

## Engaging Indigenous Knowledge(s) In Research And Practice

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### Abstract

Researching education for students of Indigenous Studies means addressing the philosophical, theoretical and practical questions that arise when a researcher from one culture begins research with people from another language and culture. Specifically, Indigenous peoples across the world contest research that frames them within a deficit discourse, as well as research that is done ‘on them’ rather than ‘with them’. Indigenous people have advocated for their ontologies and epistemologies to be recognised within the academy, alongside the Western Canon of knowledge and research processes. In this context, this paper will address three issues of importance for non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous peoples. Firstly, preparing yourself to do Indigenous research by being a top quality researcher yourself and, when invited, to learn from Indigenous peoples about their knowledges. This is, of course, regulated by factors such as gender, age, expertise and relationships with Indigenous peoples. Secondly, preparing Indigenous students to become top quality researchers themselves, seeking opportunities to create new knowledge in that culturally diverse space. This includes challenging the boundaries of the academy to include Indigenous knowledges and practices in thesis production (McGinty, Koo, & Saeidi, 2010). Thirdly, preparing non-Indigenous students to do quality Indigenous research which includes knowing your limitations, having a commitment to building Indigenous research capacity and operating in an environment of deep respect for those you are working with. Examples from research projects and student theses will illustrate these issues.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge, graduate studies, cultural meaning making, research, practice.

### Engaging Indigenous Knowledges

Encouraging academics to be involved in exploring newer research methodologies in line with the complexity in cultural meaning-making is a topic that I have worked on for a number of years with colleagues and graduate students. The term ‘Indigenous knowledge’ in this paper, refers to the ontologies (the nature of reality for Indigenous people) and epistemologies (the way Indigenous people come to know and understand their realities) and methodologies (the way these Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are enacted). It also values these particular ways of seeing, being and doing. Working in the cultural interface is a term coined by Nakata (2007) to

conceptualise the nature of working across cultures in the space that includes both Indigenous and other forms of knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge (and epistemology) embodies the cosmologies, values, cultural beliefs, and webs of relationship that exist within specific indigenous communities (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. xiv).

Indigenous knowledge represents the protection and preservation of Indigenous humanity (Battiste, 2008, p. 507).

The cultural interface . . . is a conceptual framework for exploring the dialogical exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems, as well as situating the lifeworlds of contemporary Indigenous people in the dynamic space between ancestral and western realities. Although he [Nakata, 2007] asserts this space is highly political and contested, it also carries a strong reconciling dynamic (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

### **The Karrayili Adult Education Centre**

When I arrived in the remote Kimberley region of North Western Australia in 1980 I had had no experience of Indigenous people. However, it soon became known that I was an experienced teacher and someone who had decided not to take a job in a school because I had small children. One day there was a knock on my door and I was invited by senior Walmajarri men to teach them English. I asked what it was they wanted to learn. They told me: “High English” (that is Standard English) and “how money works”. This was a tall order and so I met with Joyce Hudson (a linguist working in the area at that time) to ask if I had heard correctly. She came to a meeting which was held in Walmajarri, one of the five main Aboriginal languages of the small town of Fitzroy Crossing, North Western Australia and translated that what these men wanted was “to learn to read and write and understand how money works just like white men.”

The Walmajarri were workers who had moved off pastoral stations in the early 1970s and settled on the fringes of towns like Fitzroy Crossing. They were in the process of negotiating housing with the State Housing Commission of Western Australia (some of them lived in the open on the edge of town, others in tin shacks). They wanted to know the language and meaning of the words used in these negotiations and the “correct way” to speak Australian English with the purpose of being able to understand and participate in those meetings more meaningfully. They also wanted to learn how to write as they did not want to keep signing their names with a cross. Their children were attending school and knew how to write their names.

