Research Methods as a Situated Response: Toward a First Nations’ Methodology

MARY HERMES

Looking back at my dissertation, now a full year after it is all said and done, I am still trying to sort out exactly where the “methods” are. It reminds me of the split I identified in my research as shifting: the content/methods split in educational practice. Why would I dissect what I teach from how I teach it? How could a worksheet on rice replace going out in a canoe to collect wild rice?

When only content is implicated in curriculum, the question of culturally relevant curriculum becomes severely limited. It is as if the way you have done something (e.g., teach or research) should be extracted from what you did or, for that matter, why you did it. So that it can be replicated? Or mass produced? These categories do not make sense to me. And so I write this article, this “piece,” or slice of my research, with methods as a focus, but, moreover, to complicate through example how much the “way” of doing research was inextricable from the research and its context and cultural locations.

My intention in going to the Lac Courte Oreilles (LCO) Ojibwe reservation, in northern Wisconsin, was not to do research. Being of mixed heritage (Lakota, Chinese, and White), I had many personal as well as professional reasons for wanting to “go back” to the reservation.

Going back means touching a place of the past and the future that belongs to all of us de-tribalized, adopted out, colonized, and made-not-to-feel-at-home people. “Going back” means remembering to touch the places that bring us together. “Going back” means I am not from there, the way someone raised there is, means I will never be a part of that community in that same way, but it also means no better and no worse.
I originally went to student teach, then to teach, then to stay, and in the process of all this, wrote a dissertation. This chapter is an attempt to continue the reflective element that was so much a part of the original work. It is a reflective retrospection on my methodology. The ways in which I did the research, the “methods,” were not clearly delineated before I started the work. Instead, the goal of exploring a problem that was relevant to the community, in a way that was responsive to that particular context, guided my work. Now, a year after the entire dissertation process is done, and situated away from the community, I believe the “methods” still refuse a single category or any other formula that may make a recipe for research. I am uncomfortable retrospectively naming one methodology or theoretical basis to which I can pledge my allegiance. In this chapter I will refer to several influential academic research traditions (critical ethnography, activist methodology, and narrative inquiry) and suggest that no single, predetermined methodology would have accommodated the grounding of my research in Ojibwe culture and community.

As I came straight from graduate school, where I had been steeped in cultural studies and curriculum theory, my work on the reservation juxtaposed abstract theories with grounded teaching practice and made me shift my research agenda in ways that were responsive to the community. My presence on the reservation forced me to create a research methodology that was inspired by traditions (ranging from traditional Ojibwe culture to the culture of the University of Wisconsin—Madison’s graduate school) but not clearly derived from any of them. I constructed the “methods” of this research project as a response to some of the problems associated with the question of developing a locally based curriculum as well as the historically negative reputation of research in Indian Country at large. Necessarily, my “response” was one deeply influenced by culture, or more appropriately, I would say, was itself a site of cultural production.

Throughout the text of the dissertation I use a multiplicity of voices (my own reflective notes; the words of other community members, Elders, and students; as well as the reflections of other writers) to represent the community involvement that I (being the sole author) was taking individual credit for. Due to space limitation, in this chapter I will imitate that format only by drawing on my own narrative voice (written in italics).

The model I used for writing was inspired by a model of editing a videotape (Bordowitz, 1988). By taking different but related “clips” of writing (for example, stories as told by myself or others, analytical writings and quotes, and examples of practices at the school), I created a montage in a way not dissimilar to editing a tape (sometimes smooth transitions, sometimes jarring juxtapositions). My hope was to capture some of the detail and complexity of the voices that exist around the competing ideas of “school.” Further, Bordowitz’s video production model is most compelling in that it brings together different perspectives, side by side, without resolving tensions or making sweeping generalizations. The research project itself was an attempt to bring together different perspectives, different voices, in hopes of forming an imaginary meeting ground among them. Through relating personal experiences, practices, and narratives (including lengthy quotes from community members’ interviews), I hoped to be able to write in a style that expresses abstract, logical, and theoretical ideas as though they were a single, coherent whole, just as it also validates as knowledge the expressive and emotional gestures that often outline the details of personal stories and community struggles over the meanings of “school.”

