct and indirect participation of faculty, graduate students, and community participants during our inward and collaborative inquiry. Without their involvement, this experience and our reflections on it, would not have been possible. The work that went into producing this paper has been a tentative process of crossing cultural boundaries and successfully building our relationship based on cooperation and collaboration and mutual respect.

Definition

For the purpose of this paper, “Aboriginal” is intended to include Indian, Inuit, and Metis.

Objectives

As collaborators for this presentation we first came into contact with one another during a course on Aboriginal research methodologies. Midway through this course, we began collaborating on a joint venture to critically reflect on our experiences regarding re/research from two cultural perspectives, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, while conducting re/research in Aboriginal communities. Our reflections, particularly on ethical issues, evolved over several months of dialogue during which we conducted research in four Aboriginal communities regarding issues in Aboriginal education. Our goal is to share our experiences in terms of learning how to cross cultural boundaries in order to conduct re/research in these Aboriginal communities. Consequently, we have endeavoured to increase awareness of ethical and cultural issues that arise for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adult educators intending to conduct re/research in Aboriginal communities.

Denise: I am an Aboriginal woman from the

Northwest Territories. My background is Gwich'in and Metis-Cree. My grounding is in the MacKenzie Delta where I was born in Aklavik and raised in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. I have raised a family in the South Slave region of the Northwest Territories where I had been a teacher and an administrator for several years. I am currently completing a Master of Education Degree in the First Nations Education Program, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta.

Heather: I am a Euro-Canadian woman of Scottish and English heritage. I was born in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, but I spent most of my early years in Manitoba. My background is in Cultural Anthropology and cross-cultural inquiry mainly in Native Studies and the culture of the Deaf. I am currently completing a Master of Education Degree in the Adult and Higher Education Program, Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta. I have been teaching adults for a number of years in formal, non-formal, and informal settings.

Heather: Before submitting this paper, Denise shared an invaluable insight regarding permission from outside the conventional framework of academia in terms of publishing this paper. *Denise:* We needed to receive authorization from outside academia, someone who could determine that this paper was acceptable. What I mean by “acceptable” is that the paper needed to be validated by a recognized authority in the area of re/research with Aboriginal communities to confirm that our words were truthful. I do not mean “truthful” from a legal aspect, I mean that we needed to take responsibility for our words. I have to be aware of the ramifications for taking this kind of action. *Heather:* It had not occurred to me that this measure should be taken until Denise expressed her concern. As a re-

sult of our discourse, I have become more fully aware of the ethical considerations regarding publication. Being a neophyte in terms of publishing in academia, I began to fully grasp the weight of responsibility attached to allowing this paper to be published.

Theoretical Framework

Conducting research in Aboriginal communities has been a largely negative experience for those who are being “researched”. In many cases, Aboriginal people have been involuntary subjects for investigation by members of the dominant society (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Hermes, 1998; La Fromboise & Plake, 1983). “The term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonization.... [Research] is implicated in the worst excesses of colonization [and] remains a powerful remembered history” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 1) for many Aboriginal people. This disturbing fact is becoming more widely recognized and is slowly being confronted from within the Aboriginal population and by the dominant society.

Argument for an Alternative Model

The Aboriginal research methodologies course, where we began this inquiry, provided a forum to begin looking at research from outside the mainstream perspective. The class explored the possibilities of what research could mean from an Aboriginal perspective and how that meaning might differ from a non-Indigenous perspective. The class identified that the positivist approach to research has traditionally been an attempt to confirm that which is already believed to be true. However, other methods have taken radically different approaches. For example heuristics, phenomenology, grounded theory, situated response, life narrative, and lived experience are alternative methods that pursue a search for knowledge. The class also examined traditional forms of inquiry in Aboriginal communities including oral traditions and storytelling. From the class discussions emerged the concept of “re/search”, which to us symbolized a departure from the traditional way of perceiving research and moving towards an alternate definition. We began to examine our positions as insider/outsider within the re/search process rather than as researchers from the colonized/colonizer perspective. From this vantage point, we conducted our re/search in Aboriginal communities and explored our experiences

through collaborative cross-cultural inquiry.

