Fall 2006

Research Methodologies in Community Literacy

Jill Arola
Michigan Technological University

Research Methodologies in Community Literacy
A Review Essay

Deloria, Vine, Jr., and Daniel R. Wildcat. *Power and Place: Indian Education in America.* Ed. Vine Deloria Jr. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2001. ISBN: 155591859X.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books, 1999. ISBN: 1856496244.

Faber, Brent D. *Community Action and Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, Identity.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. ISBN: 0809324369.

Grande, Sandy. *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. ISBN: 0742518299.

What counts as a methodology in community literacy? When working or doing research in any community, how do we responsibly begin to frame the people who live and work there—and their experiences? The following four books take up these questions and attempt to unpack the ingredients for a methodology of community literacy. By investigating each of their arguments, we can begin to formulate an idea of what a community literacy methodology might aspire to.

Vine Deloria, Jr. and Daniel Wildcat demonstrate the necessity of reflecting on personal experience to begin the work of acknowledging cultural differences. In composition and cultural studies, for example, this acknowledgement is an imperative as we seek to teach students from many different cultures. As academics, we seek to improve ourselves, our fields, and our world through research. Due to increased emphasis on service learning and community literacy, this research focuses on other people and programs outside of mainstream educational institutions. So as not to approach research as the "expert" or as authorities with ethnocentric assumptions, we must be careful with the ways in which we conduct our research. In their book *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*, Deloria and Wildcat argue that "[t]he best place to begin an understanding of this reality is with critical reflection regarding our experience" (147). Do we have role models for this type of reflection? Critical reflection is often displayed in the community of indigenous peoples through the voices and wisdom of the elders. They have the ability to *pay attention*—to learn by being attentive to the world they inhabit. Deloria and Wildcat use the term *synthetic attentiveness*, by which they mean a "heightened sense of awareness that operates without thinking about it or paying attention to it" (149). Many of us in the Western world do not have the skills or the experience to enact synthetic attentiveness, especially with regard to research in communities in which we are not members.

We are often disconnected from our own communities, our natural histories, and we have forgotten what geographies and natural environments have to give us (119). *Power and Place* offers us a reference guide for working with students and community members in ways that are respectful, useful, and ethical. In fact, their suggestions are far-reaching and should also be carried further into all academic research, teaching and representational work. The following books align themselves implicitly or explicitly with Deloria and Wildcat's strategies and add interesting complications through counter-practices of research.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the leading theorist on decolonization of Maori in New Zealand, Brent Faber, an assistant professor of technical communications and academic consultant, and Sandy Grande, an Associate Professor of Education, open up different, yet similar, ways in which we can begin to understand the necessity of integrating community stories and the experiences that they represent into our research, as well as the necessity of respectful, useful, and ethical research and representation. The representation of any community's stories and individual narratives should go further than being a symbolic gesture of representation of the people and communities involved. The stories ideally should contain the *power and knowledge* of the individual people and the community (Deloria & Wildcat 62) and not what Faber labels an "academic's rendition" of an issue or context (38). Smith also states with regard to this type of representation that "the responsibility of researchers is not simply to share surface information (pamphlet knowledge) but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented (16). Grande also cautions us, in the words of Deloria, to be aware of "voyeuristic tours through the lives and experiences of 'authentic' peoples" (Grande 102) and charges us with the need for practical, community-based research unfettered by the current ideology of dominant design. The following books can be considered guides to ways of understanding the ethics of why, what and how we research.

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples investigates the ways that research has been implicated in the "worst excesses of colonialism" and how it remains a "powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (Smith 1). This book was written to situate research in a much larger historical, political and cultural context and works to complicate Western rules of research. Smith explores the concept of research as it intersects with imperialism and knowledge of indigenous peoples. Smith asserts that indigenous peoples want to tell their own stories, write their own versions, in their own ways, for their own purposes (28).

Most indigenous research has been conducted by non-indigenous peoples. The rules of research have been constructed by the West and then religiously followed, which has caused indigenous voices to be silenced. The Western research approach determines the wider rules of practice, which ensures that Western interests remain dominant. An investigation of the history that has been constructed about indigenous peoples is taken up in the first half of the book. Indigenous peoples have to transform their colonized views of their own history (as written by the West), revisit their history under Western eyes, and then develop a theory which will help them to engage with, understand, and act upon that history (Smith 34). With regards to representation (also predominantly written by the West), indigenous peoples see themselves, but they rarely recognize themselves through that representation (Smith 35). They need to come to know and understand theory and research from their own perspectives and for their own purposes. This can be accomplished by training more

indigenous researchers and by having non-indigenous researchers trained in ethically and culturally sensitive ways. Smith offers suggestions and case studies as to how this can be accomplished. Ethical research guidelines are offered for both the indigenous and the non-indigenous researcher.

As researchers, we have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance. Smith implicates Western research as a part of the colonization process, but she also puts forth an understanding of how research can provide systematic ways of understanding indigenous peoples' predicaments, of answering their own questions, and of helping them as communities to solve their own problems and develop themselves. Smith describes: "when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, people participate on different terms" (193). Smith suggests questions that should be asked, such as:

- Who defined the research problem?
- For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?
- What knowledge will the community gain from this study?
- What knowledge will the researcher gain from this study?
- What are some likely positive outcomes from this study?
- What are some possible negative outcomes?
- How can the negative outcomes be eliminated?
- To whom is the researcher accountable?
- What processes are in place to support the research, the researched, and the researcher?