How Was Theory Generated?
A Deeper Methods Question

When I started to limit “my” research problem to the most narrow definition, I realized the burning question (Haig-Brown, 1990; Haig-Brown and Archibald, 1996) was the question I took from the community: How to develop a curriculum that was relevant to Ojibwe culture within the confines of a tribal school? Twenty years ago when Native students walked out of the public school in Hayward, Wisconsin, discriminated against but not beaten, this was the same question they carried with them: Where is our school? Where is our knowledge? Can’t we learn this inside of a school that is really ours? Since I did not own the question (the community did), the question of curriculum and community continually centered the project and, in this sense, made it an “activist” (Fine, 1994) research project. Whatever I could find out about the problem would also have to be channeled back into the community.

Back and forth between discussions, practice, observation, reading, and writing, theories emerged in ways similar to the “recursive” process that Doll suggests as a model for curriculum (1993). That is to say, the writing of the text did not simply reflect practice or theory, but the “method” was one of continually recycling thought/action/reflection/writing in ways that pointed to new theoretical directions. Since one goal of the dissertation project was to generate theory (as opposed to fixed answers), the reflective methods question becomes: How was theory generated? The short answer is that in this case, theory became empirically grounded through the practice of the research (Lather, 1991).

Every now and then my idealism gets stomped on. Internal colonization, distrust, dysfunctionalism, fighting against that legitimacy which is perceived as coming
only from the White man’s system.....Harsh reality. Bitter feelings. Turning cynical, again... Sometimes I find refuge in theory, in an understanding that is not aimed at blaming an individual or anyone, but looks at history, generations, and the expression of an entire way of being which expects and accepts struggle.

I think the project was a test of accountability for theory, or maybe a test of accountability for me. Could I make sense of theory in the context of life, not just the content of an argument? Could I put what I learned in graduate school to work? On my entry form for the Holmes directory of minority scholars, 1991, I wrote:

I refuse to separate the “theory” from the “practice,” and so I find myself in the middle of trying to figure out what curriculum is relevant while tanning hides and collecting wild rice... It is messy and confusing, but I am learning more here on the reservation than I would have asked for.

I believe the place of theory in methods/research is an important question because it poses a commonsense assumption about methods: Methods are categorically distinct from theory. They are disinterested tools for extracting information, ways of doing (not ways of thinking about) that are implicitly a one-way interaction. In my research project, theory intersected with methods continuously. Methods were not held as a constant but rather were continually changing. Given the nature of my research problem, I felt that the methods acted as a situated response. It is the specific nature of that response to which I now turn my attention.

Problems with Research

Exploitative Research Methods

Gleaned from readings by Native scholars (see LaFromboise and Plake, 1983, for example) as well as through the oral traditions of the Indian “community” (meaning the grapevine, the oral tradition of Indian Country), there seems to be a growing, Native-oriented, or First Nations’ ethic for doing research in our own Native American communities (personal communication with Rosemary Christenson, a representative of the National Indian Education Association, November 1993). Deyhle and Swisher (1997) in a comprehensive review of research for, by, and about Native education wrote:

We started this chapter with voices that spoke of assimilation as the goal of Indian education. We end this chapter with the voices of Indian people who proposed a different goal, one that envisions equal coexistence and the maintenance of languages and cultures as effective means of achieving success in schools and communities. These Indian voices also call for an increase of both Indian researchers and perspectives. (p. 176)

My interpretation of this “ethic” is that the emphasis shifts from “research for research’s sake” (read: knowledge in the abstract) to research that serves a specific purpose or need of the community within which it is situated. This ethic is at least in part contradictory to the historical circumstances of being continually colonized through “research.” For example, the exploitative role of anthropology within Native communities has long been critiqued and at times undermined by Native peoples through oral traditions as well as written ones (see, for example, Deloria, 1971; LaFromboise and Plake, 1983). At this point many anthropologists, especially critical ethnographers, have become aware of this history and dynamic and have become more reflective of their positions and ethics accordingly (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986). However, Cultural Anthropology’s subdiscipline, archeology, has not been so well behaved. And the battle to reorient archeological research methods according to the ethics of their “subjects” still rages, often ending up in the courts.4

