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**Recognising The Power Of Story: Narrative Prospects For
Democratic Practitioner Research**

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Through the narrative representation of people's experiences in learning, we are allowed to catch glimpses of their meaning-making processes and of the frameworks and structures they use to make meaning of their experiences in the contexts of their whole lives. (Beattie 2001, p. 170)

Introduction

Story telling takes place in many communities around the world as a way of communicating, exploring and recording experience and of negotiating meaning. It occurs in spoken, written and a range of artistic forms. It is an important aspect of the building of culture so that local practice both relates to and is tempered by broader social concerns. The telling and retelling of events enables people to come to a shared understanding of social life and to reach consensus on significance. For some specific communities such as Australian Indigenous peoples, oral and ceremonial traditions are essential to cultural formation and include the responsibility of Elders to decide when particular areas of knowledge are to be made accessible to younger members.

Principles of Indigenous knowing have been consistently identified by Indigenous groups in various countries, where it may be that a lack of political will or educational understanding by the dominant society can prevent their incorporation into the regular curriculum. Indigenous Australian communities are often highly sceptical towards educational research as well, seeing this as another form of colonialism or oppression and one that offers little for educational improvement. Some research methodologies may not be appropriate in terms of Indigenous knowledge production and can be disrespectful of community interest, culture and history. Issues such as these that frame Indigenous education and research are extremely important in Australia as practices that can inhibit rather than enhance cultural democracy and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The proposal that is described here centres on the concept of democratic narrative inquiry as a means of confronting those serious problems within Indigenous education and research in Australia. Bruner (1996) observed that humans have both scientific and narrative modes of knowing. He outlined nine general propositions including how time, sequence and particularity are handled, the place of action and how events are interpreted, inclusion of the unexpected and the ambiguous and how the narratives of others link to our own lives. In their work on narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) drew upon Dewey's (1963) theories of experience when they proposed a narrative structure of three dimensions that looks backwards and forwards, inwards and outwards and considers the location in place of participants. These approaches structure narrative in ways that may or may not be present in everyday interactions, but which suggest key features of more formal studies.

The research methodology proposed in this paper involves the compilation and/or writing of a series of personal narratives on specific themes by participants such as teachers, or Indigenous students and community members. The narratives can focus on general life issues, or themes that have a school and curriculum emphasis. The methodology extends the work of Clandinin and Connelly in a number of ways. First, the identification of insights that resonate throughout and across the writing according to participant identification. Second, the inclusion of a fourth dimension of educational and social change that arises from the narrative investigation and which therefore sets up cycles of action and reflection. The intention of narrative inquiry here is to produce knowledge outcomes that can be further investigated in practice. Third, consideration of theoretical ideas that inform and challenge the approach being adopted. In this paper, the reflexive sociology of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) has been incorporated so that notions of habitus, field, social practice and cultural capital are read in association with the narratives produced. Finally, an exemplar of practice (Kuhn 1977) such as new curriculum formats is designed that is then available for ongoing investigation and refinement. It is proposed that these principles of narrative can be incorporated into the regular curriculum to assist the learning of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Australian Indigenous Education

In Australian terms, the word Indigenous means Aboriginal people from the mainland and the island of Tasmania and people from the islands of the Torres Strait between northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. Constituting less than three percent of the overall population, the majority of Indigenous peoples live down the east coast of Australia in cities and towns in the same way as the overwhelming majority of other Australians. Their children therefore attend the local neighbourhood school with the same curriculum in the same way as the majority of other Australian children. A minority of Indigenous peoples live in small remote communities in central and northern Australia where they may speak an Indigenous language or a creole language, with English perhaps being a third language. Most unfortunately, it is an undeniable fact that Australian education fails a considerable proportion of its Indigenous students and families. This is so in the urban, regional and remote areas of the country.

Health and education are generally seen as being the two major issues that need improvement for Indigenous peoples. In a number of other countries, the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy is about seven years, whereas in Australia the difference is twenty years (Oxfam 2007). In addition, lack of adequate housing, high levels of unemployment and unforgiving, unrelenting poverty all contribute to social conditions that should be totally unacceptable for such a wealthy country and strong economy as is Australia. While most Indigenous children complete primary schooling, retention to Year 12 as the final year of secondary schooling, is about one third less than for their non-Indigenous classmates. A combination of the social problems noted above, together with the changing nature of the curriculum including a more segmented and regimented approach to knowledge, teaching, learning and assessment, make it increasingly difficult for Indigenous children to endure the non-Indigenous institution. Leaving school may become a matter of survival.

