

RESEARCH: THE ABORIGINAL DISCOURSE

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“Celebrating the Circles of Knowledge: Mind, Body, Spirit, Emotions of Research”

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Introduction: What is research?

Research is a relatively new term in the vocabulary of Aboriginal people. In fact, any reference to “research”, even to our university students, still presents a feeling of anxiety and incompetence. How often has it been said by under-graduates students, “I can’t do a Master’s degree because I hate research”. Research to many conjures up images of statistics, the dreaded mathematics, complicated analyses and just generally a task felt to be beyond our reach. It doesn’t help that for years we have heard that “Indians can’t do math”, resulting in our fear of anything to do with numbers, except, of course, BINGO.

If, as I am suggesting, research is a mystery experienced at the university level, how much more remote is the notion of research at the community level? If we take a realistic look at what research really is, we could dispel a number of myths. In any dictionary, you can read that research is a systematic inquiry into a subject in order to find out or check facts (Chrisjohn, 1993). For example, have you ever asked an Elder about the past? about how something was done in the old days? Have you ever compared two objects? (people, rocks, trees, tastes, etc.) Or in order to solve a problem, have you ever:

1. talked to a number of people, interviewed them?
2. consulted history books (to find out more about Columbus?)?
3. given out questionnaires and analyzed/compiled the results?
4. checked public records?
5. checked through libraries/archives?

If so, you have been doing research (Chrisjohn, 1993).

I said earlier that the term “research” is a relatively new to the Aboriginal vocabulary.

While this may be so, would it amaze you to know that our ancestors were the original researchers in this country? Yes, even before the anthropologists! Empirical research is research that relies on **experience and observation** alone (Webster, 1971). We all know that long before contact, our ancestors were navigating the waters, having learned about tides, the currents and all aspects of weather, winds and temperatures. They knew about the runs of the various fish (white fish, pickerel, suckers). They knew the habits of the animals (buffalo, deer, moose, rabbits, muskrats). They knew the natural rhythm of the land, the forests. All this and much more they learned through systematic reliance on observation and experience. They knew how to turn raw animal skins into beautiful moccasins. They knew how to preserve food so it would last even in warm weather. They discovered medicines that would cure many ailments. All this is to say, they were researchers. All peoples in this country are the beneficiaries of this early research by our forefathers and foremothers.

Research by our people has been ongoing ever since those early years. Today, much of what we learn is based on **observation and experience**. That means that you have been engaged in meaningful research without really being aware of it. You, too, are a researcher.

Research by Academics

Research is most closely associated with academia. In reference to our world, anthropology (archcology) has probably dominated the research agenda as it is the study of humankind. It began with the study of bones, in an attempt to determine when people first arrived in the New World (misnomer) and where they had come from. Added to this was the study of living men and women. They studied blood types and languages (Vlahos, 1970). In their exuberance they claimed artifacts that later appeared in museums around the world.

A recent article in the Globe and Mail (May 8, 2006), reported that the Earl of Southesk Collection was to be auctioned off in New York. The artifacts that date back to the 1850's was estimated to bring up to \$3.9 million (US). Among the artifacts are a man's quilled and beaded shirt of Blackfoot origin, octopus bag of Cree origin, a knife and beaded hide sheath of Assiniboine origin. These belonged to James Carnegie, the Earl of Southesk, Scotland who traveled through Canada and the US in 1859. The Alberta Museum was reported to be making a bid to get some of these back. I was interested in the Cree octopus bag that they thought would go for \$12,000 US. Wouldn't it be great if the descendents of the people who actually made these articles could have them returned to them or in some way benefit from the sale of the precious items?

Repatriation of many artifacts such as totem poles and sacred masks on the west coast is finally happening but not without tremendous effort on the part of the rightful owners of the artifacts. In the May issue of the Kahtou newspaper, the front-page features a photo of a totem pole carved over a century ago was being returned to the Haisla people after being in a Swedish museum, having been in storage for the last 40 years. Louis Smith, a Haisla member said, "We are bringing it back to where it originally grew, and the breath of our many ancestors will be home". In return they agreed to carve a replica of the pole for the Swedish museum.