As a Native American, this research ethic arises and is articulated against a colonial relationship; it also arises for Native self-determination in education (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997). Since the Indian Education Act of 1972, 31 tribal-controlled colleges (Ambles, personal communication, May 1997) have been established as well as 66 tribal-controlled elementary or high schools (Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1990). A general mission of all of these schools is to serve various and particular Native American populations in ways that are culturally relevant. As a part of the colonial legacy of boarding schools, all of the tribal schools have adopted, at least in part, a Western European model of school “structure.” Yet the idea of developing a “culture-based school” is a common goal, although the means toward this goal are consistently in flux.

The task of responding to this “dilemma,” the task of Indian education, is enormous and the need is urgent for research on a variety of topics, including bias in educational testing; indigenous languages; the development of “inclusive” (of all races of people) texts; generational effects of boarding schools and alcoholism; learning styles and teaching methods; and inherent bias in school structures, to name a few. A well-articulated “ethic” that legitimates community-generated research questions and culturally appropriate research behaviors and holds researchers accountable to these standards would displace the current system of research projects that are accountable only to institutions of higher education or funding sources. Such an ethic would undercut imposed structures of power that continue to define Indian education through language and
practices that carry the legacies of colonialism. In this way, much more community involvement and participation would become a necessary part of the process of research. This goal seems well within the grasp of Native communities as sovereign nations.

Coinciding with this emerging ethic and sense of purpose in Indian community-based research is the agenda of the academy—to fulfill the requirements to satisfy the degree of Ph.D. Along with this purpose comes yet another sense of protocol and expectations, a different set of research needs and a different ordering of priorities. And so I am left with the sense of a duality. I have organized my thoughts around the demands of meeting the needs of two distinct purposes, two distinct audiences, only rarely overlapping.

Situating Myself Within the Research: A Not-God Trick

The war is not between Indian and White, but between that which honors life and that which does not. It is fought within ourselves as well as within the world (Hampton, 1993, p. 296).

What is the purpose for doing this project anyway? To get a Ph.D., to get a job at a college, to take the time and put the thoughts with the experiences and the voices of community people and do some foundation work for cultural curriculum development that includes community building as part of the vision, part of the process, a part of the way the school changes and becomes a community cultural center. That’s my vision.

Situating myself in the text of the dissertation (not as an abstract, all-knowing, unsituated voice) was an important and yet illusive goal for me. My intention was to avoid making sweeping generalizations about Indian education, or positioning myself as “expert” in any other way. This would be untrue to my experience and antithetical to the idea of community building through this research. For this reason, to be very clear and conscious of my positions (shifting, flexible, and dependent on context) within the school/community and within the text became another aspect of how I conducted research.

What’s it like to suddenly become “Auntie” to 306 kids and know that in three years I’ll have to write something about them, something which does not betray that trust and relationship. . . . What’s it like to be a “mixed blood” in 1995 and in every community I live in feel that that is either “exotic” or somewhat looked down on (I heard a song about a HALF BREED on the radio just today), not quite “authentic,” never quite completely respected. . . . And then what it’s like to work at a tribal school where the real, the earth-shaking work is all about identity, finding a space and a place for yourself in the fast changing world without getting caught in the crossfire of tribal politics. What it’s like to try ever so hard to fully, intelligently comprehend all this, while still maintaining the freedom and dignity to laugh, cry, sometimes not understand—and feel it all.

The Retelling of Methods

Gathering Stories . . . Community Visions

I conducted many formal and informal interviews over a period of three years. The first formal set was done with teachers in the beginning of my first year there as “cultural curriculum director.” The job was just as broad and ambiguous as the title sounds—the main question interviewees often asked me was “What is your job, anyway?” Sometimes perceived as administration but, I believe, more often as associated with teaching. I interviewed 30 teachers and staff members at the school. In these conversations I asked teachers some general questions about Ojibwe culture-based curriculum, but the format was very open and followed any direction they set. The second set was done at the beginning of my third year and involved 30 parents, students, Elders, teachers, and community members at large. In these interviews I asked to hear about people’s dreams for the school, and sometimes heard about how their dreams had been stomped on.