It is known that a number of features characterise Indigenous ways of knowing, not only in Australia but around the world. (Hughes 2004). These features include a more holistic approach to knowledge, the central role and respect of Elders as the holders of community understandings and in judging when these can be passed on to younger members, learning being firmly located in community interest and drawing upon local culture, history and language, the place of ceremony in culture and knowing and the imitation of known practices. Some of these features can be found in the regular curriculum to a greater or lesser extent, but many are not. As the secondary school in particular tends to isolate knowledge into packets of truth that are then passed on to students for reproductive forms of assessment, the tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous can become unbearable. While it is probably unlikely that many schools will set out to Indigenise their curriculum, to not attempt to find connections between different world views will inevitably demean and exclude some groups of students.

Partington (2002) has outlined a number of models that have been implemented in Australia. He has termed these Separate Schooling, Deficit/Assimilation, Culture, Empowerment, Two-Way Schooling and Partnership models. Partington suggests that 'The move to cultural models for the provision of education represented a landmark in Indigenous education. While these models did not ensure empowerment of Indigenous people, they did at least acknowledge the validity of the culture of the people.' (p. 15) There will always be a tension between the requirements of the European state as translated by principals and teachers and the cultural aspiration of local communities. The role of the individual teacher and teaching teams is central and extremely complicated here, as they attempt to find ways of making progress with European knowledge such as literacy and numeracy, while at the same time recognising the cultural imperatives within which they work,

Building on the work of Harris (1990) and what he called 'two-way learning,' Hooley (2002) has incorporated the inquiry notion of Dewey into a 'two-way inquiry learning' model. In this approach, groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come together to resolve serious issues of mutual concern and to find new ways of proceeding. Two-way inquiry learning seeks not merely to raise awareness and appreciation, but to construct new ideas and practices that new solutions demand to be found. Accordingly, the culture of each participating group is dynamic, altering as the social conditions alter and as people bring new understandings to bear. Each group not only respects the other for what has gone before, but enters into a compact to create a new pathway forward. Schools, universities, and adult education settings are obvious places where activities sanctioned by the settler state can form the basis for the resolution of current problems and for planning the journey that lies ahead.

While it might be thought that two-way inquiry learning will automatically mean the assimilation of minority views by the majority, the weaker succumbing to the more powerful, this is not necessarily so. In considering the night sky for example, there are many different views of explanation that have been discussed over the centuries involving those of narrative and science. An exploration of astronomy does not mean that one is discarded at the expense of the other; both can coexist. In considering the formation of the landscape similarly, there are stories about the creation of a river

through the meanderings of giant fish, or by geological upheavals. The origin of animals, plants and mountains can be told and retold as stories about earth, water and fire, or about the combination of matter and energy. In all of these cases, there can be agreement amongst communities and scholars that culture and history are respected while people come together to identify a basis for co-operative action so that human circumstances are improved. Two-way approaches can enable that to happen, around the camp fire, in the classroom and at the laboratory bench.

In addition to the epistemological issues discussed briefly here, there is also the educational issue of ensuring that all children are aware of the full range of Australian history, including Indigenous history. Many of these matters are however disputed at present. Some historians suggest that antagonism between the Indigenous people and white settlers during the 1800s in particular, could be described as 'frontier wars,' while others do not. (Reynolds 1982, Windschuttle 2004) Some suggest that the removal of Indigenous children from their families to be placed in missions or with adoptive parents, was well meaning, while others do not (Manne 2004). Some are comfortable with the transfer of native title to Indigenous communities so that they have stewardship over their traditional lands, while some are not. These disputes will need to work themselves out over time, but they pose various problems as to how they are considered fairly and accurately in the primary and secondary school curriculum.