This powerful desire to learn to read, write and speak “high English” was a challenge for me and I thought that I needed to know something about their language and culture. So I learned Walmajarri while I taught them English: an English based on their need to negotiate their housing and other infrastructure needs with the Govt. Paulo Friere’s (1987) concept of ‘education as the practice of freedom for societies in transition’ was

what I used theoretically to guide me in what I was doing. This concept also implied a relationship of 'empathy' between those who are engaged in a joint search. The search for them was for English education, and the search for me was to understand the worldview and language of the Walmajarri.

These men came faithfully to school every day. They were all initiated men, some to a high degree, and so were used to rigorous education within their own culture. They were very keen to learn and expected and demanded high standards. One morning I was chastised for being late. "It is only 7.30am," I said. "No", they replied, "the sun is at this angle, therefore you are late." My education into different ways of seeing the world grounded me in the deepest respect for these men and what they were trying to achieve for themselves and their communities. They could see the value of engaging in the mainstream economy and wanted its benefits. The next year some senior women formed a group, and asked me to teach them. They said, "You've been teaching those men; now it's our turn". I found another teacher for the men and so the adult education centre grew.

We (the Aboriginal men and I) found that our learning complemented our own knowledges. In teaching them English I learned about the sounds that were not in English, but were in Walmajarri e.g. words beginning with Ny and Ng, and the sounds that were in English and not in Walmajarri e.g. the English 's'. This meant explicit teaching of these sounds. This learning was valuable for me as it alerted me to the importance of teaching ESL to Indigenous speakers. I also learned that these men and women saw the world in a variety of ways, some quite different from mine. They were quite at home in blending their traditional experience and wanting to know how the world of the non-Indigenous Australian worked. Their epistemological position in the world was one that was being constantly negotiated but deeply informed by their country and language from in and around the Great Sandy Desert. Part of the curriculum included returning to country to video the men telling stories on country and how they came to move out of the desert onto cattle stations and into towns. These videos and books about first contact were later used in legal claims for native title to land as well as for teaching resources.

While the Fitzroy Crossing experience was one immersion experience for me, it doesn't necessarily educate me to work with aboriginal people anywhere in Australia. It would be like saying "I've worked in Vietnam and Cambodia, so now I can work in Laos or Indonesia." The languages and cultures are different. What was transferable was the knowledge that each group has their own ontology about the way the world works, a language that represented their world view and their experiences of it. They also possessed a values system that prized education. They wanted western knowledge so they could participate in the formal economy, too. They could see education brought benefits such as housing, jobs and better health.

Karrayili was the name given by the men and women to the adult education centre. It is the Walmajarri word for adult people coming together for ceremony or education. This impressed on me that pre-contact and current Aboriginal societies had a value for and a system for delivering further education. What the senior men and women were seeking

was a system of further education for themselves in ways that were both “Western” and “Aboriginal”. Karrayili is still going strong 29 years later.

In this Aboriginal Community, I learned three things about Indigenous ways of being:

1. Indigenous communities place a high value on rigorous and relevant quality education for their community members, both children and adults;
2. Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemologies) are complementary not antagonistic to Western epistemologies;
3. Teaching and working in Indigenous communities requires understanding of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews.

### **Furthering My Education**

As a consequence of this experience, I sought further training for myself. I needed to know more about how knowledge is created and how to use this as an educator. I realised that I needed to understand the underlying theoretical assumptions of knowledge, culture and education and the research tools to get that understanding. The result was that a few years after leaving the small Kimberley town of Fitzroy Crossing I won a scholarship through Curtin University in Perth to study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the United States. This was a further period of immersion for me in which I learned the rigorous methods of qualitative and evaluation research from some of the best qualitative researchers in the US. I also received an introduction to the discipline of cultural studies and its critical theorising of knowledge and culture.

In class, I was introduced to the works of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Dewey, Stuart Hall and bell hooks, among many others, and a whole new language around being an educational researcher and being an ethical researcher. I learned that there were multiple ways of doing research, each depending on your philosophical and epistemological position and the sorts of questions or issues you wanted to pursue in your research.

