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Recommended Citation

Buckmiller, Tom (2009). "In the “Heart of Indian Country”: The Lived Experience of Native American Adult Learners at a Predominantly White University," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2009/papers/12>

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In the “Heart of Indian Country”: The Lived Experience of Native American Adult Learners at a Predominantly White University

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Abstract: Native Americans are the least likely to enroll and persist to graduation at the university. Further, the confluence of being a Native American *and* being an adult learner is a phenomenon that needs further examination. This qualitative research studies the lived experiences of three Native American adult learners at a predominantly white midwestern university.

Introduction

The university has not typically been a site conducive to the needs of Native American students, as it has been oriented toward the problematic goal of assimilation (Brayboy, 2006). Pavel (1999a) identifies Native Americans as the least likely to enroll in public four-year institutions and the least likely to persist to graduation in those institutions. Tierney (1992) says that of the Natives who do find their way to the university, an alarming 85% will not finish. A conscious, sustained, and informed effort will hopefully lead to an education that respects Native American students for who they are, that is relevant to their worldview, that offers reciprocity in their relationship with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

Previous Research

Beaulieu (2000) says that Indian students, in comparison to all others, are still the most disproportionately affected by poverty, low educational attainment, and limited access to educational opportunities (as cited in Grande, 2004). They exhibit the highest dropout rates, the lowest academic performance rates, and the lowest college admission and retention rates in the nation (American Council on Education, 2002 as cited in Grande, 2004, p. 5).

While there exists a modest yet insightful amount of research detailing the challenges that traditional aged Native American students face in college, it should be noted that Native American adults have not yet received the research attention that other minority groups, such as African Americans, have (Imel, 2001). For a further discussion on previous research see (Buckmiller, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

Lowe (2005) says “Qualitative research takes time, but already too much time has gone by without an adequate volume of research on the experiences of Native American students. Native students need to be asked about their experiences and given the opportunity to tell their story” (p. 39). Therefore, the theory that guided this inquiry came primarily from what is known as Red pedagogy. Red pedagogy has roots in critical theory and critical pedagogy but has advanced to encompass various Indigenous principles. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005), Devon Abbott Mihesuah & Angela Cavender Wilson (2004), and Sandy Grande’s Red pedagogy (2004) all contributed to a framework that challenges educators of Native Americans to reflect and recognize the

controversial intersection of traditional Native knowledge systems with mainstream Western knowledge systems (Begaye, 2004).

Red pedagogy seeks to enable education and pedagogy to extend beyond the classroom and institution and allows Indigenous communities to theorize their own lives and connect their past histories with their future lives (Marker, 2003 as cited in Smith, 2005). This framework provides inquiry and analysis that exposes, challenges, and disrupts the continuing colonization of Native land and resources and seeks greater political, intellectual, and spiritual sovereignty for Native peoples (Grande, 2004).

Methodology, Design, Researcher Identity, and Sample

I used hermeneutical phenomenology because this methodology clearly fit with my curiosity about the lived experience of the participants. For instructors reflecting upon pedagogy, acquiring a phenomenological sensitivity to the lived experience of the learner can be useful. Phenomenological questions are meaning questions that can aid in a better way of understanding that may cause teachers to act more thoughtfully, more tactfully, and more responsively with regards to pedagogy and relationships.

The faculty of the Department of American Indian Studies at the “University of the Great Plains” (UGP) suggested various participants for this study. UGP is located in a midwestern state that is home to nine American Indian reservations and has a statewide Native population of 10%. At UGP, however, the Native population comprises only 1% of the total population.

I interviewed three Native American adult students enrolled at UGP: Stanley (age 43), Mato (33), and Sam (30). All three participants grew up on different reservations in the Great Plains region. Interviews ranged in length from 50 minutes to 2 ½ hours. Data were collected through in-depth interviewing grounded in the theoretical genre of phenomenology. An interview guide with open-ended, semi-structured questions was used in order to focus on key areas, yet allowing for flexibility. Phenomenological analysis required me to approach the texts with an open mind, seeking meaning and structures that emerge. I used inductive analysis and a constant comparative method of data analysis through which key themes from the interviews were identified. The final step was the validation of the analysis by checking with the participants to see if they agreed, extended, or disputed my judgments of what was important and interesting.