Anthropologists have gone so far as to measure our people heads (skulls) and have drawn erroneous conclusions about our intelligence or the lack of it. Consequently our view of research has been adversely affected by the attitudes of early anthropologists. We, the Aboriginal people, have found many of their ethics and research practices morally repugnant. A standard joke going around in the 70s was, "Do you know what an extended Indian family is?" Answer: a mother, a father, children and an anthropologist.

When I was at UBC, there was an incident that did nothing to endear us to anthropology. How would you feel if you were an Aboriginal student, whose anthropology professor (I

quote the student) “dressed up like shaman and then asked the class to ask him questions? He had a paper headband with a paper feather in it on his head and a green shawl over his shoulders” (unquote). Visibly upset following the incident she visited her counselor. When asked by her counselor what she thought when this was happening, she replied, “I just pretended that it wasn’t happening. I tell myself this isn’t real. There was another Aboriginal student in the class and she just kept looking at me. We went for coffee and she couldn’t stop crying”. The other woman said” How could they be doing this? How am I supposed to feel?.....He thinks he can just be a shaman. How can he wear that paper headband in front of us? It makes me sick”.

I chose to mention anthropology because of its early dominance in the study of our people. I have given negative examples of anthropology to illustrate why Aboriginal people have been leery about research. No doubt, it is a valuable field of study and should be embraced by our own people. Who better to study our ancestors than Aboriginal scholars of today?

Academic research is usually driven by a specific question. Carl Urion observed that over time, the question has changed from “When did humankind first arrive in the New World? Where did they come from?” to questions in the late 19th century about dying civilizations and “Which must come first ‘Christianization’ of the Indian, or his adoption of civilization?” In the 1930s and 40s, the question became one of acculturation of our peoples. “Our people would change and become like the ‘other group’” In the 60s there was a great deal of comparison between Natives and non-Natives, continuing the saga of acculturation. Applied to the education of our peoples, “In the end, it measures “success” in education by how closely the end results in Native culture approximates the end results in the “homogeneous ‘other’ and ‘dominant culture’ (Urion, 1991).

Aboriginal Research Discourse:

As stated earlier, our ancestors engaged in research. Predictions were made on the coming winter's weather, abundance or scarcity of fish, game and berries, whether there would be droughts or floods. Predictions were made based on observable phenomena (observing and reading nature). Oscar Kawagley states that the same empirical research continues today in areas where our people practice traditional life styles. "The environment is their school and their cathedral and reading its natural progress gave meaning to all life (Kawagley, 1992)."

Just as it was with our ancestors so it is with us today. Research is necessary to inform our lives. In the world of academia we have too long been the objects of study by outsiders who have drawn their own conclusions and have often created myths that we must now address to reverse the negative impact these have had. As Roland Chrisjohn has pointed out much of the research making direct reference to the children of various Aboriginal people is overwhelmingly flawed. Aboriginal people must become better informed about conceptual and methodological techniques, and we must develop our own expertise or we will remain dependent on outsiders whose qualifications we are unable to judge (Chrisjohn, 1986). It is this very challenge that our Aboriginal scholars are addressing.

In the late 20th century (1990s) and certainly into the 21st century, our people have taken research to higher education institutions. At university those in graduate programs raise questions that they address in their theses and dissertations that impact our peoples lives. We also now engage in comprehensive studies with independent grants, form task forces, Royal Commissions in order to answer our own questions.

While I was at UBC, we started a program in 1984 that we called Ts'kel Graduate Program. This was an adaptation or extension, if you will, of NITEP, the undergraduate teacher education program. To start with it was a Master's in Educational Administration. It soon extended to the doctoral level and to other fields of education (Special Education,

Curriculum and Instruction, Counselling, etc). I want to share with you some of the research that was undertaken by students in this program. As program head, I encouraged students to answer their particular “burning question”.

Oscar Kawagley (1990), a Yupik doctoral student from Alaska wrote on *Yupik Ways of Knowing*. He explains that in the traditional ways of the Yup’ik people, the tools for teaching a culture, a science, a way of knowing including intuitions, visions and dreams, and spiritual interaction has always been present. Oscar discusses some applications of this approach to mathematics and science education.

