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## Telling Stories and Living Art: Making Room for Social Justice and Diversity in Graduate Education

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction:

As an American Indian author, too often have I seen the oppression of wisdom and the ignoring of our “other ways of knowing” that Indigenous students experience in their quest to gain the “credibility” that a degree in higher education can offer in this world. Many cultures who are not full married to Euro-centric ways of learning and producing new knowledge suffer similarly. African American author, Patricia Williams expresses this reality:

I can no longer justify my existence in the academe... The moment I find some symbol of my presence in the rarefied halls of elite institutions, it gets stolen, co-opted, filled with negative meaning (1991, p. 27)

In their book, *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, editors Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (2005) offer chapters about Indigenous research and how its contributions to the world are oppressed in the academy from a Canadian perspective. The situation is worse in the United States.

Battiste in her comprehensive literature review on *Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education* (Canada) explains why this is a problem:

Indigenous scholars discovered that indigenous knowledge is far more than the binary opposite of western knowledge. As a concept, indigenous knowledge benchmarks the limitations of Eurocentric theory — its methodology, evidence, and conclusions — reconceptualizes the resilience and self-reliance of indigenous peoples, and underscores the importance of their own philosophies, heritages, and educational processes. Indigenous knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship (2002:5).

In 1999, Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith published *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. She writes about the importance of Indigenous people creating and applying *their own* research methodologies that have allowed them to survive for tens of thousands of years. These unique cultural approaches to observing and understanding the world and its relationships, although differing significantly between peoples and nations, often stand in contrast to Eurocentric ways learning about the world. As a result, “Indigenous scholars are in a position to enlarge the scope of research paradigms in ways that will benefit all research traditions (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 13). In other words, many of the ideas that come forward from our Indigenous authors can be useful for all students.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science has begun to recognize the potential contributions that indigenous people can make to our understanding of the world around us (Lambert 2003).

Indigenous societies, as a matter of survival, have long sought to understand the regularities in the world around them, recognizing that nature is underlain with many unseen patterns of order. For indigenous people there is a recognition that many unseen forces are at play in the elements of the

universe and that very little is naturally linear, or occurs in a two-dimensional grid or a three dimensional cube. (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, p. 12)

In his 1981 book, *The Primal Mind*, Jamake Highwater describes the results of education that operates according to the list above:

The West has grown positively sick of looking at itself, and it is trying to catch a glimpse of some vague “otherness,” some potential alternative, some different reality previously hidden beyond the self-congratulatory mirrors of a stifled and windowless civilization. (p. 24).

In this article, I offer a rationale for all students and teachers in higher education, not just non-western or Indigenous ones, to consider alternative approaches to dissertation or thesis research as a way to make room for diverse perspectives that are more likely to lead us toward social and ecological justice.

### PART ONE (academic writing, 3<sup>rd</sup> person)

Story telling and Truth were interconnected and it was with the utmost trust that The People received the tales of those who had gone before... (Eventually), the stories became words in books, but the subtle nuances, understandings and beliefs were lost. (They) became ‘stand alone’ narratives and the connections to the culture from which they came were irretrievably severed. —Shannon Thunderbird, from *Art and the Magic of Indigenous Story Telling*.

Non-western approaches to dissertation research and “writing” are actually about telling stories. Indigenous wisdom teaches that story telling via its many forms is the primary vehicle for all relevant learning. Many Western researchers agree. Livo and Rietz say: “Story structure is not an accidental or idle invention, but the profound product of a culture’s evolved perceptions of the way the universe works” (Livo & Rietz, 1986, p.21). In their article, “Recipe or Performing Art,” Fisher and Phelps write that “personal narrative can enhance the relevance and impact of research” (2006, p. 151). House says simply that all research is ultimately story-telling (House, 1994).

