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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.
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.
This is how We became
“those people”.
The “Uncivilized”
“Vanishing”
“Disadvantaged”
“Dispossessed”.
Unlearn White “expertism”.

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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 & Essevel, 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.
“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
ramblings
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
the 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
Maintenance 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

References