Shirley Sterling (1992), A Nlakapamux discussed *Quaslameto and Yetko: Two Grandmother Models for Contemporary Native Education Pedagogy*. In this paper Shirley begins by telling a story of the two women, one being her mother and the other her mother’s great aunt and how the great aunt taught her how to make a fish trap. She relates this teaching as a model to examining the goals, purposes, content and outcomes of traditional Nlakapamux education and helps to identify some criteria for success, the most important being the presence of the grandmothers who are cultural professors. Their teachings go beyond the acquisition of skills to the deeper philosophical transmissions of their values through oral traditions.

A more recent Master’s thesis sent to me by Alannah Young is entitled *Elders’ Teachings on Indigenous Leadership: Leadership is a gift*. Alannah origin is Opasquaahk. She works at the First Nations House of Learning at UBC and graduated with Master’s degree on May 25/06. For her study she examined the Longhouse Leadership Program taught by Elders, cultural leaders and educators to try to understand ways in which Indigenous Knowledge broadens the existing dominant views of leadership.

These papers by Oscar, Shirley and Alannah all speak to the **emerging Aboriginal**

pedagogy.

Other theses addressed questions of **appropriation, responsibility and control**. Opal Charters-Voght (1991) did her thesis on *Indian Control of Indian Education: The Path of the Upper Nicola Valley*. Opal was hired to be the principal of the school on her reserve. As a preparation for this work she conducted a three-day workshop on her reserve. She invited Elders, parents, students, band council members. She used structured experiences to answer three main questions. Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How will we get there? Two of her Master's advisors were present to observe the process. At the end of the workshop, she was given an eagle feather by an Elder. Opal did, indeed, follow this plan in her work as a principal.

Nathan Matthew (1990) looked at *Jurisdiction and Control in First Nations School Evaluation*. It presents the socio-political context within which evaluations of First Nations Schools in BC are conducted and demonstrates that the context is unique and sufficiently different from that of public schools that it must be accounted for in the evaluation process. He examines a set of evaluations that were conducted and describes how evaluations might become more responsive to First Nations needs.

Native Indian Leadership was the subject of Felicity Jules (1988) thesis. Felicity examined relevant features of leadership in the Native Indian context, and applies a model of leadership to some of the valued qualities and behaviour Native Indian leaders as identified by three Native Indian leaders and a review of the literature. (inverted triangle)

Still other papers dealt with various aspects of development *Toward Community: the Community-School Model and the Health Sovereignty* (Calliou, 1993) and *Cultural Strategies for Retaining Fisheries, Forests and Land* (Manu Paul, 1987). Another form of development is found in Roz Ing's (2000?) doctoral dissertation entitled *Dealing with*

Shame and Unresolved Trauma: Residential School and Its Impact on 2nd and 3rd Generation Adults. Her findings show that the affects continue to future generations.

Finally, we have papers that reveal that we are, in fact, moving toward **conceptual and methodological techniques** from Aboriginal perspectives. Examples of this emerging approach include: ***Pimosatamowin Sikaw Kakeequaywin – Walking and Talking – a Saulteaux Elder's View of Native Education*** (Akan, 1992). Alfred Manitopeyes, respected Saulteaux Elder gave Linda Akan an unusual structure, a stream of concepts connected through pallel referents that are evident in word structure in Saulteaux. Linda's discussion of the structure, points out that the powerful metaphor of walking and talking is a clear metaphor of the personal responsibility of teachers to care intimately for children and to live in such a way that our words reflect the way we live.

Compassionate Mind: Implications of a Text Written by Elder Louis Sunchild (Lightning, 1992). Elder Louis Sunchild wrote a discourse in Cree on the nature of the mind for Walter Lightning, to use in his teaching at Maskwachees Cultural College. The relationship between the Elder and the learner is always contextually specified with reference to the earth. The text always continues to unfold through layers of meaning as one thinks about it. It points out the unity of mental, biological, emotional and spiritual domains. Walter discusses these.

Both Linda Akan and Walter Lightning did their studies at the University of Alberta with Dr. Carl Urion as their advisor.

A more recent work by Stelomethet, Ethel Gardiner (2002)(Sta:lo) whose dissertation is entitled ***Tset Hikwstexw Te Sqwelteltset, We hold Our Languages High: The meaning of Halq'emeylem Language Renewal in the Everyday Lives of Sta:lo People.*** She goes deeply into the meaning of Halq'emeylem words/expressions to find their real meaning.

