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Amanda L. Cook

Sabrina T. Kwist

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Living Knowledge Production: Indigenous Approaches and Intersections in Higher Education

Amanda L. Cook & Sabrina T. Kwist

As educators and practitioners reflect on the relatively young lifespan of the United States higher education system, it is important to take this opportunity to explore and rethink our country's systems of knowledge production. Currently many of the approaches within the United States rely heavily on Western European epistemologies. Through exploration of narrative and its influence on indigenous epistemologies, we hope to challenge and expand the Western emphasis on the empirical way of knowing. We will learn from the epistemologies of three indigenous communities: Hawaii, New Zealand, and the continental United States. We will examine the creation of worldviews, knowledge production, and the philosophy of Aloha.

Manu Meyer, a leading scholar on Hawaiian epistemology, writes a letter of recommendation for a surfer. She concerns herself not about his SAT score, his ability to operate a computer, or his understanding of sentence structure. Instead, she focuses on his connection to the waves. The surfer understands how the ocean moves and breathes, and he can react in an instant. His sense of family is also tied to the water. He and his family learn together with unpredictable timing. After leaving the structure of academia, this surfer has come to a point in life where he is ready to fill the classroom with his presence once again. Meyer trusts the surfer's decision and will vouch for his recommitment to education. She declares, "I believe he is ready to create his own meaning in school, and he is preparing to 'discipline his knowledge' about how the outside world educates his inside world" (2003, p. 4).

If this surfer were to return to your campus, would you be able to teach him? Is your campus ready to view this surfer boy's strengths? Would you understand what Meyer means when she says he is ready to discipline his knowledge? Could you grasp the surfer's approach to education and his desire to make connections between the waves and the classroom? History suggests that most institutions within the United States (U.S.) are not structurally and pedagogically ready to expand the walls and concepts of the classroom to value all aspects of this indigenous surfer.

Historical Context

Impact of Colonization

From the time the first Pilgrim stepped off the Mayflower onto the shores of the New World, life for the indigenous peoples changed forever. The Pilgrims took one look at the natives and saw what they referred to as poor savages who lacked appropriate clothing, refined language, and were in need of an English education. Their typical response was to assume that everyone else in the world wanted to be like them. Thus began the civilization, assimilation, and education of the indigenous peoples in what would eventually become the United States of America.

Indigenous peoples worldwide have struggled for sovereignty against the domination of powerful Western societies. This structured colonization is long-standing and takes many forms. In all three cultures examined, Western ways of knowing have forcibly replaced the indigenous knowledge systems (Maaka, 2004; Royal, 2003; Spring, 2003). The colonizers, overshadowed by goodwill and Manifest Destiny, believed they were freeing natives from their heathen ways (Wood, 2003). A singular epistemology, that of the colonists, was developed and embedded in the minds and lives of indigenous nations (Spring, 2003). This dominant worldview not only permeated the indigenous experience but also strongly influenced the formation of the modern U.S. university. With aspirations for a brighter future, indigenous cultures in New Zealand, Hawaii, and the continental U.S. are successfully attempting to reinstate traditional ways of knowing in order to break through the barriers Western epistemologies have built.

Amanda L. Cook grounds her intellectual exploration in her travels, her family, her community, and her tribes' traditions. She is graduating in May from the HESA program and hopes to play, inspire, and make a difference in student affairs.

Sabrina T. Kwist, loyal friend and brilliant storyteller, is passionate about life and the well-being of those around her. As she graduates from HESA, she looks forward to cultivating students' knowledge of the world.

History of Higher Education

In reflecting upon the relatively young lifespan of the United States higher education system, it is critical to examine its colonial epistemological foundations as well as to explore and rethink this system of knowledge production. Rudolph (1990), in *The American College and University*, traced the roots of the U.S. educational system to the tradition of the English collegiate way. This system was closely tied to religious institutions and formed the basic structure of the modern university.

Grounded in Greek and Roman conceptualizations of education as the path to liberated citizenship, the U.S. academy was created in the hopes of educating a democracy of responsible citizens. French concepts of man and German concepts of science and objectivity shaped notions of truth as tangible, provable, and linear (Nussbaum, 1997). This epistemological foundation, combined with the parallel history of colonization, narrowed the worldview from which we teach. The rational lens limits the types of questions that we can ask to those that can be solved through objective reasoning or scientific inquiry.

“The production of knowledge, new knowledge and transformed ‘old’ knowledge, ideas about the nature of knowledge and the validity of specific forms of knowledge, became as much commodities of colonial exploitation as other natural resources” (Smith, 1999, p. 59). Instead of accepting epistemologies of indigenous cultures as equally valid, these ways of knowing became artifacts to be traded and sold. Thus, narrative and oral history were replaced by written and empirical ways of knowing. “Those ways were incompatible with modernity and civilization,” (Wilson, 2004, p. 360) and when applied to the roots of the modern university there was no room for indigenous perspectives.