The concept of a story reminds us of the value of interpretation, contextualization, creativity and praxis. One of the great problems with typical academic research is “the constant need to seek its justification within someone else’s language game and in relation to someone else’s definition of suitable criteria” (Green cited in Winter et al., 2000, p.30). According to the literature describing most university doctoral programs, a dissertation should make an original and substantive contribution to a field of study. In other words, it is supposed to create significant new knowledge. This is difficult to do when one’s voice/story is muffled by the illusion of objectivity or when the previous voices of a literature review do more to discourage originality than to assure it. Too many vital visions are clouded by a system laden with, at best, an academic rhetoric more concerned with a sense of credibility than of truth, or, at worst, a hegemonic agenda maintained by gatekeepers of the status quo. In her own dissertation for Columbia University, Stephanie Alexandra Mackler put it this way:

The crisis of the university is implicated in the crisis of meaning in culture at large, which is characterized by feelings of meaninglessness and over-reliance on banal explanations in place of genuine interpretations of meaning (2004).

In an article raising a similar concern, then President of the Association of Psychological Science,

Roddy Roediger, suggested three strategies for improving the chances that doctoral candidates might create an authentic dissertation. One was to search for new ideas in a particular field and form questions about it. Another was to rekindle an older, nearly “forgotten” problem and address it in new ways. The third was to find conflicting theories and test them for the best explanation (2003). No doubt, these recommendations have merit, however, this text’s contributors offer another alternative. The ideas, dialogue, dissertation examples and personal stories in this book suggest that “other ways of knowing” offer doctoral students the greatest opportunities for producing an authentic dissertation and for offering effective ways to address the many challenges facing our world today- challenges that concern (or ought to) virtually every academic discipline. Returning to Mackler:

These interrelated crises can be addressed together by a new vision of liberal learning centered on questions of meaning. It would teach us to learn from exemplary attempts at meaning-making and to make meaning ourselves through story-telling (2004).

The late Lakota author/educator/lawyer/Indian activist, Vine Deloria, Jr., understood the difference between meaning-making and the more arrogant idea of reducing the world so as to invent new knowledge. He says that humans are supposed to learn from other, wiser beings so as to gather and understand knowledge, not dispense it in isolated, unrelated ways. This, he says, leads to healing the lack of balance in our world. “Western science forces secrets from nature by experimentation and the results of the experiments are thought to be knowledge. Traditional (Indigenous) people accepted secrets from the rest of creation” (Deloria, Jr., 2001, p.64).

PART TWO (adding the first person)

### The Authentic Dissertation

*I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men’s lives. -Thoreau*

*We have a hunger for something like authenticity, but are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile.- George Orwell*

Since I am now writing a book entitled, *The Authentic Dissertation* (in press), it seems fitting that I offer a sense of its intended meaning, beginning with what I do not intend for it to convey. First, I reject its obsolete reference to being “authoritative.” Most of the dissertation authors whose stories follow challenge many of the notions surrounding this concept. We tend see authority not in terms of external sources but from honest reflections on lived experience with the realization that everything is ultimately related or connected. (Jacobs, 1998, pp. 176-201).

In his on-line article, “Fake Authenticity: An Introduction,” Joshua Glenn says that whenever claims of authenticity are evoked then the claims are likely to be inauthentic (n.d., para 3). He applies this especially to arenas where dissent is paramount, an allegation that might easily be levied against this text. He refers to Theodor Adorno’s idea that many who assert authenticity for the sake of true meaning or liberty do so merely to further oppress. Although most of the writers of this book possess doctoral degrees, demonstrating that we also have bent toward accepting conventional authority, even if only through the will of wanting such a degree, if not in jumping through the hoops that may have violated a wiser conviction, we know too well the price society can pay for such conformity. Nonetheless, I submit

that you, the reader or future thesis writer, will see and feel a level of “authentic authenticity” in the real-life stories of our contributors that is truly liberating.

