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Exploring Critical and Indigenous Research Methods with a Research Community: Part I – The Leap

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In Brief: Librarians create collections of works grounded in many western academic forms of research and they conduct research using many of these qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well. But are there perhaps research methods around the margins, ones that might help us ask different questions or let our research serve different ends? In this, the first of two articles, I describe how I discovered critical and indigenous research methods and how my research became grounded in a digital community.

This is the email that started it all:

*Hi Bob, I really enjoyed your presentation today. Your goofy sense of humor and passion for learning made the hour fly by. Plus, it was great to learn more about advancing my research skills and taking advantage of technology in the research process. So I would like to make an appointment with you for next week to get your help in narrowing my research question and help in pointing me towards some key areas to start researching on my topic... My area of research is urban Native American high schools students, their families, and the larger urban Indian community in regards to education...What **indigenous assessment methodologies** are they using to determine student strengths, challenges, and learning style? Are these **culturally responsive methodologies** more effective than what is being used at Portland Public Schools? ...are Native American youth performing better academically at charter schools or alternative schools that are **culturally responsive**? These are very broad questions so I need some help narrowing them down. What research is going to be reasonable to accomplish in my McNair time frame? **What research will be most helpful to my community?** What research has been done on these topics? Who is researching this? **At the end of the day I want my research to be helpful to my community.** Over the years much research has been done **on** our community (as Native Americans), yet little of it has actually **helped our people and our tribal communities**. I believe education in one of the most important tools we have in our tool box to address and start solving the complex and intergenerational problems we are facing as Native peoples. So that's a*

In January 2012, Shilo George wrote me this email , requesting to meet for a research consultation. Shilo, a McNair Scholar at Portland State, was the catalyst for my current research project embodied in the article you are reading right now. As part of my library instruction work, I have been liaising with Portland State's McNair Scholars for the last seven years. This national program "… works with motivated and talented undergraduates who want to pursue PhDs. It introduces juniors and seniors who are first-generation and low-income, and/or members of under-represented groups to academic research and to effective strategies for getting into and graduating from PhD programs." ((Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, Portland State University, 5/29/14, http://www.pdx.edu/mcnair-program/)) The intent of this program is to increase these non-traditional students' academic social capital, attempting to level the playing field with their more privileged peers. In my role with this program, I teach a library research session with a double focus. I support their current McNair Scholar's research, which tends to be more complex than average undergraduate research, and I also focus on aspects of research most often associated with graduate or PhD researchers. This includes helping students find key experts in their field; discover venues in which they might publish; set up RSS feeds to keep current in their topics; and identify which graduate schools are researching in their areas of interest. Ostensibly, I was teaching Shilo and her fellow undergraduates to begin to think like doctoral-level researchers, but they were teaching me as well. In Shilo's email, I began to see not only a complex and authentic research topic evolving out of her lived-experiences, but also the first few notes of a theme that was to echo over the next year in my relationship with Shilo and her research – that of a new way (to me) of research with and for a community. She recommend a book she was currently reading, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* by Shawn Wilson, and invited me to her graduation party. It was the first graduation party I attended where I didn't bring a gift, but rather was treated to a public appreciation of my contribution to Shilo's research and given a gift as well. This is the first of two articles. Here I sketch the path I took getting to this precarious place of *Exploring Critical and Indigenous Research Methods with a Research Community.* The journey I describe shows how one librarian's practice can, through reflection and the application of a dash of theory, turn into research and scholarship. *Lead Pipe* will publish the second article in fall 2014. It will report my findings on critical and indigenous research methods and their application to library and information science (LIS), and investigate the process of researching with a community. In my normal research mode, I would have researched, written, and published only the second of these articles as the product of my research. But Shilo's research and Shilo researching from her place in the center of a community has subtly, but profoundly moved me off my foundations. Lately I have experienced a slow shift in my own methods. While I still relish engaging with theories, concepts, and other researchers' ideas discovered through reading their scholarship, I have noticed that engaging with the people behind the research and the research process itself has become more a focus of my scholarship. This reflection in my research has taken a more self-reflexive turn, so that the process of research, the community in which the research is situated, and my place and role in it have become parts of my scholarly pursuits. I am reminded of Shawn Wilson, in *Research is Ceremony*, quoting Terry Tafoya, "Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen." ((Terry Tafoya, "Finding Harmony: Balancing Traditional Values with Western Science in Therapy," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 21 ,supplement (2005) 12.))

Let's Get Critical

Shilo and her examples of "research as community" piqued my interest in what these indigenous research methods entail, how they might differ from other research methods more commonly used in academe, and what they might mean to (LIS). At the time that I met Shilo I had started to research what I cavalierly call "critical theories" (such as the Frankfurt School, feminism , critical race theory, queer theory, and post- colonialism and their relationships to LIS. Critical educators such as Paolo Freire argued that education needs to be more liberatory and transformative to the people involved, both those in the roles of "students", and those in the roles of "teachers." As he wrote in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world…" ((Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 80.)) This is surely what had been happening when Shilo and I talked! I began to wonder if there were more "critical research methods" available to scholars — for all I knew I made up this term. Freire discussed how the *instructional aspects* of education could become more liberatory, but I wondered if *scholarly research* might also work in transformative ways. One example, with which I became familiar while liaising with students in Portland State's Graduate School of Education, is *participatory action research.* Davydd Greenwood defines participatory action research (PAR) as:

As I do the research for my second article, my goal is to ferret out more examples of similar research methods, ones that will be beneficial to librarians.