Research is usually seen as a good thing but my experience of research and researchers had been an experience that was mixed and not always good. During my years in Fitzroy Crossing I met a lot of researchers whose effect I could not see as very positive. Most tended to rush through communities, presuming on the importance of their topics, whatever the locals thought, never returning their results to the people who participated and leaving participants feeling abused and angry. I developed a healthy dislike of these researchers – I knew I didn’t want to be like them. In fact, I published a paper on ‘joining the enemy’ (Roberts & McGinty, 1995) as a reflection on my struggle to be an ethical researcher. But, at the same time, I was also conscious that, as Paul Gilroy said to the Cultural Studies Conference held in Urbana-Champaign in 1992, that the challenge to the academy is to open up different ways of thinking and researching and to apply new theories to practical problems.

Returning to Australia and on coming to James Cook University I was full of new ideas about how to do rigorous research in the western way but with a reinforced commitment

to undertaking that research from socio-cultural perspectives with Indigenous colleagues. The first research grant I applied for was to write a book about the history of the Karrayili Adult Education Centre. Researching and writing this book was not easy as the lessons learned in the US, while excellent, had to be rethought in the Indigenous context. I could not ask Karrayili people questions about the setting up of Karrayili; they knew that I knew the answers to these questions and it would all seem very silly. This, after all, was the way of doing research that I had repudiated. I needed a more collaborative and explorative journey. Irene Jimbidee, the Indigenous Principal of Karrayili at the time, pointed out was that “interviewing had to be done differently – like yarning”. This meant blending Aboriginal ways of discussing, thinking and deeply listening with my western training in how to produce research.

The book was a great collaborative effort with Irene Jimbidee and Gail Smiler from Fitzroy Crossing. It was produced in 3 languages: English, Kriol and Walmajarri so that participants could speak in the language that most ably displayed their knowledge (McGinty, Jimbidee & Smiler. 2000). At this time I was beginning to develop a method of doing research which combined knowledges from Indigenous world views with those rigorous methods learned in the USA. This then grew into several research projects as postgraduate students and I grappled with how to create knowledge that straddled the two domains. We were also influenced by the work of Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope (2000) who were directing the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies at JCU at that time and were researching and writing about the pedagogical approach of multiliteracies or representing knowledge in multiple or multimodal ways. Opportunities arising from these new pedagogies presented themselves.

### **The Cultural Interface**

This was the beginning of working in what Prof Martin Nakata, a student in the postgraduate research group at the time, coined - ‘the cultural interface’. (Martin is now Professor of Indigenous Studies at The University of New South Wales). Nakata’s notion of the cultural interface (Nakata, 2007) provides a conceptual framework for exploring the dialogical exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems, as well as situating the life worlds of contemporary Indigenous people in the dynamic space between ancestral and western realities. Although he asserts this space is highly political and contested, it also carries a strong reconciling dynamic. Elsewhere in the literature, the interface is seen as an opportunity for innovation and creative dialogue (Ball, 2004; Bala & Joseph, 2007), a harnessing of two systems in order to create new knowledge (Durie, 2005; Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009).

This dialogical way of working is an example of what is possible. The concept of cultural interface has played out in many research projects as many researchers including Indigenous postgraduate students and I have grappled with how to create knowledge that sits in the two domains. The intellectual endeavours are not solely mine, they have been generated in genuine intellectual exchange between those of us who came together to ‘think out loud’ about these things.

### **What knowledge can you rightfully claim to research?**

I have a particular belief that one should only work, or research, in areas that are rightfully yours to claim. This presents problems for non-Indigenous scholars who work with Indigenous peoples. What can I rightfully research? What can I rightfully claim as my contribution to new knowledges? There are some aspects of Indigenous knowledge that I would never research because those domains belong rightfully and only to traditional owners. They hold 'copyright' so to speak over that knowledge. If they invite me (or a graduate student) to research these areas with them, then permissions and access to this knowledge have to be carefully negotiated under the strictest ethical considerations, especially around publication of research findings. I have this discussion with all my students whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. It equally applies to Indigenous students studying Indigenous issues. They cannot assume that because they are Indigenous, they have any right to research other Indigenous people's knowledge. Currently, my job in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies is supervising students' research. This gives me some legitimacy to work with students – in an educative role – to do Indigenous research in an ethical and rigorous way.