One word, smestryex, for example expresses a Sta:lo world view of spiritual relationship with the land based on harmony and respect. Elders played a major role in her work.

Common to all of these three works is that they involve Elders and use language.

As Carl Urion states “Aboriginal research discourse has as its first assumption, the integrity of the person. It assumes a context in which there is unity and wholeness to be discovered or reaffirmed...It is thus essentially empirical. The major requirement is that the observer (researcher) be part of the observation (Urion, 1991). To take it a step further, the subject(s) and the research should engage together in the process of creating the discourse. Research questions must be driven by the people and they must be involved as participants in the study. This is the essence of participatory research, which is different from participant observation, which has as its central tenet the understanding of a phenomena and not the desire to change it. This latter view has given way to participatory research based on the principle that people become subjects rather than objects of research (Wright, 1993). This approach is conducive to change which is the hallmark of research for Aboriginal people in the 21st Century. Participatory research using tradition as a base for change rather than as a bulwark against change by outsiders, as has often been the case, is a means of regaining our security as a people.

Elements of participatory research can be found in the more comprehensive studies that have been undertaken by Aboriginal groups. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood’s formulation of the policy of *Indian Control of Indian Education* is one of the first of such studies. The process involved people from the grassroots who were engaged in the position papers of their respective Provinces and Territories setting out their directions in education, health, economic, development. Representatives from these provincial/territorial organizations used the data develop the policy of ICIE. In 1988, the Assembly of First Nations’ study entitled, *Tradition and Change: Toward s Vision of Our Future* researched the areas of jurisdiction, quality, management and resourcing. The

Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) is a good example of participatory research.

Visions of the Future:

Given that a research agenda is now well underway among Aboriginal people, it is imperative that this research is shared and utilized. Back in 1983, I started the Mokakit Indian Education Research Association that had as its mandate to promote research among our people. The members were made up of Aboriginal people holding graduate degrees. Believe it or not at that time there were very few Aboriginal people with either Master's degrees or Ph.D.'s. I don't think our numbers went much beyond thirty people. That is not to say that everyone with a graduate degree was part of the association. What I do know is if such an organization existed today, the membership would be much higher. A goal of Mokakit was to identify all the research that had been done by Aboriginal people and by seeing the gaps, we would be able to share this with Aboriginal students pursuing graduate work and eventually get a large body of research together that looked at collectively, would contribute to improving education for our people.

We held at least two national conferences inviting people to present their research. They gave a full account of their methodology, their findings, etc. in a half hour block allowing time for questions. These papers were subsequently published in as our own journals (SHOW JOURNALS). Along with the conference, we held a pre-conference session designed to assist people with statistics.

I'm pleased that this Aboriginal Education Research Forum has been created. I would respectfully suggest that for its next conference, it deal with research presentations not unlike what we did with Mokakit. Wouldn't it be great to hear from Drs Laara Fitznor, Mary Young, Ethel Gardner, etc., etc. about the research related to their dissertations.

In the context of education, the vision of the future lies in the challenge of utilizing the current research and engaging in other research, so as to answer our questions. One very basic question that continues to elude us is, "What is Aboriginal Education?" We know it is not fixing western education by adding a bit of our culture into the curriculum. So what is it? We need to consider formulating our own theories based on our philosophies and appropriate pedagogy. Thankfully, this process has begun.

This is the challenge we must face. With the help of our respected Elders, we must face the question, using their knowledge and experience, for that is the only real archival information we have. We must listen carefully to their stories, draw upon the metaphors which provide invaluable teachings. The answer to our demands for a better education, better health, better life must be derived from the inside. **The answers are within us.** We are told that to find the core of knowledge we must go deep in thought. As an Elder at Muswachees Cultural College stated "We must close our eyes so we can see further".

Our vision of the future must necessarily include research for us and by us. We must ask the right questions and engage our communities in the whole process. Without the community, the work is futile. We must utilize what research we have and promote research in areas that are critical to our progress. Let us continue the research agenda of our ancestors so we, too, will know how to proceed to make our lives better.

It is my sincere hope that what I had to say today has dispelled myths about how hard it is to do research to those of you contemplating going into graduate studies. Study your burning question and don't waver from it because some professor feels your question should be different. Strive on. We need your help.

Thank you all for your patience.

Verna J. Kirkness