In the face of an oftentimes pervasive feeling of hopelessness, I had to ask about hopes and dreams. In purposefully wanting to build dreams and visions for the community and school, I asked to hear them, to record them, and to tell them. What are the dreams of community members? Of the school community? How have they changed over time? Where do they come from? How do they connect or diverge? What are some examples of how they are being lived out? What are some roadblocks to their ever being tried out? Through gathering stories and visions, I hoped to strengthen the vision of the school as a part of the community. Further, it was my hope that the interviews be utilized as a reference for curriculum development at the school.

I refer to “community” in a broad sense, as the school community includes both persons from the reservation community and outside of it. Although the school is situated on the reserve and serves approximately 100 percent Indian children (as self-identified), many of the teaching faculty are non-Indian and live outside of the reservation in nearby towns. So the school community includes a diverse group of people, people whose dreams and visions for the school should not be excluded. This relationship between school and community is what I was aiming to strengthen through the act of gathering a diverse sampling of dreams and visions.
In some cases I found the interviewing process to be merely a way of blocking off some time and space for a conversation that was ongoing. Once I had found the time to sit with an interviewee it was not usually necessary to formally “ask” questions. The topic of culture-based curriculum was “in the air” but oftentimes not discussed due to the urgent nature of other issues. At times, the interview was an “excuse” to engage folks in some long conversations about the school.

At times, Elders thought individual interviews were redundant, saying that my past three years of working with them was an “asking” of what they thought of the school. This gave me permission to acknowledge some ideas that I was being overly cautious about presuming (for example, the idea among Elders that Indian identity and sobriety are priorities). So instead of sitting down with a tape recorder and asking questions, I often would merely “check in” with various sources to confirm my assumptions about their visions and hopes for school change. With teachers, on the other hand, or people I knew only in a professional setting, in-depth interviews provided a good tool for listening to their views more carefully.

At times during the research process, interviews and discussions were reflected back to the community in very direct ways. I circulated copies of my “proposal” among the most interested staff members and asked for comments. I gave transcribed interviews back to participants (second set) and had subsequent conversations where participants could clarify anything they perceived as ambiguous. I used interviews as curriculum and reading material in a class I taught for staff. I deposited several interview copies with administrators and the curriculum committee and a complete copy of the dissertation in the school library, inviting teachers and staff to use the information in their classes or in their continued curriculum efforts.

Observations

In my first semester at the school, I was a student teacher and graduate student at the same time. Although this did interesting things for my identity as a student teacher (see Britzman, 1991), it also gave me an entry to observe classes in a way that was familiar and comfortable to most teachers. From the observations and conversations that followed, I was invited into many hands-on instances of curricular development. Teaching examples included in the text of the research were generally initiated by teachers who invited me into their classrooms. By developing relationships with teachers in a variety of ways, I never clearly fit into any one particular category—just a researcher or teacher or community member, for example. Analogous to developing relationships with students in multiple contexts, this seemed to strengthen my position as a researcher with a bias and a purpose. I feel it clearly points to a methodology that involves more reciprocity than exists when a person solely comes to “research” a classroom.

Elders

In my desire “not to be the expert,” I am extremely aware of the cultural traditions that position the Elders as teachers and authorities. In seeking to honor life and wisdom in researching (Haig-Brown and Archibald, 1996), it seemed obvious to me that the first source to consult was the Elders. Also conscious of the legacy of exploitation that has continued under the guise of research, I felt it morally and spiritually necessary to develop the qualities of submission and reciprocity in my relationships with Elders. In my first year at the Qibwe school, I was part of a community-tribal college-school collaborative group that started up the Elders’ Council for the explicit purpose of bringing Elders together and inviting them into our schools. Through this work I often asked Elders about “curriculum” and got a variety of responses. My “method” or way of asking in these cases was guided more by cultural protocols than a particular methodology. I was grateful and listened to whatever I was told, and never consciously tried to guide discussion or interrupt with questions. Even the “formal” interviews I conducted after three years of working with Elders look on these forms of narrative or storytelling.