In my Ph.D research in the US examining resilience and educational success I found that African American female students reported that teachers didn't expect the same standard of work from them as they did from the other students. Nor did they give the same level of critical feedback that the white students received. They did report receiving high levels of praise from teachers. The unintended consequences of 'good intentions by praise' need to be named and made explicit. Teachers wanting to encourage students left out the most important ingredient of good teaching, that was, sound criticism (McGinty, 1999).

In a similar way I found it difficult to draw the line between demanding high standard work from Indigenous Ph.D students and being seen to be critical of ideas that Indigenous students expressed about their cultural practices. For example Karen Martin wrote one of her thesis chapters in her storywork mode. This was a way of telling traditional stories with a repetitive style of sentence construction. When I challenged this way of writing English, we had to negotiate that line of what is culturally right and what is right in English writing practice. Valuing the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledge into thesis production meant I had to value this style of storying with which I was unfamiliar. Sometimes the learning is for the professor, not the student! These difficulties become more pronounced when students are working in English as a second language.

### **Student work**

Karen Martin, an Indigenous woman from SE Queensland, in her Ph.D investigated the agency of a Rainforest Aboriginal Community, the Burungu, Kuku-Yalanji of Far North Queensland, Australia for their regulation of Outsiders to their Country. A major feature of this research study is its Indigenist research paradigm: founded on the principles of cultural respect and cultural safety and embedded in Aboriginal ontology, epistemology and axiology (Martin, 2008). The theoretical framework, called relatedness theory, is comprised of three conditions: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing.

Thus, Indigenist research methodology is both an inquiry and immersion process. Storywork was one such method. It is a culturally safe, culturally respectful and relevant research method based on Aboriginal epistemology, and communication protocols. It builds on the seven principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy that form a framework for understanding the characteristics of stories, appreciating the process of storytelling, establishing a receptive learning context, and engaging in holistic meaning-making (Archibald, 2008). Karen Martin received an award as best Ph.D at the Australian Association of Education Research in 2008 for her thesis. She also won a university medal for her work.

Non-Indigenous Ph.D students also worked at the cultural interface to incorporate their own professional knowledge with Indigenous knowledge through collaborative research. Sarah Larkins' (2010) study of teenage Indigenous mothers combined the rigor of mixed methods and a research model in which the young mothers became researchers themselves. She built the capacity of the young women she was working with, while they built her capacity as a researcher in a relationship of reciprocity.

Another student: Carol Moylan's (2010) study was about the gap in psychotherapy for Indigenous people with depression. There was very little available by way of psychotherapeutic interventions that are culturally suitable in the treatment of Aboriginal clients who have depression. Her study acknowledged two culturally different systems: western psychological knowledge which often reflects individualistic, materialistic and secular philosophical underpinnings; and Australian Aboriginal knowledge which is grounded in a philosophy that is communal, spiritual and ecological. Her thesis titled: *Towards an Indigenous psychotherapy* provided a framework for psychologists working with Indigenous clients.

Another student, Tyson Yunkaporta, who completed his Doctorate in 2009 worked with 50 teachers in a regional area of the state of New South Wales. He found that teaching an explicit Aboriginal pedagogy, combined with a willingness to learn on the part of the teachers, helped them to implement culturally strong pedagogy that engaged young people. They reported less disruptive behaviour by the students in the classrooms and the intellectual work produced by the students was of high quality and beyond what teachers thought possible. Yunkaporta (2010) says that that quality education is blocked by oppositional framing of Aboriginal and western knowledge systems. This is portrayed in some curricula that merely highlight the differences between Indigenous people and others and is often tokenistic in its representation of Indigenous knowledge. Teachers who believe they are doing 'inclusive education' when they choose Indigenous topics without ever introducing their students to the wider world of knowledge, are mistakenly contributing to the low performance of their students. Mistaken ideas about 'inclusive education' can be limiting for young people. As Yunkaporta says: why wouldn't Indigenous kids want to know about, appreciate and deconstruct Greek mythology, or the concept of gravity on the moon, or the Latin names for plants, as examples? While completing his thesis he used his traditional skill of carving as his metaphor for the storyline of the thesis. When you come across a knot in the wood, you turn it around and

carve from a different direction. This is what you do when you encounter a problem in life or in your research.

