

Indigenous Awakenings: Facing the challenges of education, culture, and healing in Aboriginal Australia

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Certificate of originality

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signature

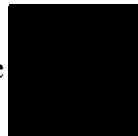


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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents,

family and extended families

Grace and John Kennedy

Jonna, David, Dennis, Daniel, and the late Joanna Kennedy

Randolph, Kay, Donna, Lisa and

their children, Darren, Jason, Matthew, Sophie, Kolby, Phoebe,

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Publications Arising from this Thesis

Atkinson, J. **Kennedy, D.** Bowers, R. 2006, Aboriginal and First Nations Approaches to Counselling, In (Eds.), Pelling, N. Bowers, R. & Armstrong, P. 2006, *The Practice of Counselling*, Thomson Publications, Melbourne, (In Press)

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Kennedy, D. 2005, Encouraging Quality of Life for Aging persons who have Developmental Disabilities. Conference presentation at the 12th Annual Conference of the Society for Pastoral Counselling Research, on 'Aging and Spirituality,' held at St Basil Institute for Counselling and Mental Health Education, Assumption University, Windsor, Ontario, 12th, 13th, and 14th of May 2005

Kennedy, D. 2005, '*Butterfly Awakening*,' A commissioned icon from an original painting, commissioned by C.P.H-Journal Board of Editors, Medium: Acrylic on Canvas, Australian Counselling Association, See: <http://www.cphjournal.com/cphlogo/> Sponsored by the Australian Counselling Association, for the artist's commentary on the work

Kennedy, D. 2005, commentary on '*Butterfly Awakening*,' <http://www.cphjournal.com/cphlog/>

Abstract

Using auto-ethnography, this study recounts personal life experiences from an Aboriginal Australian and minority perspective while engaging in reflective critical analysis of learning within mainstream educational institutions. Reconstructing the story of Indigenous culture and spirituality, the study examines personal, social, and political issues with the help of analytical tools including experimental writing, poetry, and story telling. These approaches provide a narrative basis for generative healing work at personal and social levels, creating a dialogical space where aspects of autobiography (personal story) and ethnographic analysis (sociohistorical context) act to challenge dominant ways of knowing. These practices honour the context of more traditional cultural ways of knowing within an Indigenous worldview. The work seeks to reframe challenging life experiences to enable a clear knowledge of how Aboriginal spirituality and culture can be reclaimed and celebrated in today's world.

Introduction

This study utilises an auto-ethnographic approach to explore the experiences of growing up in an Aboriginal minority within mainstream Australia and at the same time facing other personal issues that added layers of additional minority status, including having a learning disability, and coming from the ‘wrong side of town’. The study aims to give the reader a window into the life experiences of the researcher-as-participant and thus to provide one culturally appropriate example of the difficulties that can be faced by an individual who comes from a minority status and who is placed into a mainstream schooling context.

Coming from a more traditional cultural stance, the use of auto-ethnography resonates in certain ways with an Indigenous research approach. That is, in as much as the voice of the researcher is localised in their cultural context, the stories or narratives that emerge speak from personal social experience. The local nature of the narrative suggests an honouring of story as personal and social medicine (Atkinson, Bowers, Kennedy, 2006). That is, by exploring narratives of one’s past, the present circumstances of minority

experience are in many ways illuminated. New choices open up based on the stories of our lives, shared between trusted mates. Through the process of constructing story, sharing it, and having it somehow listened to or responded to, the acts of cultural practice continue.

Aboriginal and minority cultures are always changing and evolving, yet for those of us who have experienced vast lifestyle changes there are still many Indigenous values that are respected and upheld. While it may have been more 'valid' to interview other minority people according to mainstream approaches to research, it was decided to take up an Indigenous approach and hold back, wait, and discern what was right in this circumstance. The decision to honour personal narrative came as a resolution of the conflicts between wanting to produce research verses needing to respect cultural traditions where the most trusted approach is to start at home, start with the self in relationship with the family and tribe.