Teaching

Teaching was another role I played in the community, one that informed my theory and research on many levels. There was a teacher shortage and a desire to recruit more Indian teachers, and so after one semester of student teaching there, I was offered a job. In my various teaching positions over the next three years, I was given the opportunity to translate theory into practice and experiment with curriculum. Feedback from students was (of course) immediate and constant. Teaching was probably the one act that strengthened my relationships with community members the most; through students I was invited into many families. To veteran teachers, I was a “new teacher” and occupied a very different position than a “Ph.D. candidate.”

Intersections with Critical Ethnography, Narrative, and Activist Research

In this section I will briefly describe how some recognized educational research methods served as models and inspiration for this method. I
will also point out places where I feel that my work diverged. And finally, I want to emphasize places where these traditions intersected with ideas gleaned from First Nations researchers or traditions.

The post-positivist methodological traditions I will discuss are critical ethnography, narrative inquiry, and activist research. These are broad, interdisciplinary methodologies, and I will not attempt to review all the educational research that links them, desirable as such a project would be. Rather, I want to focus my discussion on the ideas I found most useful in validating, legitimizing, and/or inspiring my methodology as a situated response.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography is research which provides opportunity for the study participant to engage in didactical interactions of action and reflection—praxis—in relation to both the research and their situations, thereby transforming those situations. (Haig-Brown and Archibald, 1996, p. 246)

Apart from the obvious sort of “being there and participating” (participant observation), from critical ethnography I borrowed the important concept of “praxis” (Lather, 1991) and combined it with activist research. I believe that being in this particular community as a researcher (among other things) opened up venues of communication and reflection that had not previously existed for this community. Further, the conversations that took place were implicitly and explicitly about transforming the school. In a school setting where life’s urgencies were a daily part of the unofficial curriculum, taking time for these conversations seemed like a necessary luxury. Working in the school together provided avenues for “action” that might emerge from group discussions or researcher/teacher reflections. One clear illustration of this is from the class I conducted for teachers. After reading and discussing some of the research from the school, teachers all developed their own culturally relevant curriculum projects, or at least “directions” for projects.

The goal of my research was to use method and theory to explore an educational problem in a way in which the concept of culture was fluid. Relationships grounded in Ojibwe culture produced knowledge, methods, and curriculum, which was a part of this research project, but my research was not intended to use an understanding of culture to interpret behaviors.

Ideas of power and respect were very helpful in legitimizing my thoughts on First Nations ethics. In the words of Haig-Brown and Archibald, “Critical ethnography in a First Nations context resists hierarchical power relations between study participants, including the principal researcher, and focuses on ethics sensitive to and respectful of the participants and their contexts” (1996, p. 246). I believe I challenged the idea of a rigid hierarchy of power by building relationships that had multiple dimensions or, perhaps, just in recognizing this multiplicity. For example, in Elders’ meetings, at moments I was the “organizer” or facilitator and could control the agenda, but when it was time to eat I was just as easily a “waitress” or, at the meeting’s end, a “driver.” In many social contexts with the Elders I was simply a “young person” or a “helper.” So, although I set the meeting dates or held the tape recorder in an interview, these positions of “power” could quickly vanish in a different setting. I believe this interpretation of “power relations” is a different one than a “power-blind” approach to research. That is to say, since I was the Ph.D. candidate, there were always certain economic and social privileges tied to my being a researcher that were not currently available to many of those who participated in the research. As already mentioned, I continually tried to involve community members in all levels of the project, to recognize my position as “not the expert,” and to problematize the positions of power I did occupy. However, at some point I had to recognize that I did occupy them, even if I tried not to reinscribe them.

