TITLE: Participatory action research: knowledge sharing between the academy and Indigenous populations
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SPEAKERS:

[LW]: Lori Walter
[ME]: Mike Evans

[0:00]

[Music Intro]
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[LW]   This is Lori Walter and you are listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the Library at UBC Okanagan.

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[LW]   Today I'm here with Professor Mike Evans, former Director of the Institute for Community Engaged Research. He has also worked with Indigenous communities for the past two decades in a variety of contexts.

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[LW]   So Mike, tell me about yourself and the research that you do.

[ME]   Umm, so I was trained as an economic anthropologist. Did my PhD in the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific on micro-economic processes and their relationship to the integration of Tongan society and people into the world system, including the ways in which exchange processes at the village level actually integrate, or provide the means for integrating, Tongan communities overseas as well. Creating this massive global network of Tongan sociality, if you like. So I started there, and then came back to Canada, did the PhD, was looking for work, and wound up working at University of Northern British Columbia, and I was very grateful for the job at the time. It was 1995, and there weren't a lot of jobs. So I wound up working there and I had been, you know, involved in Indigenous stuff, if you like, prior to that but it was the main area of research or activity. More political than anything else.

So I started working with the Métis community in Northern British Columbia, in Prince George in particular. Myself and another colleague Marcelle Gareau, and we wound up doing a participatory action research oral history project with a Métis Elder society there. And that started a long relationship with the Prince George Métis Elders, but then subsequently within Métis Nation British Columbia and subsequently within a number of different Indigenous organizations. Mostly urban Aboriginal and/or Métis organizations and mostly using participatory action research methodologies, which is something I was aware of and had been

trained in but hadn't really conducted. My PhD was really a classical ethnographic work – work truthfully that I wouldn't do now, but was okay to have done at the time. And, you know, subsequently I've moved into a much more participatory frame. And in the context of working with Indigenous communities now, that's de rigueur. If you're not working in a participatory reciprocal frame, you're probably not working.

[LW]   So you talk about it being de rigueur to work in this participatory frame. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that means, what that looks like?

[ME]   Sure. So, umm, so participatory research methodologies, and there is a whole bunch of them, really well they derive from several different sources. In Indigenous studies people would argue, people have argued, that participatory sorts of sensibilities actually derive from Indigenous ontologies in the first instance. That is to say that there is a kind of openness to not knowing not just what you don't know, but also not necessarily knowing the way to go about framing your question in the first instance.

So, that really is the fundamental tone of participatory action research is that the people with whom you are working, have a much better sense of "What is a significant research question?" than you do. And that may not sound like a revolutionary kind of stance to take, vis-à-vis social science research, but it actually is because prior to the mid-1970's really, people would have assumed that the theoretical framework that they were working in was somehow pertinent to people's lives or somehow the correct stance from which to frame research. Both in terms of what the question is and then and thus, then and thus, what the correct method to derive the data or the information that you need to answer the research question.

Participatory action research turns that on its head and assumes indeed that you don't actually know what the correct question is or what the pertinent question is or what the appropriate question is. Umm rather the people with whom you are working do, so you are really basically trying to generate a dialogue where people have an opportunity and are empowered to frame their own research question, and then collectively you co-create the research process.

So, you know in a participatory frame, the question itself, the area of inquiry and the question or questions, the research questions are generated in a collaborative manner with the assumption that the community or the people with whom you are working have a privileged position in framing the question. And

then the methods of generating the data, to answer the question, are also informed in an ongoing way by the people with whom you are working. And then finally, the interpretation of the data itself derives from a collaborative process again.

Instead of assuming that the theoretical framework from which we're working is privileged and correct, you are assuming that the theoretical framework that people themselves are working from is the thing that informs their action, as indeed it must be. And not just their past action, not just their present action, but also their future action. And the objective is almost always to somehow assist in framing that future action and ensuring that that action is efficacious in the terms of the community believe it to be efficacious. And if you're not doing that, then you're not being reciprocal in your action. If you're only trying to answer your own question, as important as that question might be, then you're not really contributing much.