The 'validity' of this research modality rests in its internal logic or coherence, its cultural appropriateness, and in how it is communicated, more so than in any Western-traditional approach that would seek to objectify the other person's experience. From an Indigenous point of view, the latter task

is extremely difficult and nearly unlikely because our best guide in life, and in research, is our own experience and the stories that come from our own lives.

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it aimed to provide the researcher with an opportunity to consolidate prior learning, gain deeper insight into past experiences, and to apply academic skills to areas of social and cultural healing. Second, it aimed to provide others who may be engaged in educational ventures with some insight into how educational environments are challenging for those from minority groups.

Naturally, this study acknowledges a subjective analytic viewpoint by placing the author/researcher centre stage as the principle subject of autobiographical analysis. It is hoped that through this study the reader will understand that what is presented is at once personal and social, and as such speaks to the integrity of one person's life experience which also resonate with larger social and historical contexts. Many of these wider contexts are explored in dialogue with the literature even while the primary focus of analysis is on carefully constructed personal narratives.

The reader will find two literature review chapters that highlight the central themes which emerged upon reflection on personal narratives of the past and present. The methods chapter then explains the research approach that guided the study. Following that, the remainder of the thesis examines the challenges of education, culture and healing in the Aboriginal Australian experience of the author. Three examples of dialogic analysis are undertaken: (1) personal narrative, (2) critical analysis of educational practices, and (3) sharing insight into spiritual and cultural awareness. The study is concluded by offering the reader insights into what the researcher has learned and how this may be applied in various educational settings.

To reinforce the interconnectedness of the thesis as one coherent body of knowledge, within the literature review chapters, short indented paragraphs in italics are inserted to refer the reader to the relevant personal narratives found in the last three chapters of the work. The reader may choose to shift modes of reflection, turn to the new section, and read the additional information – or the reader may continue to read the existing text from start to finish, later becoming aware of the connections between the parts of the analysis. To deepen the interconnected and Indigenous tradition of circular-reflection, the thesis moves between topics like racial identity and its social

and political importance in education, to topics like dyslexia and learning disabilities, and circles back upon these topics from different perspectives. These perspectives, or layers of analysis, add rich complexity to the thesis, and provide different ways of thinking and doing research, teaching, and learning from an Indigenous perspective (Battiste & McConaghy, 2005).

It is also noted that this thesis represents an Indigenous Australian whose cultural and linguistic heritage is enriched by the different traditions associated with Aboriginal cultures, European invasion and settlement in Aboriginal territories, and subsequent colonisation histories that incorporate a diverse range of influences upon family, culture and language. Therefore, the writing contained in this thesis represents a ‘time capsule’ of the current usages of language experienced by the author – these include subtle and not so subtle uses of ‘Aboriginal English’, academic discourse as well as poetic and spiritual conceptions based in my unique worldview.

It should be noted that there are quite natural conflicts that arise in the acquisition of ‘academic’ styles of writing and analysis, some of which conflict directly with class-based heritage as well as Indigenous cultural values. It should also be noted that in some instances academic style is

considered 'more valued' by those in the educational mainstream. However, the devaluing of other expressions and likewise other worldviews and cultural values is both troubling and problematic, particularly in an educational system that endeavours to support Indigenous studies. By taking this journey seriously, this thesis stands as one example of the ongoing intercultural dialogue that is created by the mix of cultures currently occupying traditional Aboriginal territories in Australia. Hence, the reader ought to keep these issues in mind when shifting between chapters, and in some cases between sections of chapters, where the styles of writing employed have intentionally been kept as-is to highlight an underlying linguistic and cultural politic of care, consideration, and personal integrity.

Another influence worth noting is the way in which challenges in learning are reflected in the way knowledge is constructed in this context. It is my hope these expressions both challenge and inspire the reader to acknowledge different learning styles, and by extension the unique abilities and talents of Aboriginal and other minority students in Australia.

Although this is referred to in the methods section of the thesis, it is noted here that all identifying names and personal details of individuals associated

with this work have been masked by use of false names and by altering certain information.