Finding (Digital) Community

From my meeting with Shilo and my exploratory reading of critical pedagogy, a new research project (the one you are currently reading) began to form. Initial research questions developed in my mind, questions such as;

Are there existing research methods that might align themselves with critical theories?
What exactly are indigenous research methods, and what makes them unique?
What are the defining features of indigenous and critical research methods, and is there overlap between them?
Who uses these methods, and are there researchers in LIS using them?
How might librarians use these research methods and their knowledge of them in their practices?

As I was preparing to research these questions, a voice from critical theory. ((I'm not sure from where or who, just a vague recollection. Perhaps a reader will recall a critical theorist somewhere mentioning the need for self-critique?)) sounded in my head, reminding me to not only critique the works of others, but my own work as well. I needed to inquire into my own unarticulated assumptions, at the very least to come clean with my own motivations. I realized that I was about to go off on another of my individualistic "Marlboro Man" research journeys, studying topics like Native American ideas and the idea of research as community. The culture clash! The hubris! I realized I needed to more closely model this current research project on indigenous and critical methods, to the extent I could with my limited understanding. While I am not a member of an indigenous group, reading Shawn Wilson's book led me to seek out a research community of my own. Pondering how to make my research more community based, I stumbled upon the digital humanities project ((Very recently I also saw that Harvard University, as part of their Digital Initiative project , published their first "crowd-sourced" article titled The Capitalist's Dilemma.")) was using what they called MediaCommons. One of its projects is the MediaCommonsPress (MCP). MCP publishes free, online works in the humanities — works that are often created by groups, and in which reviews of the works are open and continuous throughout the publication process. Not only does MCP produce digital humanities texts in this novel manner, it also self-reflectively publishes on this new publishing model itself. Titles include *Comment Press: New (Social) Structures for New (Networked) Texts*, *Media Commons: Scholarly Publishing in the Age of the Internet*, and *Open Review*. While I was taken with the open review process used by MCP and the community participation it afforded, I realized that the costs associated with the software used, as well as overhead, would make this specific instance of open review prohibitive for many individual librarians with no budget. It was now clear to me that the community research project I was about to launch could be also be a pilot of "open review for the rest of us." But I had not yet found my "us." Indigenous researchers are organically situated in their own communities, which allows them immediate connection to a group and intimate knowledge of the issues and problems they face. But who might I connect with; who might I be researching with and researching for? It struck me that, at least for this research project, my community might be other librarians with an interest in critical and indigenous research methods. Granted this would be an ad hoc group, but one that I hoped would be willing to extend themselves by helping to inform the direction of this research, and, more importantly, critique and enrich my work through the feedback they could give as it progressed.

Weaving Together

I identified three strands for this research project – indigenous research methods, critical research methods, and researching as part of a digital community. To find a research community and to make my research more immediately responsive and relevant to a group, I created a survey of four open-ended questions:

What would be interesting or important to know about critical research methods?
What would be interesting or important to know about indigenous research methods?
What issues specific to library and information science should be explored in regards to critical or indigenous research methods?
What ideas, theories, or previous researchers' ideas should be considered in doing this research? (You can name the names of researchers or texts for within or without of LIS).

The survey was sent to three listservs to which I belong – Social Responsibilities Round Table Action Council (SRRTAC-l), Information Literacy Instruction Discussion List (ILI-l), and Education and Behavioral Science Section (EBSS-l). I prefaced the survey with an invitation for both naïve and expert questions, and I introduced the idea that by helping to inform this

research, participants would become part of my "research community." At the end of the survey, I invited participants to leave their email addresses if they wished to continue as community members and be invited to comment on my research as it progressed. I left the survey open for two weeks and twenty-two people responded to my questions; twelve of these left email addresses so that I could contact them later for feedback. I have taken the community feedback and integrated it into my initial research questions below. Community feedback is summarized in italics, and direct quotes are in quotation marks.

Are there research methods out there that might align themselves with critical theories?
  What does "critical" mean in this context?
  How related to social justice, Marxist, or critical race theories?
  Is this just a buzz word or does it mean anything?

What exactly are indigenous research methods, and what makes them unique?
  Define the term.
  Why am I considering them in terms of LIS?
  "How and why the use of such methods might be considered a form of appropriation and thus forced or inappropriate."