Working with all Australian children in the neighbourhood school must therefore include two strategies for inclusion. First, all children have a democratic right to be aware of Australian history in its totality and second, all Indigenous children have a democratic right to not be disadvantaged by the nature of the curriculum they encounter. There are additional matters in remote communities where the purpose of schooling may differ, the language used may be different and communities may prefer outcomes that emphasise local rather than general culture, history and knowledge. It is to be expected that the Australian nation state will have views on such issues and that from time to time, such views will contradict and perhaps override local aspirations. It must also be stated however, that the progress made in dealing with Indigenous problems and dilemmas in Australia has been shameful.

Narrative as research methodology

The broad outline of narrative as research methodology shown below is based upon the work of Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000) in terms of a general approach to qualitative research and Beattie (1995, 2001) and Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 2000) in regards to narrative inquiry. What is particularly significant about the approach of these theorists is the respect accorded participants in the research process and their recognition of narrative as a mode of inquiry into experience and knowledge. Beattie, Clandinin and Connelly's reference to Dewey not only bridges more personal and local concerns with generalised thought, but also locates their work within the broad historic sweep of pragmatic philosophy and more recently, constructivist knowing.

In adapting the work of Clandinin and Connelly, four main features are proposed to characterise the research design:

1. A movement between three sets of questions involving a transition from field experience to field texts, from field texts to research texts and finally, from research texts to the research account (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, p. 418).
2. Inclusion of the internal factors of voice and signature and the existential factors of inquiry purpose, narrative form and audience (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, pp. 423-25) to facilitate the above movement between texts.
3. Reading of narratives in association with other viewpoints including those of a critical friend and those drawn from the literature, to both challenge and inform the original experience being described.
4. Development of strategies to change and improve the situation being researched through the proposing of insights arising from narrative production and of exemplars of practice and knowledge for ongoing application and investigation.

Step 1. Movement from field experience to field texts

Data as expressed in letters, reports, articles and papers together with reflective narrative writing all describe and structure personal experience and are considered as field texts. Narratives that are written around chosen themes have a different character to other texts in that they are more autobiographical and are written within an overt theoretical framework, that is the inquiry framework proposed by Dewey.

Specific narratives that are written by research participants are selected as being of importance to both personal and professional lives. They are not crafted or reworked to ensure that predetermined issues are raised, but record points of significance to the writer as the writing unfolds. It is recommended that the narratives involve a process of looking backwards and forwards in terms of previous and possible future experience, looking inwards and outwards in relation to personal ideas and the ideas of others that may be quite different and challenging and in considering such viewpoints in regards to current community, political and theoretical discussions that are known to exist. The narratives therefore have a definite structure, are essentially reflective and attempt to describe experience in some detail. While the writing aims to be informal and naturalistic, its reflective nature will enable links to the formal literature to be made and provide a basis for interpretation and theorising. The length of each narrative will be decided by participants as being appropriate for their research purpose.

Drafting of the narratives as field texts needs to take into account issues regarding participant voice and signature. It is quite possible that research writing will tend to mask or 'write out' the contribution of participants so that interpretation and knowledge proposals appear to have an independent quality, they seem to exist and to have arisen in isolation from the people concerned. Narrative writing by the participants themselves rather than an academic researcher, offers a way of overcoming these problems, but care to ensure recognition is still required. The writer needs to be visible in the text so that the personal significance of experience and the events described is clear for that person at that time. For more reflective narrative writing this becomes a difficult task, especially if the writing in a further cycle requires connections between the broader experience of others and even perhaps, the professional literature. The text needs to allude to and open up such possibilities, but not close off discussion of them.

Step 2. Movement from field texts to research texts

Following Clandinin and Connelly, field texts are converted into research texts through the identification of themes and principles that may emerge, if possible, in collaboration with a critical friend. This role can be undertaken by the academic researcher, or a person who is invited to undertake this role specifically. The world view and social and professional experience of the academic researcher and/or critical friend will impact on the analysis and different interpretations may give rise to some conflicting viewpoints. Rather than being a problem for qualitative research, this is an important aspect of the process of democratic meaning making and will be considered in further cycles of the research.

In discussing each narrative with a critical friend, a process of critical questioning for self-understanding is anticipated. The discussion should provide critique of the narrative itself, as well as uncover possible insights for follow-up consideration and theorising. Questions may be of the type:

- * Is the narrative consistent with the format being followed, does it raise issues of community, context, knowledge, practice, theory?
- * How are the questions of narrative authority dealt with, whose voice is heard, is the narrative honest, accurate?
- * Is the writing cohesive, is enough description and information provided?
- * Does the narrative speak to you and open up issues for ongoing conversation?