So in the context of working with Indigenous communities today where colonization is a 400 year old fact, certainly it's a 100 year old total social fact, not contributing to the capacity of communities to decolonize on their own terms is deeply problematic. Basically if you're not helping in that grand action, then you're not helping at all. And that's best case scenario. Worst case scenario is that you're actually re-inscribing various colonial processes in your research process itself. And so, you know, when people in Indigenous communities, you know, say they've been research to death, it doesn't necessarily mean that they've been researched over and over again. What it means is that they've been researched in a particular kind of way over and over again, and that the research results are just simply not useful. And I don't mean that in a pragmatic sense, although I do also mean it in a pragmatic sense, but they're not useful in a sense that the ways in which people themselves are thinking about things are not given place of pride. And so, they are implicitly denigrated, when they are not. And that's kind of fundamental attitude in the context of participatory action research.

One of the basic challenges though is that were human beings, right, so as you and I are communicating now, we're negotiating our mutual understanding of the interaction. By which I mean to signal that it's really impossible not to be part of that negotiation, it's impossible not to have a set of interests, and it's disingenuous to suggest that you don't. So, even while I was working in those participatory contexts over the last many years, I was also building a career, I was also framing questions and developing research outputs that were pertinent

to the contexts in which I work, and had value for me as well as being careful to ensure that those research outputs had value for the community.

[8:40]

[LW]   So let's talk about research outputs. You've talked a little bit about co-creating the research question, sharing in interpretation, understanding that not wanting to participate in re-inscribing colonial processes, and then when you come to the research outputs, or the sharing of knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge, especially with publically funded research, there's a push to make this research openly available. So, what do you need to consider when making decisions about sharing knowledge, that you're co-creating with these communities? Sharing knowledge, and the barriers to that and considerations around that.

[ME]   Okay, so let me start by saying clearly that I am very much in favour of the Open Access movement and I'm very much against the enclosure of knowledge that is typically fashioned through the academic publishing traditions. And I've been involved in generating Open Access portals, and certainly whenever I'm given an opportunity to push an Open Access agenda, I'd be doing it, as I'd be doing it right now.

I just, I don't think there is any question that a publically funded institution, like a university, has an obligation to make that information available, freely available, to the public, which is funding it. And, you know, hiding it behind, well not hiding it, cause of course academics don't want to hide it, nor do academics make money directly from publications, so we don't have a particular interest in having a pay-wall anywhere. In fact, a friend of mine used to say "If you want your work read, make it Open Access, and make it available on the Net. If you want it stuck in a book some place, then you should do that." You want to have an impact, I think we all do, you want the work to be read.

So, I'm absolutely in support of that position and work pretty diligently to try to promote it, both in my practice and in the ways I talk about things. In the context of Indigenous research though, there is an extra layer of complexity there. And especially now, working from a participatory frame, where one is being very careful to ensure, well trying to ensure anyway, that Indigenous ways of knowing are valorized and are carefully attended to. And indeed that Indigenous knowledge, whether it be stories that have sociological and ecological implications or whether it be an interpretive framework for understanding, you

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know, ecological transformation, or whether it's simply a way of patterning communication that might be more effective in terms of sharing information in a non-hierarchical form. All three things being part of, you know, things I've learned in the context of working with Indigenous communities. That knowledge needs to be Indigenous knowledge. The re-appropriation of that knowledge to an academic enterprise, while respectful of its construction in the first instance, is not particularly respectful if we scoop it up and throw it behind a paywall. I mean, you know, the deep irony of a young Okanagan Syilx scholar having to pay for an article written by and through a collaboration with an Okanagan Elder on Okanagan traditional knowledge is one that's pretty difficult to escape.