I believe Adorno himself would nod to the sincerity and the importance of our goal to mitigate the conformities and superficialities that too often guide the dissertation process. In his classic text, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, he likens the scholarship of the times to a “cult of employees” where “once idle talk is a state of mind, one need not be greatly embarrassed when authenticity turns to idle talk” (2003, p.86). (Routledge 2003 London). He compares the “undiminished irrationality of a rational society that elevates religion to an end in itself without regard to its content” (p.16) with what might be considered a religious reverence for the academy’s inauthenticity. In this vein he refers to the work of Ernst Anrich and his critique of German universities. Anrich seemed to understand our own ideas about authentic research as a spiritual undertaking when he wrote about the importance of the “Whole Being” as a primary force in the academic journey:

If it is right to demand of the student that the essence of his study must be to drive forward, within his own specialty, to the view of Being, then we must require of the professor that it be made clear how his own research is itself ultimately motivated by a struggle with these questions, and it may be expected that each of his courses should be an invoking and awakening force in this sense (p.16)

I agree with Glenn’s challenge for each of us to “boldly interpret where no one has interpreted before; to create not truth, but truthfulness, where none would otherwise exist; to be, for lack of a better word, an artist” (Fake Authenticity, para 7). I also generally (though not fully) concur with his idea that authenticity could be defined as something like “that mode of existence in which one becomes ironically and radically suspicious of all received forms and norms” (Ibid). But how do we translate this into research at the doctoral level? How to we express the concept that many of the traditional elders from the world’s First Nations are now struggling to understand- that we are going to have to take care of the entire world spiritually. How can we do this unless we shake off our preconceptions, see through the hegemony and, like an artist/scientist/lover, experience the whole world in our quest for probabilities in our area of interest?

Please do not get me wrong. I am not saying that all western research is inauthentic, not at all. Rather I am saying that too many doctorate candidates write inauthentic dissertations because the western approach does not coincide with their passion, style or creativity. Jamie Moran, in his lecture entitled, “Authenticity vs. The Pathology of Normality,” offers a more comprehensive understanding of how I intend the idea of “authentic.”

Authenticity in Latin means something that ‘proceeds from its own source.’ This does not just mean true to oneself in terms of acting from my feelings, my desires, my opinions, my thoughts, my preferences—it means something far more radical. It is about being an active participant, not just a passive passenger, in the hands of fate. Through dialogical exchange with the world, I author—it is in fact co-authoring—my existence.

Authentic carries implications of three potent realities; authorship, authentication, and authoritativeness. Authentication is the process that forges the person in their situation. We are existentially tested and proved. Some things in us come through the furnace, scorched but rendered more pure and more powerful, while many other things burn up on the way, and do not prove themselves. If we proceed from our truest source, yet are true to the situation, and if we live this out and

submit to the consequences, discovering what rings true and what rings false.

Authoritative is the converse of authoritarian, for authority does not itself 'descend' to any of that travail and tribulation, it is never tested and never proved, thus its deeds and words ring hollow. It persuades no one, it convinces no one—except those using it to buttress superstition. There is no authority above us, but there is an authoritativeness of those persons who have 'come through', not perished on the way, and these persons can help others come through.

Ultimately, compliance with social pressure toward conformism, the passion to be 'normal', is not compatible with authenticity. Authenticity could be briefly described as the real meaning of agency. Authentic agency and existentialism reject as tyranny any and all the beliefs, values, rules, procedures, set up to rob human beings of their agency. This is what is wrong with any authoritarian structure. It tyrannizes over humans, robs them of their agency, and takes away from them their responsibility, their accountability and their passion.

Finally, authenticity is an aim, a realistic aim, but it is never finally attained. It is a process, not a project. It is life long, rather than having some end point where one can shout, I have arrived! There are no formulae for it. It is a path that we both create and uncover only as we walk it. On this path we struggle and strive. There are undoubtedly some 'common themes' that emerge— but these only emerge as each person walks this road and wrestles with its challenges 'personally.' Different persons struggling and striving with authenticity then discover they have commonalities in their experience.