Narrative

Narrative is a concept that has been removed from education and from the homes and lives of indigenous peoples. Yet native families continue to tell their stories—not around campfires, but throughout daily lives. As a result, narrative cannot be lost as a teaching tool, a form of beauty, a way of being, and a lived tradition. In spite of Western society’s focus on the written word, the oral histories of the Navajo, the chants of the Hawaiians, and the genealogies of the Maori serve as important portals into the souls of the communities. However, spoken expression is less valued as Western cultures celebrate the written word.

Is it possible to reconcile the rift between oral and written traditions in order to combine the two narratives in a blend of language? Can this new written narrative be healing? According to Silko (1997), although the written word is relatively new to indigenous cultures, it doesn’t negatively affect all aspects of these cultures:

It begins with the land; think of the land, the earth, as the center of a spider’s web. Human identity, imagination, and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as strands of the spider’s web radiate from the center of the web. From the spoken word, or storytelling, comes the written word as well as the visual image. (p. 195)

Silko’s “it” refers first to a wide range of ideas, including life, which begets language, which begets storytelling. The storytelling, or narrative, eventually leads to the written word. It is as natural as a spider spinning the next outer layer of its web. Narrative spreads from the core of the earth, through our bodies, and onto the page. Through written narrative, indigenous cultures are able to employ their epistemologies to decolonize literature and scholarship (Bird & Harjo, 1997, p. 25). But will we make space for these epistemologies within the academy? Or perhaps a better question is: As we admit a more diverse student population, will we acknowledge the space these ways of knowing already occupy?

Narrative as a valid form of knowledge production is not a new concept. Narrative has been used in research for years. Feminist theory, for example, has used it as a means of gathering information in which a researcher forms a unique relationship with the researched (Lentin, 1993, p. 123). Other forms of research inquiry have a strong connection to narrative as well. According to Lentin (1993), the principles of extracting theory from data in what she calls *grounded theory* are integrated into the narrative method (p. 123). In other words, this form of qualitative scholarship has attempted to validate the role of narrative in the academy. Unfortunately, feminist

theory is located at the margins of the academy and has not been able to normalize concepts of narrative for the field.

If narrative is comfortable in indigenous cultures and feminist theory, why is it uncomfortable in the academy? This brings one back to colonization and the separation of self from the heart of education. Indigenous epistemologies in Hawaiian, Maori, and Native American cultures seek to continue the validation of narrative.

Learning Theory

As we expand on the academy's limited epistemology by reintroducing the power of narrative, expanded cosmology, and the validity of subjectivity, we ask if this expansion is supported not only by feminist theory but also by student development theory. The following learning theory demonstrates the need to expand our framework for students.

Conscientization theory is "the process by which one moves from one level of consciousness to another, achieving a deepening awareness of one's socio-cultural reality...Conscientization involves a process that begins with learner's ideas, words, and life situation" (Stage & Muller, 1999, p. 38). The centrality of the subjective in indigenous epistemology aligns itself with the causal relationship of conscientization. If our goal is to empower student learners to better understand their roles in a global society, make more diverse campus communities, and explore the interdisciplinary relationships among their areas of study, the higher education and student affairs community must provide tools for such development.

Epistemologies

The word *epistemology* is used as an all-encompassing term for what and how we construct living knowledge production. Epistemology, in the traditional academy, is used to describe the lens through which one has been taught to see the world, as well as the framework by which one answers questions. It is how one measures and validates truth. The authors acknowledge it is a term steeped in a long colonial history.

Hawaiian Epistemology: A Framework for Knowledge

Hawaiian epistemology provides the academy with a rich history of discovery, dedication to education and inquiry. It further expands empiricism by adding the following concepts: "1) Place educates, 2) Beauty develops and 3) Time is not simply linear" (Meyer, 2003, p. 63). These concepts both challenge and expand Western empiricism by providing another perspective on the Western tradition that asserts that knowledge is solely an external experience. Hawaiian worldview allows for the ancient dialogue of place, one's connectedness to location, which serves as a starting point of the inquiry process. As with the surfer, his ancient conversation with the ocean and his relationship to the waves and sand allow him to have information that is unique to him. His experience on the water shapes his knowledge and his interpretations in the classroom. He knows the truth of the ocean inside of him.

Secondly, Meyer (2003) presents knowledge as a metaphor that validates the data located within the subjective, the mind, and the rationale that each of these can be influenced by beauty. This data is combined with the unique subjectivity of the indigenous perspective so that "in this subtle point/subjective self, body-centric knowing expands the metaphor via the *mind*" (p. 65). This concept further challenges the Western mind-body divide. *Na 'auao*, a Hawaiian term that refers to a deep connection between mind and body, supports the idea that knowing shows "we are our thinking" and, in turn, "interpretation leads to conscientization" (p. 65).

Finally, the information collected both through one's location and through the mind-body connection is mediated through the spirit. This element of knowledge production links experiences and differing perspectives. An acute awareness of this interconnectedness creates a type of causal knowledge. This causal knowledge then motivates and informs the spirit of Aloha. Aloha is made up of "love, affection, compassion, mercy, sympathy, pity, kindness, and grace" (Meyer, 2003, p. 232). The product of adopting this worldview is, "*we get along better, we help each other more, we have the energy to do what is right*" (Meyer, 2003, p. 14).