So, there's that element of it. Re-appropriating it and selling it, which is, you know, basically what we're doing when we throw it behind a paywall, well that's a problem. Then there's of course there's the issue of whether it should be shared or not. And who's business is it to share, who's business is it to make that decision about when and where such knowledge is shared. And you know Indigenous communities, Indigenous scholars, are very much concerned about exactly that, and as they should be. So, my kind of approach to Open Access is tempered by my respect for the intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples.

[12:53]

[LW]   Do you have a specific example that you can speak about, where you've had to negotiate and manage who has access to certain forms of knowledge or research results?

[ME]   Let me talk about an article that I and a number of colleagues worked on a few years ago on participatory action research. The article is called "The common insights: differing methodologies" and what it does is it compares feminist inspired participatory action research, more general participatory action research, indigenous methodologies and white studies. And basically it makes an argument that there's a great deal of common ground across those fields of inquiry and argues that empowering or participating in research projects that allow indigenous people, not to study themselves, but to in fact engage in white studies; that is to say, rather than having a, in this context it was a project on experiences with the health care system, it's two ways of framing that. Well there's three ways of framing it. One is, a kind of, tell us your experiences and framing the tale questions yourself because you're interested in making sure that people comply with the expectations of medical system and they do so effectively.

The other is asking people about their experiences with some degree of empathy, um and sympathy to try to ensure that they get an opportunity to articulate how they feel about their relationship with the medical system. And the third is to ask people to actively engage in a critical appraisal of that medical system from their perspective. Those are three very different approaches and the article was arguing for the latter. It was arguing that even in a participatory research frame the research needs to be framed in such a way that the object of inquiry is not indigenous people but rather the mainstream system with which they interact and from their perspective. So it's a, it turns the thing exactly on its head.

Now in that article we referenced the work of our friend and colleague Dr. Jeanette Armstrong which is a…there's an Okanagan methodology called n'awqnwixw - you may have run across it. It's a traditional way of gathering information, of coming to a consensus about action and moving on. So it's both a research and action methodology if you like. Um and it's extremely effective on a whole bunch of, I had the opportunity to participate on a number of occasions and I'm quite impressed with the way it works.

Now I'm not going to describe that process to you because it's not mine to describe. So indeed, in the article we reference this, we reference an article that Dr. Armstrong had written earlier and moved on because that's not ours to describe. It has been described. She has described it in other contexts, um but in that article it wasn't - the whole point was this is not an article about understanding how indigenous people experience things, it's an article about how reframing the question so that indigenous people are actively interrogating colonial structures and are being supported in that interrogation, is a more effective tool. So we give lie to the process if we then deconstruct indigenous method or indigenous methodology in that context. Now we were criticized for that basically by a colleague arguing that we hadn't really brought anything new to the conversation and indeed why hadn't we? Which is of course a fundamental misunderstanding of what the point of the piece was.

Ok so let's circle all the way around back to open access here. In those contexts it's more important to ensure that the structures through which communities can choose, shape and share their information are appropriate than to share the information. Some things are not sharable. For a whole bunch of reasons. Sacred reasons, reasons of safety, and that's OK. It doesn't mean that they're not sharable from inside the community and it doesn't mean that people can't, within

the community, address you know issues that matter to them. But it's not for me to share and not because that's a transcendental world value, it's that it's not useful. All it does is feed that other structure, that colonial structure of knowledge. That's the source of colonial power. Well, it's the source of the justification of colonial power, which is iteratively tied up in colonial power. Having guns is not a bad idea either if you're trying to exercise control but, you know, reproducing those things is deeply problematic and I'm not interested in doing so. What I'm interested in now is how do you get to a point in a relationship where the results are such that people are comfortable to share them and there's a reason for them to share them that's useful to them and their community.

[18:28]

[LW]   So you've been talking about the tensions around creating knowledge and sharing knowledge, specifically in a participatory action framework or using those types of methods, but you're professor Mike Evans, full tenured professor. So how easy or difficult are these decisions if you're a PhD, graduate student or someone who is up for tenure and is being pressured to publish in very specific kinds of journals?