Ultimately this interpretive study will be conducted through the eyes of a white male, who had many educational privileges and opportunities afforded by being in the mainstream of a predominantly white place. Even though this research is a co-construction, bracketing, as much as possible, my white mainstream educational assumptions will be an important part of this study. I do not bring the claim of being an objective researcher to this study, as I believe it is inevitable that all researchers bring various biases, opinions, thoughts, and feelings to a study as a result of their personal socio-cultural and historic past.

It should be noted that although many of the core traditional values permeate the lives of Native Americans across Tribal groups, Native Americans are not a completely homogeneous group, differing greatly in their level of acceptance of and commitment to specific tribal values, beliefs and practices through a variance of customs, language, and family structure (Garret & Pichette, 2000). Thus, it is dangerous to stereotype or make broad generalizations regarding Native peoples.

Findings

The Disorienting Effects of Being at University of the Great Plains

Sam's childhood education experiences ranged from a predominantly white elementary school when he recalls being called a "prairie nigger" to a Tribal high school that according to Sam, "*provided a space to concentrate more on being Dakota, and an environment that was healthy and more comfortable.*" But even this wide range of childhood education experiences probably could not have prepared him for life at the university. Discrimination, racism and ignorance all compound the complexities of attending a university located off the reservation. Sam reflects on what it was like,

When I first started out I hardly would talk (in class), it was a big learning curve. I think for any student it is difficult, but I think Native students are at a little bit of a disadvantage, especially when you add on the small disadvantage academically and the cultural difference and the difference in racial composition. Add in all those factors plus any problems that may come from home—which often is things dealing with health, alcoholism, drug abuse the things that often go on at reservations, I guess things tend to be more complicated. Bringing all that baggage to school and plus the feeling that you really don't belong there. It's really difficult.

According to Tierney (1992a), "In the case of American higher education we find that colleges and universities reflect the culture of the dominant society. In America, that dominant culture is white" (p. 608). Mato confirms, "*there is culture shock coming from the reservation to the university. I mean walking into a classroom full of a hundred non-Native students, it's intimidating.*" Mato eventually learned to cope with this culture shock by confronting the prejudice. Mato explains, "*but how I use it now is that, it's not my shortcoming if someone has a prejudice or maybe it goes all the way to racism, it's not my problem...its theirs. I'm here to do something and I am going to do it.*" Sam continues,

Coming from a Tribal school, when I got to the university it was like seeing a sea of white people. And not because it is different, but because of what you're used to and what you've experienced with the white people from where you're from and how racist (this state) is.

Along those lines, Stanley explains, "*there are still some very closed minds here. Ignorance is a comfortable place to be.*"

Cultural Conflicts and Classroom Contradictions

Native students often will face contradictions and conflicts in the classroom. As Sleeter (1993) pointed out, white teachers often have a knowledge of race based on their own life experience and vested interests, and the idea of what is "correct" comes from the white perspective (as cited in Pewewardy, 2002). Sam reflects on this one-way idea of teaching:

Because their idea of relevancy within the classroom and curriculum of what's supposed to be taught and understood and what's given from the teacher to the student is supposed to be this one way for basically this monolithic group of white Christian American young people and its supposed to go from professor to student like a certain prescription.

The perspective some white teachers have about race is what Joyce King (1991) defines as "dysconscious racism," a form of racism that accepts without cultural awareness the dominant white norms and privileges (as cited in Pewewardy, 2002). These perspectives, when manifested in educational practice, are located somewhere between racism and assimilation and are detrimental to the Native learner. The negative impact of historical and contemporary discriminatory policies and practices on Native peoples has devastated their standard of living and created major cultural conflicts (Herring, 1999).

Using a lens from critical theory helps to investigate conflict, not only when someone speaks up because of an injustice, but also when there is silence on the part of the voiceless (Tierney, 1992b). Stanley reflects on the response to the Native perspective or way of knowing in the classroom or academe,

A lot of times I think that it (the Native perspective) is not widely accepted. Actually, it's heard, but not really listened to. And sometimes I think it's exploited or taken out of context and changed around to a certain degree. That is something that I've struggled with the most in my experience thus far.

Sam shares, "it's hard because a lot of times people don't react, you'll say something in class that you feel is important like 'what about this?' and they'll say 'yeah' and then keep going like I wasn't even there." The work of Semali and Kincheloe (1999) seem to confirm Stanley's and Sam's thoughts, "ways of knowing and action could contribute so much to the educational experiences of all students; but because of the rules of evidence and the dominant epistemologies of Western knowledge production, such understandings are deemed irrelevant by the academic gatekeeper." A critical study of how knowledge is valued/not valued in the classroom looks at the hidden barriers that exist for the Native American adult learner. Implicit in the structure of academe is a system that seeks to exclude some individuals and reward others because of the lack of "cultural capital," or the accumulation of it (Tierney, 1992b).

