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Circle as methodology: enacting an Aboriginal paradigm

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Circle as Methodology is a poetic narrative, a Trickster tale, which is descriptive of an Aboriginal method in use, while being critical of hegemonic beliefs which confine us. Fyre Jean seeks to engage qualitative researchers from all disciplines in an ongoing dialogue to recognize and resist the oppressive eurocentric attitudes and practices currently shaping research norms. Creatively combining Aboriginal teachings with qualitative design, the author shares insights she gleaned when researching the material for *Circle works: Transforming eurocentric consciousness*.

My ongoing lifework

Transforming contemporary challenges
by Invoking Aboriginal Tradition.

As Aboriginal educators we are Painfully aware
throughout Most of our lives

Schools are “ideological processing plants” (Maracle, 1988, p. 133).

Located within contemporary Western educational institutions

how can I contribute to education as the “practice of freedom” (Freire, 1972)
rather than perpetuating Repression

Colonialism

Eurocentrism.

I am, as Cornel West names, a “prophetic critic” (1993, p. 213).

I engage in modes of theoretical inquiry which

Unveil power structures

“Disclose options and alternatives for transformative praxis” (p. 213).

To Honor Tradition

I begin with my Self-In-Relation (Graveline, 1998).

My work, Circle as Methodology

is highly Contradictory

very Personal

ultimately Political.

Ng vocalizes my reality: “It is nevertheless in these contradictions that I exist, and therefore think, speak, and write” (Ng, 1991, p. 10).

To begin with my cultural-locatedness

Was and Is Conscious

A Political choice.

Our selves are ever present

“like a garment that cannot be removed” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17).

I espouse passionate inquiry

become deeply involved in things that I study.

“We cannot pretend that we do not care. We look at our subject with passion because we are our subject,” professes Raymond (1985, p. 58).

I agree with Weil and McGill (1989): “Meaning is not ‘out there’;

we are part of that meaning and we can therefore convey it personally” (p. xx).

To declare “what I know to be True” is a complex undertaking.

My own Consciousness was/is Shaped by Aboriginal teachings

Influenced by interactions with Western colonial realities.

Individual experience and Collective history leads to knowledge (Hill Collins, 1991).

“All experience is shaped by concrete social conditions” (Brah & Hoy, 1989, p. 71).

My Voice/Our Voices are a Materialization

Externalize our internal Beingness.

“Everything in the universe speaks,” tells Min-ha (1989, p. 128).

Aboriginal peoples have historically been denied Voice.

As McMaster and Martin declare:

“I want to say my own things to the world, and so, of course, given history, part of ‘my own things’ is that you don’t let me say anything” (1992, p. 23).

Appropriation of Voice is a Hot topic of “Post-Colonial” discourse.

Who should research

Speak about Native peoples’ Culture

Oppression

Social movement experiences?

To Elders only those who have Experienced an Event

are Empowered to Speak about it.

Embrace First Voice as Methodology.

Only those who Are Aboriginal

can speak about Being Aboriginal.

Can understand with any Depth

Our Meanings within a “Native perspective” (Young Man, 1992, p. 81).

“Don’t talk about what you don’t know” caution Elders.

I Challenge widely held Eurocentric notions.

White “experts” can Not

Should Not study Others

Ultimately speak for

on behalf of Us.

Findings vary Depending on values chosen.

Empower and enfranchise Some.

Disempower and disenfranchise Others.

“Inquiry thereby becomes a political act,” says Guba (1990, p. 24).

This is how We became

“those people”.

The “Uncivilized”

“Vanishing”

“Disadvantaged”

“Dispossessed”.

Unlearn White “expertism”.

Use First Voice in Research to address issues of
 White privilege (McIntosh, 1990)
 White racial identity development (Helms, 1990)
 White racism (Sleeter, 1994)
 European roles in Global colonization, racism, oppression (Said, 1993; Blaut, 1993)
 “the Imperial gaze” (Razack, 1998).

As Metis woman, scholar, activist, teacher and healer
 I enact First Voice as pedagogy and methodology.
 Observing my own lived experience as an Educator
 Sharing meanings with Others
 Create collective context.
 As Schutz reminds us “self-explication of our own lived experience takes place
 within the total pattern of experience” (1967, p. 105).

My Voice is Heard
 in Concert with Students and Community Participants
 through a “Grounded” approach (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983).

I asked: What pedagogical practices
 Enacted through my Model-In-Use
 contribute to what kinds of transformational learning?
 For whom?

I engage in “reconceptualization of curriculum” (Grumet, 1981, p. 140).
 Attempt to Reclaim curriculum as we have Lived it.
 Test my Conceptual description against the evidence of our Experiences.