Construction of narratives as research texts involves attention to the issues of inquiry purpose, narrative form and intended audience. The style of writing will be impacted upon by the purpose of the study, by consideration of how the research texts will be interpreted later and by whom. The style of the writing is structured around the dimensions noted above so that it tends towards being reflective so that challenges to current understandings are encouraged as early as possible. A delicate balance must be struck between acceptable forms of writing and the exploration of different styles so that the rigidities of current knowledge domains and the manner of conducting research itself are challenged with creative intent. This is particularly important when working with communities investigating their own practice to ensure that participants are respected and acknowledged.

Step 3. Movement from research texts to research accounts

The writing of research accounts involves a 'leap' by the researchers from the data of experience and possible interpretation, to possible new understandings. This process occurs in both the physical and social sciences. At some point, the research group will suggest an explanation for what has occurred based on the totality of the research process to that time. The initial explanation can be very tentative and speculative, or can be more definitive because of agreement on what the data and observations mean. In either case, all new thinking becomes available for cyclic re-investigation.

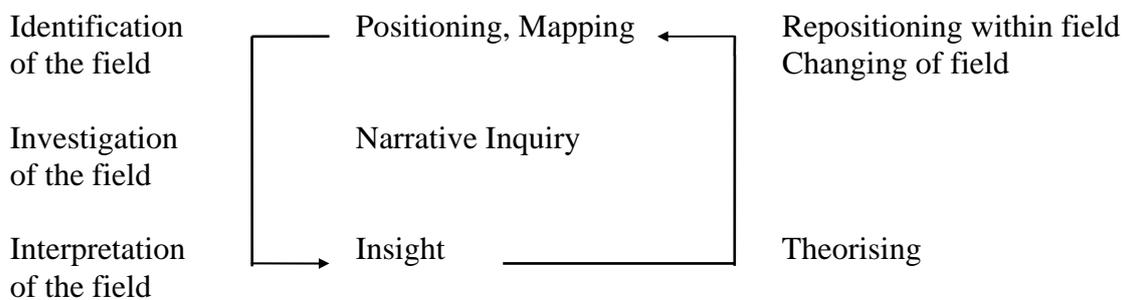
At this point of the research, tentative insights into the generation of knowledge may provide possible new approaches to practice, or possible new knowledge itself. The model of research being proposed here is not intended to formulate research 'findings'

of the formal academic and propositional kind, but to explore possible meanings that may have been provisionally revealed and which are then available for a next cycle of investigation. It may be that narrative inquiry leads to generalised statements concerning a particular field of knowledge or practice, but this is not necessarily the case. Democratic educational and community research is a long-term process that involves many cycles of encounter, communication and experience, of redrafting and refining understandings, until such time as a community consensus can be reached.

Researching Indigenous education with narrative

It is now appropriate to consider whether the process of narrative inquiry is congruent with Indigenous approaches to knowledge and learning and whether as a research methodology, narrative inquiry can withstand European hegemonic forms in the interests of Indigenous peoples. An overall view of the process undertaken can be seen in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Representation of overall research process



Describing narrative inquiry in this way, as a significant model of knowledge, learning and practice is a significant statement for Indigenous research. The property ‘consistent’ is taken to mean that the general approach adopted has supportive links with the recognised literature and with the practices of the cultural settings being investigated. In epistemological terms, the concept of ‘model’ indicates a tentative frame to guide cognitive activity that is compatible with the political and cultural life of participants. Again, the mold is characterised by the epistemological properties of ‘knowledge, learning and practice’ as distinct from a more sociological position that considers the social issues surrounding each of the settings involved. The properties of consistency, cognitive activity, knowledge, learning and practice are key properties of an epistemological model that can be applied across the divides of different cultural circumstances and assist the movement towards mutual understanding.