Discussion

In selecting our communities, we considered the broad definition of community to include either people living in a specific locality or a group of people sharing common interests and experiences. *Denise*: Both of the communities I selected were communities that I was familiar with, one was based on a geographical location and the other was based on a group of individuals sharing a common experience. *Heather*: I was not familiar with either of the communities I selected for conducting research. I decided to approach two communities in close proximity to one another with distinctly different lived experiences.

Denise: As an inside re/searcher, that is, knowing the participants in the study, having been raised in the same geographical location, and sharing a similar lived experience puts me, an Aboriginal re/searcher, in a unique position. Evered and Louis (1981) note that “insiders...are those whose personally relevant social world is under study....We may characterize the insider’s actions as pursuing “inquiry from the inside” (cited in Bartunek & Louis, 1996, p. 12).

Heather: In contrast, as an outside (non-Aboriginal) re/searcher, I am in an alternatively unique position because I have experienced a very different social (and political, economic, cultural) reality. According to Evered and Louis (1981) “the outside re/searcher’s actions may be characterized as “pursuing inquiry from the outside” (cited in Bartunek & Louis, 1996, p. 12). “By capturing, conveying, and otherwise linking the perspectives and products of inquiry of both insider and outsider, a more robust picture can be produced of any particular phenomenon under study” (Bartunek & Louis, 1996, p. 13). Through cross-cultural collaborative inquiry during the various stages of our re/search, we have endeavoured to employ this alternative method for critically reflecting on and interpreting our own experience and moving beyond, by introducing a critical examination of each other’s experience in terms of learning what it means to conduct re/search.

The narrative inquiry approach, developed by Clandinin and Connelly (1994), involves the informant, who is also an insider, critiquing and advancing the outsider’s interpretation of data (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). We went one step fur-

ther with the concept of collaborating lived experience by not only critiquing and advancing each other's data but also by critically dialoguing about each other's lived experience. We are working towards framing such re/research by paying particular attention to ethics and culture for conducting re/research in Aboriginal communities. We are attempting to provide not only a basis for a deeper understanding of the experience of working as a re/researcher in Aboriginal communities so that other adult educators may be able to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in similar situations (van Manen, 1997; Frank, 1995) but also so that re/researchers behave in a less oppressive or exploitive manner. It is important to recognize that this paper is not about the findings of our inquiry into issues in Aboriginal education. This paper is concerned with critically reflecting on the ethical considerations for conducting re/research in Aboriginal communities.

Heather: Through ongoing discussion and reflection I came to realize the extent of the ramifications embedded in attempts by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal re/researchers to do research within Aboriginal communities. For example, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal re/researchers may or may not be accepted into an Aboriginal community depending on the nature of the inquiry, the methodology, the implications, and how or who the re/research will be of benefit. Through further discussion and reflection, I was able to appreciate the internalized colonization that could be present in Aboriginal communities. I also became aware that there would be certain aspects of community dynamics and issues that would remain hidden from me as an outsider. Conversely, there would be other aspects that I would be able to observe that others would not see because of their closeness to the issues. Inside and outside re/researchers are able to view a phenomenon differently and ask questions the other has not considered. With ongoing discourse, each re/researcher is provided with a more holistic understanding of the issues under investigation.

Denise: One misconception held by the general public about Aboriginal people is that we are all the same in terms of our culture, language, practices, beliefs, and values. The cultural groups found within the Aboriginal population are diverse. As Aboriginal people, we need to recognize the differences and honour them when entering a new community. If you are not among your own people, you

could be considered an outsider.

Heather: One of the considerations I have found myself struggling with is whether or not a white re/researcher should carry out research on a topic that involves Aboriginal people. Tuhiwai Smith (no date) notes that some argue that a white re/researcher can be involved in Aboriginal re/research but not on his or her own. Others argue that no re/research is exclusively owned by one particular group. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) suggests there are ways of negotiating relationships between non-Aboriginal re/researchers and Aboriginal communities. Rigney (1997) adds that critical re/research by non-Aboriginal re/researchers should continue if it assists with the struggles Aboriginal people have for self-determination (p. 12). I continue to explore the acceptability of my involvement in any re/research study through discussions with potential participants as well as with academic and non-academic advisors. Negotiating permission from the Chief and Council to enter a community is fundamental to the success of a re/research project.