Narrative Inquiry and Oral Traditions

Ideas from narrative inquiry informed my work on many levels. Specifically, this approach gave me permission to insert my voice directly into the text (see Anzaldúa, 1987; Hooks, 1990; Williams, 1991) and “name my own reality” (Delgado, in Tate, 1997). This was important to my project in order to explore the insights only the situated positioning of a researcher can yield. That is to say, just as I was specific about the context of the school and community, my voice and bias also was a part of the context and was explicitly included for this reason. Second, I found validation to the idea that it was important to include a multiplicity of voices from the community directly in the text as well (in addition to including long quotes within the text, eighteen full interviews were included in the appendix).

The idea that “stories” are open to an infinite variety of interpretations, or especially to meanings that are not obvious (“ethnographic allegory,” in the words of Clifford and Marcus, 1986), was very appealing to me. This seems to intersect with some Native American ideas about storytelling (Faioya, 1989). In this particular Ojibwe tribal context, traditional stories were given much authority as teaching tools. In my research, however, I did not “ask” for stories (as someone using a narrative inquiry approach might). I asked questions and behaved in a way that often evoked stories as responses. I received these stories as gifts, feeling respected as a learner and as a person who could be entrusted to make
sense of the stories myself. My first set of protocols for receiving stories were from Ojibwe traditions; perhaps in this sense my methods diverged from narrative inquiry. For example, I would not write down or record “wintertime” or traditional stories, and knew it would be disrespectful to ask for permission. Usually, I did not record any stories given to me by Elders unless instructed to do so. On certain occasions, if I felt I wanted to use what was said in the text, I would ask to later transcribe “what I heard,” for this purpose. In many ways the seriousness, respect, and authority given to stories in my “methods” and in Ojibwe traditions is divergent from that of narrative inquiry. Stories as “myth” or “folklore” conjures up connotations with which I would take issue.

Activist Research

The emerging “ethic” around doing research as a Native person in Native communities was a starting point for developing a community-based research project. I define a “community-based” research project as one that revolves around the perceived needs of the community rather than one that is dictated by academic protocol or traditions. I understand the idea of community-based research as a way of devoting time, attention, thought, and sometimes actions to areas that are defined as problematic by the community itself.

This ethic is similar to the “community grounding” efforts of participatory research, work which comes out of a Freirian school of thought (Kidd, 1982; Kidd and Kumar, 1982). This approach to research requires a constant back-and-forth movement between the research group and the community of origin. Topics for research are generated around community needs, as perceived by community members. Another approach that grounds research in community is called “activist research” (Fine, 1994; Tiemey, 1994). The idea that I find useful from this methodology is that the researcher’s objective is to work toward some stated change within the community: “Activist research uncovers, interrupts, and opens new frames for intellectual political theory and practice... A move to activism occurs when research fractures the very ideologies that justify power inequalities” (Fine, 1994, p. 24). In my case, I am supporting the efforts of the tribal school to continue making changes to an Ojibwe culture-based curriculum.

In grounding my research in what I perceive to be a community need, I make no claims to an unbiased or “objective” methodology. I hold a vision for the school that involves the (Native) community and the school community coming together and working toward the goal of building a school that is strong academically and culturally—whatever this means as determined by these “communities”—and through the process of creating a culturally specific curriculum. I surrender the “privileges” of trying to maintain and prove an “objective” position in this project to one that places me as an “activist” within the community, that is, a person working for change. The implication for this project is that it then contains a performative aspect—my objectives, biases, emotions, and creativity are all a part of this project. This written expression of the work was created with the school/community audience in mind, with the hope of supporting change—more specifically, supporting a paradigm shift in the curriculum from one currently based on a “modernist” paradigm to one that is based on Ojibwe relationships, culture, and values.

Reciprocity, Respect, and Native Research Methods

I have come to see creating a culture-based curriculum as a “process in motion,” much as I see First Nations research methods as a situated response. My research was driven by the question of culturally based curriculum development, including all of the forms and shapes this question took throughout the writing of the dissertation. At the outset of this project I could not anticipate what steps I would need to take in order to explore these questions—some of the questions came about during the research, not before it. What I did articulate at the beginning of the research project was a sense of an emerging research ethic within Indian Country for Native peoples to conduct research in our own communities. I would like to revisit this ethic and articulate the methods that came about, in part, as a response to it. I do this in the spirit of wanting to contribute ideas about research ethics and methods to an ongoing discussion, not to define a new methodology.