Sahlins (1995) states, “Hawaiian thought does not differ from Western empiricism by an inattention to the world but by the ontological premise that divinity, and more generally subjectivity can be immanent in it” (as cited by Meyer, 2003, p. 102). Thus, Hawaiians bring a spiritual and cultural element into everyday life, including education. In this process we begin to develop the ability to speak our narrative and, more importantly, listen.

Native American Epistemology: The Applied Experience

The current state of Native American epistemology is one that is birthed from both ancient ways and living knowledge. Modern day tribal colleges have attempted to provide a space in which narrative can be honored, while at the same time allowing for the achievement of skills gained in other Western academies. From these institutions we learn that the holistic approach to knowledge and the expansion of epistemology is possible.

Many of the tribal colleges and universities in the U.S. have taken it upon themselves to reclaim, teach, and maintain traditional languages. These institutions provide cultural restoration and maintenance to Native communities by strategically committing their resources to preserving language and creating fluency among their tribal members. Weatherwax (2000), editor of *Tribal College Journal*, explained, “gradually tribal colleges are creating places where languages are safe. A place where the language is honored is a place that education, too, becomes honored. By recognizing Native languages, they recognize Native people, leading to self-esteem and academic success” (p. 8).

At the Blackfeet Community College (BCC), one can witness the balancing act within the institution’s mission statement. This two-year tribally controlled community college is located in Browning, Montana. Founded in 1974, BCC now has a mission statement which reads, “The college provides a core of general education instruction that results in identifiable student competence in written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and logical thinking” (BCC Mission, Retrieved January 28, 2006). However, it also states that its most important mission is “to serve as a living memorial to the Blackfeet Tribe, in preserving the traditions and culture of a proud and progressive people” (BCC Mission, Retrieved January 28, 2006). Students who graduate from this institution cannot only market themselves as valuable employees, but also have a desire to contribute to their native communities.

Maori Epistemology: Honoring the Whole Student, Honoring the Process

Smith (1999) describes Maori epistemology through the traditional story of Tane-nui-a-rangi. In this story, Tane-nui-a-rangi travels to collect knowledge for the Maori people. He places the knowledge in three baskets. The Maori are to live by these epistemologies gained through observation, practice, and the guidance of elders. These concepts create a vivid picture of Maori epistemology: knowledge gained through human contact and surroundings.

In Maori epistemology, a person is always a student. This brings us back to the surfer boy whose time away from the traditional classroom does not negate the learning experiences from his time on the ocean. Professor Meyer is able to see this because the concept that learning continues despite location is not a culturally incongruent idea. The surfer gains from the ocean what a Maori student would learn from his or her surroundings.

Maori epistemology, as manifested currently within higher education, is born from a tradition of resistance. By the 1970s, the Maori of New Zealand had long suffered the loss of language and tradition at the hands of Western education. Fearing total loss, the Maori tribes banded together through *Te Wananga*, their higher education system, to create innovative ways to save a nearly extinct language. Thus began the Maori renaissance. The concept used to fuel this transformation was *Tu Tangata* which translates as “stand tall.” *Tu Tangata* had an overarching theme of Maori empowerment and focused on the following ideas: *whakapakari*—identify the strength; *koutou rourou*—harness the strength; and *kokiri*—advance (B. Kaula, personal communication, October 1, 2003).

The Maori found that their language served as a way to remain hopeful even in meager times, and they used their hope, their language, and their culture to educate one another. Smith (1999) states, “Many indigenous communities are spaces of hope and possibilities, despite the enormous odds aligned against them” (p. 98). The

concept of *Tu Tangata* is central to Maori epistemology as it provided the strength behind the movement that brought wide respect for Maori ways of knowing. Today, the Maori use their language and histories in their education systems from preschool through post-secondary levels. Both Hawaiian and Native American societies are starting to base their education systems on Maori epistemologies. Maori education is quickly becoming a prime example of a holistic approach to indigenous education (Johanson, 2004, pp. 575-576).

Conclusion

A wave crashes as the tide rolls in. A student, a surfer, walks into a classroom. He sits down, opens a book, and brings his whole being into the room. Ideally, his teacher can educate the surfer in a way that honors, rather than changes, his world.

There are many frameworks within today's higher education system in which implementing indigenous narrative is possible. With an expanded knowledge of culture and support for diverse learners, the field of student affairs will be better equipped to reach diverse student populations and make deeper change. Are today's educators ready to connect with and help this student explore the world in an epistemological manner that will reach him? Can we break free from the Western, singular epistemology in order to recognize, honor, and educate our students? Are we able to include the surfer's understanding of the ocean into our scientific knowledge and understandings? When we can answer yes to these questions, we will truly recognize the multiple ways of knowing presented by indigenous epistemologies, honor the spirit of Aloha, and pay tribute to what each of us brings into our encounters with one another. We will live the Hawaiian principle, "A'ohē pau ka 'ike." *There is no end to knowledge* (Meyer, 2003, p. 67).

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