Similarly, authenticity is personal but not subjective. We must be authentic to a situation as well as to our own stand in that situation. (Moran 2006)

As to the growing movement referred to as "arts-based" research:

Our arguments stem from a belief that if forms of arts-based research are to be taken seriously as emerging fields within educational research, then perhaps they need to be understood as methodologies in their own right, not as extensions of qualitative research. This entails moving beyond the use of existing criteria that exists for qualitative research, towards an understanding of interdisciplinarity not as a patchwork of different disciplines and methodologies, but as a loss, a shift or rupture where in absence new courses of action unfold. (Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 2005, p. 897)

Ann E. Fardon boils this belief down into some useful concepts. I highly recommend her article about arts-based research published in *Educational Foundations* (2000) and entitled "Arts Based Educational Studies: An "Adventurous" Option to Arts Based Educational Research." Her article is based on the writings of John Dewey as put forth in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*. Her stated goal is to broaden the work in this field of Thomas Barone and Elliot Eisner. (Eisner joins our dialogue later on). Her ideas are reflected in many of the stories that follow and are worth mentioning here:

· "Unlike traditional research-which tends toward an intellectual, objective, straightforward factual presentation of the findings-arts-based representations strive to engage the reader with the research by creating a "virtual reality." By entering into this virtual reality, the reader becomes emotionally involved in the recreation of the details of the research and examines his or her previously held assumptions about the research topic."

- “Arts-Based Educational Research creates understanding of a general situation through a descriptive analysis of that specific situation while, at the same time, encouraging a reader to question his or her biases concerning that situation.”
- “The idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd.”
- Knowledge can be gained from researching our own experiences “since-according to Dewey-our life experiences are intimately connected with the creation and experience of art.”
- “In order to create esthetic works which will engage individuals in the same way as life experiences, artists need to enter a cycle in which they reflect upon their work, consider how other individuals might interact and perceive the artwork, and shape their work accordingly.” Thus, Arts-Based Educational Research needs to study and discuss how an audience recreates the experience of arts-based research... One way to begin to understand how an audience might interpret an arts-based project-as well as judge the validity of an arts-based project-would be to elicit an audience’s thoughts regarding a project.”
- “In our everyday lives outside a traditional academic setting, we encounter and learn from different representational forms, such as visual art or music, we aren’t required to justify the fact that we learned using both our intellect and emotion. Why shouldn’t we take advantage of this type of complete learning experience in educational research as well?”

I conclude with an effort to alleviate the concerns of those readers who might be worried that alternative dissertations are not sufficiently rigorous or are likely to not be perceived as meritorious, I submit that, to the contrary, they are more likely to be considered as “excellent.” In the journal, *Academe*, published by the American Association of University Professors, Lovitts’ article, “How to Grade a Dissertation,” describes the conclusions of two hundred and seventy six faculty members at ten research universities who collectively had sat on nearly ten thousand dissertation committees (2005). They represented the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. I highlight some of the conclusions here about dissertations that the faculty rated as “excellent.” Keep in mind that the research revealed that outstanding dissertations “were very rare,” a problem I hope will be rectified when more scholars move out of the traditional academic box. These findings are relevant to any concerns about the rigor of an arts based or Indigenous approach to graduate research and representation. Moreover, they show that a dissertation is more likely to be rated as “excellent” if moves in the directions that the alternative dissertations described in this book reveal.

- Although there were consistent benchmarks in dissertations rating “excellent,” some items were self contradictory, indicating that no set formula led to excellence.
- Outstanding dissertations “defied explication.”
- Faculty “said such dissertations display a richness of thought and insight and make an important breakthrough.”
- The dissertations were a pleasure to read.
- “The faculty members described students who produce outstanding dissertations as very creative and

intellectually adventurous.”

- The dissertations “leap into new territory and transfer ideas from place to place.”
- The dissertation writer “used or developed new tools.”
- The dissertation pushes the discipline’s boundaries and opens new areas for research.
- Outstanding students typically think and work independently.

### The Stories

On this beauty road, peppered with joyful action and tragic suffering,

we pause to meditate and reflect;

To understand the shadows so as to become One again.

We are Guided by The Stories.

Not mere entertainment, but careful words to help us remember that

Life is meant to be magical.

The stories teach us to embrace Truthfulness,

As do images, sounds and our intuitive knowings.

They return us to a Time Before Deception,

Where monuments to lesser ambitions could not be built.

Sacred wisdom from the seeds of our birth,

Not Kings nor Priests,

Come with us on this Beauty Road

Where we remember that

“We Are All Related”

And learn the songs

Of our Indigenous Ancestors,

Songs that can sing away the sickness.

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