Earlier, I wrote about going against, or contradicting, the history of being exploited by research processes. The contradiction to this history has been a starting point for my methodology. Relationships of reciprocity replace relationships of exploitation. Here I draw from Carl Ulrich’s (1991) idea of a First Nations discourse of learning. Most importantly, the idea of reciprocity and mutual respect in the teacher/learning relationship is emulated in my research methodology. This meant that the people I interviewed or gathered stories from were involved in an ongoing, two-way exchange with me. These were people with whom I had some kind of relationship before the formal “interview.” The interviews drew on a common interest (the school and the children there) and were intended to strengthen an existing relationship for the purpose of community building around the school, not to create a new or “artificial” relationship solely for the purpose of extracting information.

I am thinking of the time I went to “interview” Lucy. She was quite happy to have me visiting, but when I started to ask her “What should be taught at the school?”
she told me that in the past three years of working with the Elders I had been asking that question. The question was not new, and I had already been given the answers, in so many different ways. We spent our time sipping coffee and I listened to other stories that day. I was a little surprised, and somewhat delighted. It made me feel as if I had been doing, and asking, what I had wanted to all along, and that that was understood.

The relationships, of reciprocity and respect, ordered the methods. This made my research a “process” that cannot be replicated but that is situated within the particular relationships among other community members and myself. This brings up a second point in my methodology, one that responds to Robert Allen Warrior’s call to be intellectually sovereign:

If our struggle is anything, it is the struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life. That way of life is not a matter of defining a political ideology or having a detached discussion about the unifying structures and essences of American Indian traditions. It is a decision—a decision we make in our minds, in our hearts, and in our bodies—to be sovereign and to find out what that means in the process. (Warrior, 1995, p. 123)

What I have done in my research is to constantly amend the process as responses from the community informed what I was doing.

In my interactions with the Elders I would ask a direct question about the meaning of culture-based curriculum or curriculum for the Lac Courte Oreilles Schools, for example, and oftentimes the response I got was not an “answer” but rather a story about the boarding schools. This is how the chapter on boarding schools came about. I interpreted their stories to my questions as a way of telling me that the boarding school stories were an important piece of the puzzle of curriculum and schooling at the tribal school today.

I was concerned with researching a question that originated with the community, while also being acutely attuned to their responses. I wanted to know how these responses might be incorporated and again reorient the research process. After hearing a half dozen stories about boarding school experiences, for example, I began to ask for these stories in my interviews and to ask myself how to organize the dissertation around them.

I tried to approach this research in ways that strengthened existing relationships of reciprocity, community relationships. My writing came from a process of being a part of discussions, listening to stories, and reflecting back on practices. This all happened within the context of being a part of the community I was writing about. I believe that going back and forth between stories, practices, and writings helped me to keep research grounded in the concerns of the community. Further, this research is only one moment in the process; teaching practices, school reform, and many more stories are to follow.

I approached the research methods as something that could change over the course of the research. To start, my only guide was that what I did and how I did it were “situated responses,” specific to the culture, the problem, and the dynamics of the particular context. One other guiding principle emerged over time: Be in the community as a community member first and a researcher second. In this way the community itself influenced and shaped the methods. The relationships I enjoyed in the community were not designed just to extract information or to exploit an “insider” perspective. The work I did was based on mutual respect and reciprocity, as a person who was deeply invested in studying a problem but not willing to prioritize this over the relationships created in the process. This meant that I had multiple responsibilities (not just to a university or a “committee”) and relationships with people that had a variety of dimensions. Within this context, “methods” took on new meanings; methods were no longer simply tools for taking or discovering something. As textbook and tradition took a backseat to ethics and responsibility, methods began to feel like a recursive process rather than one procedure, a part from a whole.

Maybe going back really means going back and forth, for me, for now. So publishing something on methods is not so much “selling out” as it is pacing a way for other scholars/community members like myself. Feeling yet another version of a dualistic and fatalistic choice emerging—smart or pretty; Indian or激起; scholar or community member—I rush to object: It must be time to evolve beyond impossible choices for women and people of color in the academy.