Denise: The motive behind conducting re/research is important. I want my re/research and related work to be useful to northern Aboriginal people. In fact, I choose to pursue re/research that has been guided by discussions with northern Aboriginal people. I choose topics for projects based on relevant issues. Completing course requirements or writing for publication are not the main driving forces behind my decisions. The finished project has to be of some use to my people.

Heather: As a non-Aboriginal person, I had concerns in regards to conducting re/research in both communities. I wanted to behave in a respectful and ethical manner particularly as I was negotiating entry into the community. I was concerned that I would not be accepted by the people that I wanted to work with based on previous negative experiences that they may have had with other non-Aboriginal re/researchers. My hope was that people would become comfortable with me and accept me in their communities. Reflecting on this experience, I have come to realize that the more meaningful inquiry occurred when I became an active part of the second community before I begin active re/research. Visiting with community members and establishing a real relationship is an important part of the re/research experience because it is through this interaction that people come to know my reasons for being there. By visiting, a genuine interest in each

other and the issues under inquiry are promoted (Colorado, 1988).

Denise: I would hesitate to refer to myself as a re/researcher although this is the work I am doing. As noted above, negative connotations of the past are still strongly rooted in the label “researcher”. Integrity is an important value in obtaining information from an Aboriginal community. I have to give something back to the community in terms of reciprocity for the teaching they have given me. If information is taken from an individual or community, it needs to clear what the motive is and how the results will be used and whom it will benefit. It seems to me that there is often too much emphasis on data collection, I believe the emphasis should be on *how* the data is analyzed.

Heather: The role of re/researcher is analogous to that of a learner, storyteller, or explorer. Re/research itself is a means for sharing knowledge. It has been said that the topic, the method, the methodology, and the re/researcher change over the course of a study. Kvale (1996) presents a metaphor of the re/researcher as a traveler and suggests that “the journey may not only lead to new knowledge; the traveler might change as well....The journey might instigate a process of reflection that leads the [re-researcher] to new ways of self-understanding” (p. 4). I believe this to be true. I have acknowledged that I may not always achieve the expected outcomes outlined in my future re/research proposals, particularly if I employ collaborative or participatory action research. However, I will be able to draw conclusions from the unanticipated tangential learning and subsequent outcomes that surface during the re/research process.

Findings

In positioning ourselves through life narratives we get a sense of ourselves, but with the understanding that this sense of self is dynamic (Usher et al., 1997). Only a fraction of any experience can be storied and expressed at any one time. Inevitably, a great deal of the lived experience falls outside the dominant stories about lives and relationships (White & Epston, 1990 cited in Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). According to White and Epston (1990) “those aspects of lived experience that fall outside of the dominant story provide a rich and fertile source for the generation, or re-generation on alternative stories” (cited in Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997, p. 15). In this particular forum, the

primary goal then, is not to share an analysis or conclusions of our fieldwork, but rather to share part of our lived experience, which falls outside the dominant story. We are sharing our reflections as adult learners with insider/outsider re/research roles in Aboriginal communities with the principal focus relating to culture and ethics. The approach we have taken in terms of our experience is to triangulate personal meanings with the meanings shared with each other and the presence and influence of our different contexts and different discourses (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997; Brookfield, 1995; Erlandson et al., 1993). This approach to knowledge is an engagement in the process of re-viewing ways of knowing (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997; Brookfield, 1995).

Implications

In sharing our critical reflections about our experiences conducting re/research in Aboriginal communities, we have endeavoured to bring about awareness of an alternative method for examining the auxiliary learning that takes place while conducting re/research in Aboriginal communities. The implications of sharing our critical reflections in terms of adult education theory and practice are becoming increasingly more compelling. Aboriginal people are no longer tolerating the fact that they have been exploited and oppressed by the dominant society. As re/researchers, we need to discontinue the previous pattern of misappropriation of knowledge and wisdom. As adult educators, we need to be prepared to address and adopt alternative re/research practices and recognize the auxiliary learning that occurs when re/researchers conduct re/research in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

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