[ME]   Yeah, that's a great question and you know the answer is more and more urgent depending on how junior you are. And in truth the more junior you are, the more urgent an answer is. I often won't support graduate students working in some of these ways unless I know that their relationship is really, really solid. Because indeed you can get yourself in situations where people no longer want to participate or where people are uncomfortable with the results of the research for a whole bunch of reasons. Not because the research is wrong, maybe because the research has, you have developed an interpretive frame which is at variance with theirs and you can't reconcile the two.

What I'm saying is, the relationship needs to be strong. It needs to be reciprocal, you need to be subtle, you need to understand what's going on around you more or less. And frankly, you know the older you get the wiser you get. I know that sounds like things that old people say but it's true. So earlier career researchers are more at jeopardy in that context, both in terms of managing their relationship and the consequences should the relationship crumble.

I often put in vetoes in my work as in, if you don't, if you want to stop this then we're done. Now it's de rigueur in research ethics protocol to allow somebody to withdraw from a research process as an individual but to have the entire research

process withdrawn by the community, that's a slightly different scale. But that is indeed what indigenous communities generally expect. That they may, as a community, withdraw from the relationship. So you have to be careful.

Now having said all that, I haven't necessarily been very all that careful myself and there's another side to what careful looks like in this context. I've talked about how communities have an expectation not only in terms of shaping the research question and the research practice they also increasingly have an expectation that the research result will be accessible. They ask the question, why would we be participating in this when it results in a series of reports and papers that we don't understand or maybe we do understand them but we don't care to read them because they're not immediately useful to us. To do so, employing them, using them, it's not obvious. So you know we've just done all this work and you got something out of it but we don't.

So um, I make it a practice, well…and on the other hand, as a scholar you need to produce things that scholars understand so I've made it a practice to actually try to produce two things, or having kind of dual research products out of everything that I do. Often, you know, a report which is directly useful to the community or some set of associated activities that come out of the research that's directly attached to some outcome that people in the community want. Or something which is written in a way which is accessible to the community so they can actually read and share that information and are interested in reading and sharing that information. I know that's easy to do with history because everybody's interested in their own histories, but there are other contexts for it that matters as well. Um and I kind of have a dual publication structure.

In terms of succeeding in the academy, if you can have some of those classic traditional research outputs which are valued by your colleagues and you have this community based stream, you're golden. If you got 'em both you're OK, but if you only have the community based ones you've got a problem. And because they're not peer reviewed; now, there is a dialogue going on about what peer review looks like when you're working with a community but it hasn't penetrated necessarily deep into the halls of the academy. And so the more junior you are, the more at jeopardy you are from the consequences of making these choices.

Now the other thing you can do, and actually a colleague of mine, Christopher Fletcher down at University of Laval then at the University of Alberta when we were there together, we actually, we used to have this conversation all the time. I would have been an associate professor but he had just come as an assistant

professor and indeed it was exactly this, you know, how do we negotiate this? We know we have to do the community based research in the way that we're doing it, we know it's a good thing to do but we also know that we're kind of doing some damage to ourselves and we're at jeopardy here. So what we did is we actually developed a publication series which was for community based research in community accessible formats but peer reviewed.

Um but of course the point here is that peer review is not the sole purview of the academy and peer review for the purposes of developing social science theory is also not the only way to do, or the only outcome that you get from peer review so we actually just developed a structure which delivered peer review but with the terms of reference valorizing community accessible works and now the review is not just what's the value of this knowledge but what's the value of the way the knowledge has been structured in terms of communicating back to community. But I would not advise a colleague who is in the run up to tenure to embrace only these non-traditional forms of research outputs.

And it's important also going back to this issue of relationship, the responsiveness of researchers to community objectives is good, true and beautiful. And it's part of, you know, an authentic response is part of valuing the relationship and the people within the relationship. Um, that is reciprocal as well. In order for it to be reciprocal people in the community need to realize, and you need to tell them because they're not going to know, right, that you do in fact need these traditional research outputs. And you're happy to, you know, share in the interpretive work or on the data and happy to communicate this and happy to have whatever conversations you need to have, but you do need the outputs.