Smith then goes on to question whether the individual researchers have an inherent right to knowledge and truth (173). Getting back to Deloria and Wildcat's call for the voices of experience to become the representation (the power and knowledge) of the Other, Smith's book gives us excellent suggestions and examples of how to begin to work in this way as researchers and teachers. It is an empowering book for indigenous researchers, teachers and students, but it also provides valuable considerations for non-indigenous researchers, teachers, and students who are involved with work in indigenous communities.

Faber's *Community Action and Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, Identity* heeds Deloria & Wildcat's call to seek out the narratives and experiences of the communities/organizations that we study in order to bring us to a fuller understanding and an accurate representation of them. This book is about the ways people cope with change: how they create change, how they adapt to change, and how they try to resist change. Faber's focus is on organizations, but his approach is applicable to working within communities as well. Faber's research is also concerned with "how we research and talk about change and the connections we create and sever between theory and practice, the researcher and the researched, and the academic and the community" (4). Faber and Smith's works demonstrate the necessity of ethical research practices and their importance in understanding why and how we proceed with research.

This book is a series of case studies, featuring individual chapters on a bank, a college, a political campaign, and a cemetery, as well as the ways in which the individual and or-

ganizational stories contained within these structures broker change. Faber draws on the theories of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Anthony Giddens (in a very accessible way) to demonstrate that change, due to its inherent complexity, takes place in the stories/experiences that people share.

Faber suggests that stories "broker change because they mediate between social structure and individual agency. In other words, stories help us negotiate between those factors that restrict and limit our possibilities and our free ability to pursue our own choices" (25). Narrative can stand in for (represent) our experiences (Faber 32). Faber is concerned about a distorted representation, which he describes as "an academic's rendition of an issue or context and not a representation of the practical work and the necessary day-to-day aspects of life within that context" (38), adding to the discussion created by Deloria, Wildcat, and Smith regarding experience and attentiveness to our surroundings. Faber sees the necessity of researchers stepping out of the confines of their offices and becoming much more ethically involved, much in the same way that Smith asks researchers to refrain from simply relying on "pamphlet knowledge." This interaction will better link their research and teaching interests with community needs and civic projects, echoing Smith's call for research practices that are useful, respectful and ethical.

Faber offers questions to ask when encountering and incorporating organizational stories: Who wrote this story? What does the story hope to accomplish? What do I need to believe in order to buy this story? Who profits from this story? Who loses in this story? Can I accept the consequences of the story? He reminds us that we must be aware of the power relations that endorse the story, the social work the story accomplishes, and the story's ultimate consequences (Faber 43). We must participate, experience, and become involved in our research in order to fully comprehend the narratives that have been shared with us.

Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought focuses on the need for a revolutionary critical pedagogy, one that incorporates the type of critical reflection suggested by other authors in the field, such as Deloria and Wildcat. Grande begins with reflection on her own experience, as she describes:

> I learned that experience is far from self-explanatory: that language and ability to name one's experience are precursors to emancipation; that teachers, schools and Western frames of intelligibility still desire to "kill the Indian and save the man"; and that native America is not only a place but also a social, political, cultural and economic space. Ultimately, however, I learned that transgression is the root of emancipatory knowledge, and emancipatory knowledge is the basis of revolutionary pedagogy. (5)

Grande envisions a revolutionary pedagogy as one that cultivates a sense of collective agency, both to curb the excesses of dominant power and to revitalize indigenous communities (26). She invokes indigenous communities to critically analyze colonialist education practices. Within this analysis, there is no room for claims of political neutrality. Her quest is for a new "Red pedagogy," which is a search for the ways in which American Indian education can be deepened by its engagement with critical educational theory, and in turn, for critical theory to be deepened by Indian education (Grande 28). Red pedagogy employs critical pedagogy as one of the many starting points for rethinking indigenous education

practices, with the aim of diversifying "the theoretical itineraries" of both indigenous and critical educators so that new questions and perspectives can be generated (Grande 28).

In terms of framing the American Indian, she reveals how the "current obsession with questions of identity and authenticity obscures the sociopolitical and material conditions of American Indian communities" (92). When the arguments focus on who or what an American Indian is (who should be allowed to speak for Indian peoples, who can conduct research in American Indian communities, or what counts as "real" Indian history), it displaces the real sites of struggle within Indian Country—sovereignty and self-determination (Grande 92). She states that this obsession with identity politics has pressured American Indian scholars to become who they are supposed to be instead of who they are (104). The basis for a Red pedagogy comes from survivance narratives. These narratives move us from "romantic calls to an imagined past toward the development of a viable, competing moral vision" (Grande 175). A Red pedagogy must include conversations about power and an examination of our collective responsibility, and it embraces an educative process that works to "reenchant the universe, to reconnect peoples to the land, and is as much about belief and acquiescence as it is about questioning and empowerment" (Grande 176). She encourages us to develop a model for social change that will transform not only the personal but also the dominant institutions that design our current methodologies.

These scholars also offer excellent bibliographies that invite us to explore concepts such as *synthetic attentiveness* more in depth and to keep critical questions at the forefront of our work. For example, for readers of this journal, what are the critical questions that we must ask if we seek a transformative methodology for community literacy?

Jill Arola is a Ph.D. student in Rhetoric, Composition, and Technical Communication at Michigan Technological University where she works full time in the MTU Writing Center as a Learning Specialist/Administrative Coordinator. She is a co-advisor for the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) students on campus. Jill is Ojibway and is currently working on projects that have to do with representation of indigenous and underrepresented peoples.