Students’ weekly journals helped them
 air feelings
 record thoughts
 realize insights
 share observations
 reflect on experiences and actions taken.

As Mac tells it: “I wrote from the heart and only put down what I truly felt...
 to reflect my inner struggle with these issues and to convey it honestly.” (in
 Graveline, 1998, p. 74).

How do we select some events and exclude others?
 Why do we acknowledge some feelings, repress others?
 “Accounts can never exactly coincide with our experience” (Grumet, 1981, p. 141).

Hundreds of journal pages
 hand-tabulated
 Dissected into relevant themes.
 Subjective data committed to linear form.
 Decontextualized from their life narratives.
 Partial Stories clipped and coded.

I began to question: How can I possibly produce An “analysis”?
 How can I Reduce
 25 delightfully diverse
 Self reflective monologues
 into One document?

I envision a fluid pattern

Medicine Wheel as “paradigm”.

Paradigms are beliefs that Guide “action taken in connection with disciplined inquiry,” Guba says (1990, p. 17).

Teachings of the Sacred Circle.

Circular

Flowing

Integrative

Honoring Interconnectedness of All

Balancing Mental

Spiritual

Emotional

Physical Dimensions

How do I get from here to there?

Pray to the Grandmothers.

Phase Two began.

Ten Talking Circles planned and held.

Students and Community guests

Aboriginal

African Canadian

Asian

White

Invited to Participate.

Themes a Carefully Constructed Weave

journalled words and my reflections.

Consciousness

Context

Community

Change

Visions

Talking Circle as Methodology Enacted.

Traditionally a Sacred ceremony

a Gift from the Ancestors.

A physical reality

a Metaphysical experience.

An egalitarian structure

each voice acknowledged

heard in turn.

To choose words with care and thoughtfulness

is to speak in a Sacred manner.

We can each have our own Voice

speak our own Truth.

Tell our own Story.

In Circle all participants are encouraged to Be

Self-reflective

Culturally located.

To Listen Respectfully to Others

provides another lens to view our own Reality.

“Circle is a place of healing” says Elder Sarah (in Graveline, 1998, p.148).

“Through the sharing you can find strength and you can see a purpose for what you’ve gone through, that it’s making a difference in somebody’s life if you do share it” realizes Phil (in Graveline, 1998, p. 178).

Circle Builds community, “gives everyone a sense of worthiness and being valued and listened to, and respected,” acknowledges Char (in Graveline, 1998, p. 176)

Circle takes explicit modeling

clear Intent.

Re-fresh all minds

Guide participants

Re-vitalize Traditional philosophies and practices.

To Hart: “the fostering of solidary relations among all the participants

in a context of caring” (1991, p. 135)

is as Vital as the development of critical reflexivity.

Circle takes Time

Patience.

Do not rush the Council, my Elders say.

“There are no quick recipes for zapping sacred knowledge into the essences of who we are” reminds Absolon (1994, p. 33).

Talking Circle as Methodology Is an “Adaptation”.

I am reminded by an Elder

“This is not the practice, taking notes... in a setting like this”

(Sarah in Graveline, 1998, p. 241).

Other Traditional participants want to know:

How are Laws of “moontime”

abstinence from drugs and alcohol addressed?

Would requiring research participants to disclose

Substance consumption over the last four days?

Women sitting outside the Circle on their Moontime?

Be Unusual in an academic research setting?

Abusive of individual rights to Privacy?

What about the ingrained potential for Appropriation

by members of White culture, asks Charlotte?

“It’s very tempting to borrow wholesale from North American Earth Based

Tradition because its much more recent. It’s much more intact... But it’s not

right,” she says (Charlotte in Graveline, 1998, p. 245).

Using Circle in Eurocentric contexts

can be a negative, hurtful thing.

As Elder Sarah says: “I’d like the dominant society to learn from this. But I don’t want them to exploit it or to do damage to it, or make fun of it. That’s my biggest fear,” (in Graveline, 1998, p. 246)

Circle as Methodology has Complexities.

Simplicity Is an Illusion.

Physical forms may be easily Comprehended

Spiritual and other dimensions are Not.

Adaptations are a necessity

engage in them cautiously.

To 'Adapt' Aboriginal Tradition to Eurocentric contexts
 Humor is required.
 Trickster is Always ready to teach the unwary.

As I sat with 10 Talking Circles Transcribed
 Contradictions immediately began to arise.

How do I transform this "data"
 Collected through subjective
 circular
 community-based processes
 Into individualistic
 rational
 linearity
 required by Western minds?

Smith's message echoed in my mind
 We maintain the status quo
 through acceptance and use
 of "categorical and conceptual procedures that name, analyze and assemble what
 actually happens" (1973, p. 258).
 Eurocentric cultural norms are Revealed
 through what is named "Editing".