In terms of another of the key features of the model proposed in Figure 1, each of the insights that emerge from the narrative process are personal in that they do not necessarily define new and fundamental knowledge. They are insights that reflect what practice has generated at a particular point in time. Describing the insights as personal does not preclude their linkage with broader concerns, in the same way that local and global issues are related, each impacts on the other, each can be found within the other. The personal nature of insight can indeed assist formulation of more general thought as ideas are enacted in practice and the relation between practice and theorising is experienced. Raising the issue of the personal in learning and curriculum

sets up the possibility of substantial curriculum change for all children. There is a significant point in relation to overall educational change here and how it occurs. As well as reflecting on our own practice and position regarding the general field of the cultural basis of understanding through a systematic research process such as narrative inquiry, the field itself is altered. The link between personal and localised insight and changing the overall field from within which that insight has been generated, is practice. As researchers begin to reposition themselves in relation to the field, the field itself begins to take on new properties because the researchers themselves have altered in their perceptions and understandings. The field is not passive, static and unidimensional, but is dynamic, evolving and multidimensional in transformation as the social circumstances including the researchers are transformed.

Conceptually, the epistemology suggested by the insights offers a very different approach to knowledge and learning to that generally encountered in schools and universities today. Prospect for change in the interests of Indigenous knowing is thereby created. It suggests a number of features that are to be found in different cultural settings and which are available to form the scaffold of inquiry and learning for communities and children. The concept of personal and community narrative itself is an important structure, allowing learners to begin their intellectual excursions from the point of view of their own experience, culture, understanding and aspiration, all of which are recognised and respected for their inherent value. This is the reverse of the usual process of knowledge imposition favoured by many institutions of the dominant society. There then follows an open-ended process of exploration that focuses on practice and reflection on practice over time so that learners can pursue many learning opportunities that by their very nature bring different cultural ideas adjacent to each other for experiment.

Narrative inquiry therefore can form the basis of cross-cultural understanding, something that cannot happen if people and practices are kept separate. Broader ideas external to the learner need to be accessible as projects develop and are brought into relation through the role of personnel such as Elders, facilitators, critical friends or other community members. This is a long-term process requiring adept and wise professional judgement and democratic intent and a broad experience of how theory and practice relate and inform. Finally, ideas and new knowledge are explored in practice as cycles of investigation flow, merge and are reconstituted from each other, self-regulating ideas that have been decided by participants as being important for resolution. In this way, social practice contributes to an evolving personal consciousness that can guide further practice. Such a process can be likened to Freire's 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1972, Glass 2001) where citizens seek to reform their relationship with knowledge through a changed experience. Freire spoke of this happening at the broad social level where the structures of society constrain the activity of people and how the struggle to change society changes people as well. For the Indigenous community, liberation from the ideological strictures and sometimes racism of the settler state needs to occur at the individual, community and institutional levels.

Artifacts, portfolios and exemplars of knowledge

In describing her own practice in writing narrative and how different narratives can link together, Conle (2000, p. 202) reported that she 'began to see the relationship among my own experiential stories as resonance. I saw parts of one story connected to parts of another story through metaphor, not metaphor as a figure of speech, but as a process of understanding.' This search for the essential character of one narrative and how it might relate to the essential character of another, is very similar to the process of insight as outlined above. Conle goes on to detail how she was able to detect 'clusters of images' that could connect with similar ideas and currents in other stories and thereby the themes and meanings that were 'resonating' throughout the narratives could be identified for consideration. In the first instance, the process of insight relies upon community consensus that is then investigated for credibility in further cycles of community practice.

It is now suggested that a central feature of narrative inquiry that includes generalised (theoretical) ideas to inform ongoing investigation of practice, is the notion of exemplar. The work of the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn introduced exemplar as an important idea in the process of how science develops. Writing some years after his ground-breaking work on the development of scientific paradigms (Kuhn 1962), Kuhn sought to identify new terms such as 'disciplinary matrix' to more fully describe paradigm as the assumptions, theories and practices that are shared between the members of a scientific community and which guides their inquiry. He also used the idea of exemplar (Kuhn 1977, p. 187) to provide added detail:

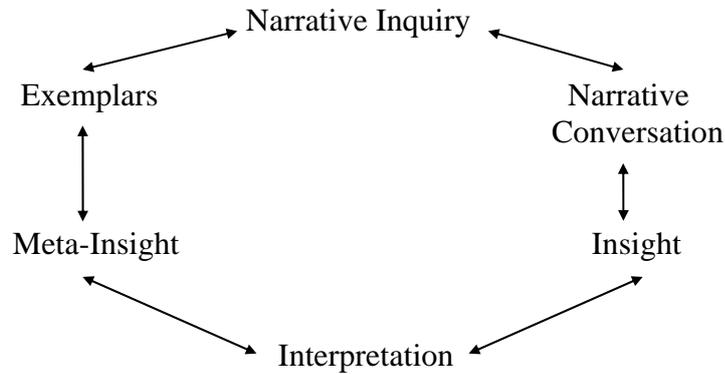
By it I mean, initially, the concrete problem solutions that students encounter from the start of their scientific education, whether in laboratories, on examinations, or at the ends of chapters in scientific texts ... {and} at least some of the technical problem-solutions found in the periodic literature that scientists encounter during their post-educational research careers and also show them by example how their job is to be done. More than other sorts of components of the disciplinary matrix, differences between sets of exemplars provide the community fine-structure of science.

In quoting this passage, Mishler (1990, p. 422) goes on to discuss how Kuhn saw 'knowledge embedded in shared exemplars' as a 'mode of knowing' and pointed out that such 'working knowledge' is acquired no less easily than 'playing the violin, or blowing glass, or throwing pots.' In the research approach that has been developed in this paper, the notion of exemplar is incorporated as a way of describing and investigating the essential knowledge, criteria and guidelines that constitute a particular field of endeavour, enabling both lesser and more experienced practitioners to work within, describe, communicate and reflect upon that field. It is a particularly useful notion for inquiry-based, interpretive research where the outcomes are intended to encourage a deeper understanding of meaning and to provide new avenues for further study.

For communities, the putting forward of a series of exemplars over time could help clarify the theoretical ideas that need to be confronted within any particular issue and most importantly, would illustrate the significance of 'working knowledge' as the key

way of dealing with such theoretical schema. The exemplars do not dominate, but guide exploration of solution pathways to dilemmas so that the theoretical and generalised becomes practical and specific. A model of knowledge and practice shown in Figure 2, is an exemplar that has arisen from recent projects involving Indigenous students in primary and secondary school:

Figure 2. Exemplar of knowledge and practice for Indigenous education.



To qualify as a Kuhnian exemplar, a diagram of this type would need to establish a working procedure such that ‘Acquiring an arsenal of exemplars, just as much as learning symbolic generalisations, is integral to the process by which a student gains access to the cognitive achievements of his disciplinary group. Without exemplars he would never learn much of what his group knows about such fundamental concepts as force and field, element and compound, or nucleus and cell (Kuhn 1977, p.307). The model proposed in Figure 2 suggests that the central components of knowledge and learning are practice and discourse, that is that personal practice is a central aspect of knowledge production in both the local and general sense. The notion of ‘the personal’ is significant in that it is often not found in formal educational programs, but if integrated, provides an important link across Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning. Scientific investigation involves working within broad paradigms or exemplars or disciplinary matrices that embody modes of knowing and problem solving approaches that while combining theory and practice, generally proceed via practical and experiential means. This is a key idea that brings Indigenous and non-Indigenous process together.

In discussing step 1 of the narrative process above, it was suggested that the movement from field experience to field texts could involve the collection of letters, articles, newspaper reports and the like as well as the compilation of the personal narratives themselves. These items could be considered as artifacts for inclusion in an overall research portfolio. For Indigenous peoples whose tradition may be more oral, it is appropriate to include artifacts that are at least in the first instance non-written such as paintings, songs, photographs, oral stories from Elders and digital records of ceremonies if permission is granted. Knowledge, stories and local history involving sacred sites and important events as held by Elders may not be available at the time a research project is undertaken and will therefore diminish the extent and quality of the evidence collected. Whether or not a portfolio of artifacts will constitute an exemplar of practice or of knowledge is problematic at the beginning of a research process and

an exemplar may not be produced until after a number of cycles of investigation have been completed. Whether or not a portfolio does constitute an exemplar of knowledge or practice will be decided by consensus of the group concerned.