Native students often must grapple with the notions of not only navigating a system that seems to come natural for their white counterparts, but also how these ideals, many of which are contradictory, are to be negotiated within an Indian framework. Stanley's experiences seem to occupy a similar position,

It can be difficult at times and it can be eye-opening. And by difficult I mean that I find myself in this unfamiliar territory having to compromise the way I've been raised, my beliefs, and the cultural integrity that I was raised with of very specific protocols of how to be a Native male, a Native man and trying to do that in light of how academia has interpreted my culture, that's pretty difficult to do. I find myself questioning it on occasion, not ready to quit by any means, but questioning the validity of academic structure based on that, and if I'd have to compromise myself in some areas, it can be kind of difficult.

Sam has found that sometimes the most valuable knowledge doesn't come from the content of the classes. "I really can't stand (the content) a lot of the times. I guess school has helped me understand that it's not maybe understanding for myself the knowledge that I feel I need, but rather where the understanding of where the Western world is coming from." For Mato the wisdom gained from the university may sometimes not be the most obvious, "My Native instincts tell me to be humble, to listen, and maybe that there's more teaching in there and maybe what they're trying to teach me isn't really what's on the surface. My culture tells me that there's always a teaching underneath."

Sam acknowledges that for many students, dealing with the contradictions of the university are detrimental to the student's academic pursuit, "It pulls people apart inside and so many people are like 'I'm not going to do this' and go back home. It almost feels like something ugly gets inside you and starts sleeping inside you."

Using University Knowledge and Cultural Knowledge at Home

Champagne (2006) says that ideally, Western education forms, skills, and knowledge will be critically assessed and if appropriate and necessary, combined with Native forms of education, skills and knowledge in order to find culturally unique solutions to contemporary and future

social, economic, and cultural conditions. Stanley's long-term goal is to continue his education, earn his Ph.D. and teach in a university or college, and "mold the minds of the young". He indicated an openness to teaching at either a Tribal College or non-reservation university.

Although Sam's degree will be in American Indian Studies and English, he is interested in making documentary films. He said he was heavily influenced by the many Native American, African, and African American authors he read in college and wants to do work that makes a difference. Sam's calling to make documentary films is fueled by the fact that there aren't very many Natives doing this work and yet there are plenty of Indian issues that need attention from a wider audience.

Wilson (2005, p. 77) says, "Fortunately there seems to be a growing number of Natives who are less concerned about their status in the white world and more concerned with helping their respective Nations with long-term survival." Mato, who has overcome battles with alcohol and drug use, will have a degree in drug and alcohol counseling which will ultimately help him when he goes home to the reservation,

I have to go home. If anything it's just to instill some hope. I mean, I'm not going to say I'm better or worse than anyone, but I lived a crazy life. There's a lot of my relatives and a lot of my friends and a lot of my people who choose to struggle and I like to say that if I can do it there's hope for a lot of them.

Conclusions

The university is filled with contradictions and conflicts for the Native American learner. In a context where knowledge is valued, epistemology, or "ways of knowing", becomes a contested space. Additionally, where there is contested space, issues of power are also inherently manifested. The burden of this conflict is cast upon the Native American learner, as the Native "ways of knowing" or worldview is often incongruent with that of institutional and/or mainstream "ways of knowing." These contradictions often lead these students to believe that their worldview, stemming from Native American culture, religion, traditions, and heritage, are wrong and unvalued, thus having no place in the mainstream world of the university.

It is clear that higher education does not yet provide a hospitable environment that attracts and holds Native American students at a satisfactory rate (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). One of the paradoxes of educational institutions is that they are assumed to be providers of opportunity, yet Native Americans do not always perceive the university in that manner (Tierney, 1992). From a university perspective, it makes good sense to broaden the personal and professional perspectives and range of understanding about the complex web of human relationships that make up the higher education enterprise (Tippeconnic Fox, 2005). Further, if the university hopes to recruit and retain Native American learners, it must be able to present itself in ways that have instrumental value to Native students; that is, the programs and services must connect with the students' own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

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