Notes

1. The writing in italics is used to demarcate an “insider” voice, one that calls on epistemic privilege to validate ideas, and considers emotions and “all the details of the ways in which [their] oppression is experienced” to be an essential way in which knowledge is constructed (Narayan, 1998, p. 36). Found in concrete examples, these thoughts are often theoretically laden. Some of these are taken from the time of writing the dissertation, some are more recent.

2. At this point, I am thinking specifically of critical race theory. Since I first presented this work publicly (Hermes, 1997), scholars have commented on elements of critical race theory that they feel undergird it. Although critical race theory has been influential (as I indicate later in this chapter), to attribute the entire
theoretical basis to this emerging body of work would be artificial. I believe "Ojibwe traditions" were also influential at the theoretical level, for example. However, since these are much less accessible to the citation process (see the work of Delgado in Tate, 1997, for reference to structural determinism), it would be easy to negate their influence in comparison.

3. I was introduced to this term through the Canadian Journal of Native Education. It is a term more often used in Canada to refer to indigenous peoples, but I use it here since I credit many of those writings with ideas inspirational to me.

4. The issue I refer to here is the return and reinterment of Native tombs and sacred objects to their peoples and to the earth. Some museums have begun the process of "giving back" the archeological "findings" that were stolen from Native gravesites. However, for the most part, the question of "ownership" is one that is currently raging between tribes and museums or, worse, has itself become buried in legal bureaucracy. See: http://www.repatiationfoundation.org/ or http://www.fws.gov/laws/digest/reslaws/natamer.html for more information.


6. One teacher gave me the nickname of "Father Confessor," since I was perceived as someone teachers could talk to without the same connotations of "power over" that many administrators bring to teacher-administrative relationships.

7. The idea of "schools as community" seems very akin to a "traditional" idea of Native education. During pre-invasion times the idea of "education" was an integrated part of the daily functioning of the community; see Armstrong, 1987.) Currently, the idea of a school as a community, and the building of social and cultural relationships therein, is being heralded as a key to successful current "alternative schools" (Wehliege et al., 1989).

8. Dennis White, principal at the LCO Schools, in collaborating on this proposal, offered the suggestion to include the diversity of people who work at the school. This important idea—of a "School community" as both intersecting with and divergent from the community it serves—was developed throughout the research project.

9. After years of coming to "consciousness" of some of the dynamics of power and oppression, submission is not a term I use lightly. Learning to recognize that much of my life history was influenced by occupying "submissive" positions predetermined by a stratified society, choosing this position was a challenge. Nevertheless, I believe it positioned me to listen in a way in which I could simply absorb and critique. I found direction for my research and meaning that went beyond a degree.


11. See Bill Bigelow (1995) on the biased meaning of discovery in the Columbus Day context.

References


Toward a Definition of a Latino Family Research Paradigm

NITZA M. HIDALGO

Through the process of education, qualitative researchers trained in traditional paradigms learn how Eurocentric forms of knowledge are supposed to be applied universally to all people (Stanfield, 1994). The educational researcher is positioned to frame the questions to be investigated in a supposedly "neutral" stance with little attention to the unique characteristics of the communities to be researched. But the research stance of neutrality serves to hide inherent privilege in the research process (Fine, 1994). Researcher neutrality masks an underlying conceptual framework that posits the behavior and experiences of people of color to be inferior to those of Whites (Tate, 1997). In recent years research that applies Eurocentric frameworks to Latinos1 and other people of color without questioning intrinsic conceptual frameworks has been critiqued (Baca Zinn, 1996; Hurtado, 1995; Stanfield, 1994). In addition, there is controversy surrounding how "White" is defined as the cultural norm in colonial sites like Puerto Rico, at the expense and exclusion of people of Black and African origins (Torres, 1998).

The social construction of Whiteness relegates Latinos, as a multiracial people, to an inferior status on the social hierarchy. Within social institutions such as schools and social service organizations, Latinos are judged by their race and little attention is paid to their ethnic and national differences. Critical race theory is employed in this chapter to explore the

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