[25:25]

I used the word earlier indigenous ontology in the context of research methodologies and indigenous ontology is simply that the things of knowledge, the things that matter, the things that we perceive and interact with in the world are a product of that interaction. It's a relational ontology. Indigenous ontologies are relational ontologies, meaning that they are not fixed in time, their essential qualities are not attached to them. They're only emergent in relationship. And so the entire research enterprise indeed is not objective in the sense that it's fixed and static. It's constantly shifting and it's shifting on the basis of that relationship. That's an indigenous ontology and that's what allows people to calibrate their action to a great deal of complex information without rendering that complex information into reduced quantities. Cause those things only give you static

pictures. What you need is a dynamic picture in which you are a moving part as well.

So fundamentally then the research relationship in a participatory action framework in an indigenous context engages those relationships in proactive and constantly shifting ways and understands that those relationships are in fact constitutive of the [inaudible] in the first instance - not the second instance, in the first instance. And that's what makes it a little bit decentering for some of our positivist colleagues who don't share that kind of philosophical underpinning but none the less it is the philosophical underpinning for a lot of that activity.

[LW] You've talked a lot about the differences between being a full tenured professor and some of the challenges young scholars face and you've used the word jeopardy, but you've also mentioned that young scholars are in a new landscape and there's new opportunities for being creative and open access allows for new types of innovation and new types of models. Can you speak a little bit about that?

[ME] The answer to your very good question is, I don't know. But that's a really important thing to know, that is we don't know where open access is going and we really don't understand how the internet and the various other lines of communication that are now open that are in fact facilitating open access period, full stop, are going to integrate with our traditions. We just don't know. What we do know is that we've got massive problems in terms of business models for academic publishing and even though I'm extremely critical of academic publishers, especially the commercial ones, I do have some sympathy for their need to keep the lights on. I don't know if they need quite the champagne they've got flowing at the moment as they encircle and enclose our production, but I certainly have some sympathy that a model, an alternative model that uses open access but still provides the resources required to do what you need to do even in the open access context, is obvious. It's not obvious to me right.

You know we have a small open access press at the Institute for Community Engaged Research and our problem is not making the stuff available, cause we just push it online, our problem is actually making it available in such a way that traditional libraries can use it because we'll send it to you for free but we can't charge 'ya. Because we don't have the capacity to charge you because it actually triggers a whole set of very essential costs in order to charge you in the first instance.

I don't know what the new model is but I know that it matters. Maybe it's not any model maybe it's many models. Which leads me to the more important answer to the question which is, I think that there's a whole opportunity to innovate in and around this stuff. I think as video technologies become more and more accessible, both in terms of their production and in terms of their consumption, as the bandwidth on the net increases and the compression and the files allows the use of video files that there's a whole new set of ways of communicating and what I do know is that the context for those new ways of communicating knowledge requires the models, the existing models to be broken.

The old model's broken and we need to make sure it stays broken. So that all of these innovations that these young scholars that we were talking about earlier, have an opportunity to negotiate with their interlocutors in the community and elsewhere, to imagine things that I have no idea of right now cause I'm old. I'm old and staid. It's for them to do and it's for us to ensure that there's an opportunity, an avenue, or several avenues for them to do it. What's not helpful is propping up an old business model or an old production model when it's clearly broken. Or what's not helpful is being resistant to new ideas and new ways of doing things and that really does fall on people with power in academies to be responsive to those things, to be open to them. And we'll see where we wind up. I suspect we're going to wind up in something good though, I really do. Certainly we're in a much better place right now then we were thirty years ago.