For the purpose of narrative inquiry and reflective practice, the exemplars so proposed will need to begin with and be seen as being credible by communities of practice if they are to contribute to and improve practice of those using the exemplar. The research process described above has taken narrative inquiry as its mode of investigation and has proposed a series of techniques to ensure that inquiry is systematic and rigorous, links with theory and can result in further practice that is informed by and can be critiqued by theoretical concerns. These techniques are referred to as narrative conversation, insight, interpretation and meta-insight. A further step involves the theorising of exemplars that capture the essence of the work being pursued and which provides the basis of new cycles of investigation and clarification of meaning. There are thus two types of exemplar, those that characterise a particular approach to practice and those that characterise a particular problem within a particular field of knowledge.

Democratic practitioner research

Indigenous Australian cultures, while having some similarities, are as diverse as Europe and western Asia. This can be best explained by the placement of a map of Australia over Europe whereby Perth is overlaid upon central Spain, Broome nearly atop Britain, Darwin near Norway, Melbourne in the Mediterranean Sea near Greece and Brisbane adjacent to the Black Sea. While we loosely group all these people under the category of 'European' for specific purposes, we do not identify the Spanish, the British, the Norwegians, the Greeks and the Russians as the same people. The same is applicable to Aboriginal Australia. (Foley 2007, p. 106)

Given this vastness of Australia and the large number of Indigenous peoples each with their own country, culture and language, the question of difference must be respected and recognized by the dominant society. As mentioned previously, a process of two-way inquiry learning should enable this to happen as groups of people come together to determine serious issues. The power of story is one essential principle that can link the understandings of all participants provided that they embark upon their journey with a commitment to respect different histories and viewpoints. Attwood (2005) has pointed out that the oral tradition of Indigenous peoples has been criticised and often dismissed as being inaccurate, but that new attempts at interpretation are being made. He comments that historians and anthropologists may now consider 'oral histories and oral traditions not so much to recover past events of the frontier as to discover how these have been understood by Aboriginal and settler peoples since that time. In this mode, oral histories or traditions are treated as accounts *of* the past rather than accounts *from* the past' (p. 175). To achieve such respect in cross-cultural settings is a difficult task, particularly in formal arrangements of education and research. What can be agreed however is a process of narrative construction and inquiry occurring over long periods of time that contains major events, ideas and themes while the detail can remain a little obscure, or even in dispute.

Democratic approaches to knowledge that include for example practitioner research, action research, action learning and self-study, must be very respectful of these matters when working with Indigenous communities. Systematic narrative inquiry as described here provides a recognized framework for the inclusion of story as data and for the development of underlying ideas and principles as the community works through and with meaning. Connelly and Clandinin (2006, cited by Clandinin, Pushor & Orr 2007, p. 22) note that ‘Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful.’ Other, more empirical methodologies of course, do not have to accept this proposition and proceed from the point of view that knowledge emerges primarily from measurable ‘facts’ alone. Whatever the approach researchers bring to working with Indigenous peoples, the formal ethics application must include acceptance of cross-cultural respect and protocols for adopting a framework of equality amongst participants (see NHMRC 2003). While the situation remains that many Indigenous peoples in Australia see themselves as being the most researched population in the country and are highly suspicious of non-Indigenous projects and their purpose whether practitioner or otherwise, a strict adherence to Indigenous ethical processes is imperative.

Let us allow Bourdieu to have the final word. Essential to his concept of habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) is the context within which social practices occur, the expectations, rituals, disputes, contradictions and interpretations of practice, referred to by Bourdieu as cultural fields. In describing this concept, Bourdieu (1998, p. 32) took a very broad view such that:

All societies appear as social spaces, that is, as structures of differences that can only be understood by constructing the generative principle which objectively grounds these differences. This principle is none other than the structure of the distribution of the forms of power or the kinds of capital which are effective in the social universe under consideration – and which vary according to the specific place and moment at hand.

Bourdieu goes on to discuss this idea of cultural field as involving a ‘field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it as a field of struggles within which agents confront each other’ (p. 32). The degree of influence that each person is able to exercise depends on a field positioning in relation to others and the amount of cultural capital that is accumulated. This view of Bourdieu shows that educational research cannot be isolated from the social storms that engulf educational practice of all types and that they must be confronted as a key aspect of the research process. For Indigenous peoples, such storms include racism, poverty, exploitation and dispossession of land and culture, still occurring on a daily basis in the midst of plenty. Democratic practitioner research based on systematic narrative inquiry can bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples together to not deny difference, but to understand it and to move forward from its firm foundation.

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