Rule One: ANONYMITY OR OBJECTIVITY

Strip all speakers of their "personal" identities

No given name
 family name
 community
 tribal affiliation
 geographic roots.

Eliminate all 'personal' narrative.

No identification of the speaker
 leads to Objectification
 de-contextualizes Speakers
 de-collectivizes Individuals.

Naming is highly personal
 and Political

When renaming is required
 to reconstruct meaningful exchange
 Soliciting self-selected pseudonyms can Empower participants.

Naming Oneself: Unicorn

Free
 Redbird
 Misel
 Sarah
 Hattie

Done for cultural
 Familial
 historical reasons
 re-integrates self-in-relation.

Rule Two: CATEGORIZATION

When Qualifiers used to designate Race
are Attached

to All speakers

It is a political act.

“You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” says
Hall (1991, p. 18).

Racialized communities have had many labels
attached to Us.

White is The Unspeakable
Invisible

Hegemonic

Assumed

Anonymous Category.

Be open to experience

“pedagogy of Disorientation” (Jay, 1995)
when White is named.

Creating Categories

confines Data

to Identified themes.

Eliminates much of potential importance.

When we exclude

Personal information

Interrelationships between those in Circle

Stories that do not directly relate to research “topic”

Supportive talk by some participants to others in Circle

Certain community building terms:

“you know”

“right”

“like (so and so) said”.

We make Invisible Community Building

Healing Dynamics of Circle.

We Ignore the “socially mediated” (Smith, 1987) nature of knowledge
in the Discovery of Facts.

Constructed in telling

facts are shaped by purposes for which they are Told.

Rule Three: BREVITY

I am told: “This quote is too long
has too much text to it.

Break it up.

Comment on the content.

Theorize: What do You think They mean?”

Create Bridges it is called.

I am stunned.

In Circle Talk

when a speaker has the Stone

She or he talks as long as they want.

Making their Own connections
 between Self and others in Circle
 Self and topic
 Self and Communities.

My task is to Shrink stories.
 Cut huge chunks of now named “extraneous” material.

As I struggle to Insert my own comments
 Intruding into Other’s stories
 I become self-consciously Aware.

Editing: a polite code word
 for Actions viewed Disrespectful
 Unacceptable
 in Traditional Circles.

Rule Four: READABILITY

Phrases such as “sort of”
 “like”
 “I guess”
 “of course”
 “I think”
 “I’d say”
 “so to me”
 “it seems”

When edited out
 make speakers express More authority on a topic
 than they might Feel.

When expressing Authentic realities
 not made into Words before
 it is natural to Stumble
 search for the “Right” words.

How do I convey Unspeakable
 Unmentionable
 Unasked for
 actualities?

When introducing Holistic paradigms
 we Challenge participants to New Awakenings.

We can Not Expect Coherence.

When in the name of Clean text
 blank spaces
 unfinished sentences
 rambblings
 are edited Out

we leave Ideas given “Reportable status” (Smith, 1987, p. 265)
 those “sanctioned and enforced” (p. 266) by Authorities.

We Eliminate Process.

How we Signal articulation
 of alternative knowledge paradigms
 is left Unaccounted for.

Having now written and published “Themes”

I now return to re-Search Patterns
 Old thoughts made New.
 Tradition re-made in modern contexts.

I ponder, for example,
 what methods of analysis can be created
 to make Visible
 Unspoken
 Silent communication?

As Thought forms travel among and around
 those communing in Circle
 Collective consciousness Grows.

As Cal notes: “There is a union without the words having been expressed. We don’t have to respond to everything, There is a degree of understanding.” (in Graveline, 1998, p. 148)

How can this “understanding” be “qualified” in qualitative research?

Through Circle as Methodology we learn and teach
 ethics of Reciprocity in research endeavors.
 How can we “qualify” Healing benefits
 produced and received by All members
 Engaged in Talking Circle?
 By all who recover their Own First Voice?
 All who learn to truly Listen to Others in Oneness
 with Open heartedness?
 By all who Deepen their Connection
 to All that Is?

In Conclusion I have Grown to realize
 Circle as Methodology
 can be Adapted Respectfully
 Enacted as a data collection forum
 in multiple contexts.
 Cautiously.

Be wary of Eurocentric norms.
 Do not be lured away from Traditional paradigms.

I Creatively coped
 Maintained Medicine Wheel as organizing frame.

I would Heartfully recommend:
 “data” collected by Talking Circle as Methodology
 is best left Un-edited
 Un-analyzed.
 Preserve the content Intact
 Circular
 Flowing
 Interconnected.

If They want to know
 “What does it all mean?”
 Tell Them
 Read between the Lines.

Megwetch

Thank you for accepting the Gift of my words
All My Relations

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