Louise Wilkinson (2006) is a Principal at a Primary School in Townsville Australia. She completed a Master's thesis to determine the school based factors that contributed to the progress and achievements of its Indigenous students. In keeping with the emphasis on quality teaching and on the role of principals, she coined the term 'audacious leadership' to describe the most significant intrinsic variable, or school-based factor, found to contribute to the success of educational outcomes for Indigenous students in the school she studied. As a leader in her school, she displayed a deep respect for Indigenous families who attended her school. Focusing on educational leadership and the quality of education is important. Yunkaporta and Wilkinson knew this and rightly emphasised it as a key ingredient in providing quality education to Indigenous students.

It is our role as professors and educators of the next generation of researchers, to challenge the academy as to what constitutes accepted ways of researching and to open up opportunities for Indigenous researchers to bring their ways of seeing the world to the problems they undertake to study. Allowing and encouraging graduate students to explore the expression of their Indigenous knowledges in the context of their research brings a creative edge to their work. Thinking and writing from their knowledge of the world, with new expressions and other forms of visual representation are some of the ways this can be done.

The notion of the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges in research education fell on receptive ears when I presented the notion of working in the cultural interface at an international conference in Penang. Prof. Koo Yew Lie from Malaysia, and Dr. Mahnaz Saeidi from Iran and I surveyed Australian, Malaysian and Iranian postgraduate students' about the use of cultural knowledge in their theses (McGinty et al., 2010). Along similar lines, Koo Yew Lie, Wong Fook Fei, Kemboja Ismail, Chang Peng Kee and Mohd Subakir Mohd Yasin (2011, p. 100) articulates that "Using action research involving transcripts of teacher talk and student logs, this paper qualitatively analyzes a subject's reflections of her journeys through CLA instructional pedagogy in a transnational Malaysian Higher education classroom." The use of multilayered codes (vernacular languages, dialects, registers) and diverse cultural resources in the subject's reflective logs demonstrates the complex ways in which hybrid texts are constructed based on the subject's various social locations. The teacher's deliberate engagement with the subject's positions is also seen as a contributory influence on the use of diversity for cultural meaning-making. The findings indicate that for it to be inclusive and transformative, teacher's talk and interventions through CLA pedagogy has to multiply and inter-culturally engage with student's language and cultural resources as variously valued in diverse context. The results of the study indicated that, despite some variations, most students, whether or not their native language was English, had similar ideas about western epistemologies (the process of thesis writing, the roles expected of a supervisor and themselves). Whether local, cultural knowledge could be used in thesis development often depended on the nature of the research and the disposition of the supervisors to value alternative epistemologies: different ways of knowing.



## Conclusion

I have introduced you to some of the ways I learned to do Indigenous research and to train early career researchers to do ethical and rigorous Indigenous research. There are many positive and creative things happening in research education engaging Indigenous knowledges. I have provided you only a few examples from the context in which I work.

In summary, it can be said that Indigenous people have always placed a high value on education. Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemologies) are complementary not oppositional to Western epistemologies. Good and rigorous research is just as applicable in Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts. But, the way it is done is as important as what is done. Thus, there is a way of working, the notion of the cultural interface, which acknowledges the best of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing.

I hope I have shown you some of the possibilities, some of the innovative ways we can train the next generation of researchers, especially Indigenous researchers themselves, to incorporate their worldviews into their research work. There is hope and much of what is hopeful is happening in partnership with Indigenous peoples themselves. My belief is that if we can have personal transformation within ourselves as educators while bringing our expertise to the table, then together there is hope for the creation of new knowledges. But it requires good will and effort on all sides, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We are all in this together.

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