What are the defining features of indigenous and critical research methods, and is there overlap between them?
  What are their benefits and limitations?
  How can these methods validate individual and communal experience?
Who uses these methods, and are there researchers in LIS using them?
  Linda Tuhiwai Smith – Decolonizing Methodologies.
  Critical race theory, feminist theory, post-colonialism, queer theory, and Marxism.
  Gramsci and McLuhan – "information as commodity, hegemony, message creation, propaganda."
  L.F. Lavallee, M. Mendelson, M. Evans.
  Paulo Freire.
  "Um, do your own critical research, dude. There is a difference between giving you feedback and doing your job for you."
How might librarians use these research methods, and knowledge of them, in their practices?
  "How do we promote qualitative research in an increasingly quantitative world?"
  Should the topic of research shape the methods of the research?
  What are the impacts of privilege on research – epistemological impacts, process barrier impacts, or research reception impacts?
  How can these methods be applied in higher education and in the digital age?
  "How does process and collaboration impact on the researchers' direction of research?"
  How might librarians, uninformed of these methods or theories learn to incorporate them in their research?
  "Provision of library services to diverse populations"
  "Problematizing the Western notions of objectivity and/or neutrality in regard to library collections."
  "Who creates and controls information? Who creates the frames?"
  In instruction and collaboration with faculty.
  "Unpacking our approaches to research and our relationships with existing research."
  How is information defined, and who is considered an expert?
  Power relationships within the library and with other parties like students, instructors, and vendors.

Many of the comments and suggestions confirmed my original ideas. This let me know I was on the right track and that the relatively naïve frame I would be constructing for this research might be appropriate for LIS readers. As you can see for my community's comments above, I was also given many new (for me) ways of looking at my questions. I was introduced to a number of new theorists — among them Antonio Gramsci, Friedrich Nietzsche, Marshall McLuhan, as well as the Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand researchers Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Lynn F. Lavallee, Michael Mendelson, and Michelle Evans. These comments were helpful in broadening the base of my search even before it began. There were also some resistance raised that forced me to reflect on the totality of the project itself. Some questioned if "critical research methods" was even a meaningful term and warned me to be aware of colonizing or appropriating indigenous methods in inappropriate ways. These were important points to internalize and make part of my continuing self-critique. One comment resonated particularly strongly with me: "Um, do your own critical research, dude. There is a difference between giving you feedback and doing your job for you." The jaunty and flippant tone of this comment grabbed my attention, and it was a nice envelope for a serious message. The comment was written in response to my asking for any leads or theorists to potentially investigate (question #4 above). I think I may have had a similar response if I had answered this question before I learned a bit about alternative, more community based methods. The Western academic "Marlboro Man" type of research to which we have all been socialized by virtue of the years we have spent in academe is so tightly woven into the grand narrative of scholarship that it seems "natural," and so we blindly defend it. The community member who offered up this comment seems to imply that I'm asking others to do my work for me — but with this community research pilot I am exploring a new cooperative model. It is true that in question #4 I do ask for any leads others may have, and that I will use this information to help jumpstart my research. If my community were an indigenous one, there would be a high probability that I would already know the issues that we as a group consider important because we share a long past together. But because my community has only coalesced just now around this one issue, by asking this question I am attempting to access our shared

knowledge and sources on the subject at hand. The other part of the relationship between me and my new-found community is reflected in questions #1 to #3. There, I ask for issues that the community wants me to research. One way to view this exchange is that they will provide helpful information **for** me to begin my research and I will be researching **for** them. Another way to see this is that we will be researching **with each other.** Shawn Wilson says, "Research by and for Indigenous peoples is a ceremony that brings relationships together." (2008, p.8) I am hoping to take this ceremony we call academic research and use it to build relationships with my newfound community of researchers.

The Leap

To recap, I am setting off on a project where I will research critical and indigenous research methodologies and what relevance they might have to librarians and the field of LIS. I am engaging with a digital research community in the process of producing my scholarship, and this "researching with a community" process will be analyzed in my next article, along with my findings related to the questions above. I was drawn to publishing in *Lead Pipe* because it is open access, it is published in a blog format (with comments enabled), and it allows for continuous open review, albeit in a post-publication fashion. Because the article will be in two parts, peer input is welcomed during the rest of my research and writing process. I invite any readers to offer suggestions you have for this research project by commenting on this blog below. Or, if you would like to review the second article prior to its publication in the fall, please email me at schroedr@pdx.edu and I will add you to my community. *To be continued…*

Acknowledging my community:

Even getting to this place in my research I've been supported by many colleagues and friends. Shilo George, of course, for being an amazing and dynamic catalyst. Many colleagues at Portland State University for giving me feedback on my survey and this projects development — Swapna Mukhopadhyay, Claudia Weston, and Meredith Farkas. My 22 anonymous community members who have helped direct this research, and Carol Terry, Amy Hofer, and editors of *Lead Pipe* who reviewed this piece. And of course the ever ebullient (even when enveloped in ennui), Emily Ford, for aiding and abetting me on this madcap adventure.

Photo credit: "Star Jump" https://www.flickr.com/photos/68134711@N00/3152875867/

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