[30:55]

Look I also think that there's a way of thinking about what we do which is not related to, not directly related to, what we produced in the sense of a product, a book, a podcast, a whatever, but really related to the impact. Now that gets way harder to count. Right. Which will drive the neo-liberal audit culture people nuts, but I'm OK with driving them nuts frankly. So you know maybe we start thinking a little bit more creatively about what impact looks like. Maybe we actually start worrying a little bit more about what impact looks like. Because I assure you when we start worrying about what impact, or having an impact and what impact looks like, we're going to wind up much less time on this campus and much more time in the community. As social sciences, humanities people in particular. And that's not a bad thing. You know, reengaging in that way in a proactive way, where what we do is valued for what we've actually done. And if we're all up here alone measuring citations or generating citations I think we can be pretty assured that the positive impact that we're looking at, for in the world, is likely not to be the main outcome of what we do. That's the danger of measurement right. Is it

has a perverse consequence. Ultimately in the context of this conversation perhaps the exactly opposite outcome as that which the people of who are advocating audit culture desire.

[LW] So you've been discussing about the traditional publishing system being broken and perhaps it should stay broken to allow for new forms of innovation so do you have any suggestions for new models or new ways?

[ME] Well I do have a model and that I mean this to be a model amongst many because it's actually a very traditional model. But it does solve the immediate problems around open access. That is to say how do you support the frameworks for open access while ensuring that the quality of the peer review and the quality of the publication are maintained. Um now and you know, indeed libraries actually have been pretty proactive in this space in terms of digitally supporting journals and journal collections that are open access and there's a number of initiatives floating around. I'm sure you're probably more aware of them than I am. But um, in the short term one way of doing this is um well what is partially done already. So Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has a granting stream which is for the support of scholarly journals. And that money tends to go to supporting copy editing and the organization of the flow of papers and reviews and so forth.

Now um, none of this replaces the editors' time but it does certainly facilitate high quality outputs. And it actually has an element of peer review in and of itself, that is to say, you have to have the journal up and running for a certain amount of time and then if this committee judges the journal to be of quality then you can apply for support. If you attach those more systematically to scholarly societies then you actually have a built in peer review network as well and you have a built in labour pool if you like in terms of graduate students and so forth who can both benefit from working on the journal but also contribute to the journal by their own labour.

So that would be a relatively inexpensive way of doing it. Unfortunately, some scholarly societies have in fact been selling themselves out to commercial publishers where they will take a journal which they have edited in house for decades and go to the one, more likely one of the big publishing houses will come to them and say, Hey, we'll give you $25,000 for your society and we'll take over all of the editing and you get access to our software which allows you to you know, track your review process and communicate automatically. It just makes it a whole bunch easier. Well first off, the software is not that impressive and

second, you just sold to a commercial publisher who is now going to enclose all the extra work that's involved in publication for themselves. So yes, your society will get $25,000 for your publication per annum, but all your colleagues will continue to review for free, all your colleagues will continue to produce knowledge and then give it to the publication house for free, and in the end really just perpetuating a system through which they derive, because they're not doing it for love. They're doing it for money and I assure you, they're making some.

So I think a more reasonable and collegial system is actually to go back to the scholarly societies with the expectation that we will develop a shared framework for managing the ebb and flow of papers across to reviewers, where there's a copyediting house, where you know our graduate students have access to that experience and that capacity, and where we figure it out that way. Um…you know I did want to say that it's not really acceptable for commercial publishing houses to enclose our knowledge and our labour in the way in which they do and again, all sympathy for young scholars who simply need to get their work out in order to, well, a) get their work out and b) succeed in terms of their careers, but I will not review for a Sage or Elsevier run journal. I will not review for a commercial journal. These are not relationships. Or at least not relationships that have any integrity or much chance of longevity. You know back again, the model is broken. We just don't know it yet.

[LW]   Thank you for speaking with us today. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

[ME]   It's been a pleasure talking to you as well.

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[LW]   You have been listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the library at UBC Okanagan. Your host today was Lori Walter. Editing by Karin Haug and Mathew Vis-Dunbar. Music by Trevor Neill. Artwork by Alison Ward. Additional support provided by Arielle Lomness and Josh Chan. Thank you for listening.

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[38:11]