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When western epistemology and an indigenous worldview meet: Culturally responsive assessment in practice

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Abstract: There exists a natural tension between standards-based assessment and a multicultural perspective of assessment. The purpose of this paper was to examine issues of culturally-sensitive assessment, specifically within the context of preparing a female American Indian doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership. How does an instructor with a Western worldview fairly evaluate a research topic proposal written from an Indigenous paradigm? A case study design bounded by a single assignment and the instructor's reflections of that assignment provided the context for examination. When the instructor and the student operate from different worldviews, there is a mismatch in expectations. Criteria for evaluating a student's understanding from an alternative perspective need to be explored.

Keywords: multicultural assessment, Indigenous worldview, educational leadership, research proposals, Western epistemology.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing interest in how to design and implement culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; NWREL, 2006; Phuntsog, 1998; Wlodkowski, and Ginsberg, 1995). This movement came about in response to the growing diversity found in U.S. classrooms and the widening achievement gap that all too often leaves many minority students behind despite years of education reform. Zeichner (2003) described the mismatch between the teachers' and the students' backgrounds as problematic. "This cultural divide between teachers and their students is further complicated by the lack of sustained attention to preparing teachers to teach across lines of ethnicity/race, language, and social class in most teacher education programs," (Zeichner, 2003, p. 493). Students crave to have their cultural identities acknowledged and reflected in the school environment. Unfortunately, this cultural divide is just as apparent in higher education as it is in K-12 classrooms (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Efforts to bridge this divide have included modifying instructional strategies and diversifying representative curricula (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2005; Cleary and Peacock, 1998; Fox, 2007; Kelting-Gibson, 2006); however, published literature discussing a multicultural perspective of instructional assessment is scant.

Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) produced a comprehensive guide to integrating a culturally responsive pedagogical approach in higher education. In their book, they include chapters that help faculty understand the importance of respecting diversity; motivating learners; creating a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment; deriving teaching cross-discipline and cross-cultural principles; and promoting social justice and educational equity. Although there are measurement tools included in the appendices of the book, these assessment rubrics reflect the expectations of educators who are members of the dominant culture.

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There exists a natural tension between standards-based assessment and a multicultural perspective of assessment (McCarty, 2009). Scheurich and Young (1997) argued that assumptions buried deep into cultural routines create bias against those who hold any epistemology that diverges from the mainstream perspective. Whether the standards be those created by states for use in K-12 education as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) or the standards used to prepare professional educators (such as the Educational Leader Constituent Council Standards or the Association for Childhood Education International Standards), these standards reflect the dominant paradigm. In the words of Lightfoot (2008):

> Bringing diverse groups of people together when members of one group have wielded power over members of another group, without giving explicit attention to changing the imbalance of power and status, will not resolve conflict. …The fact of the matter is that the education they [historically oppressed minorities] receive from the oppressor only reinforces their oppression…. (p.39)

To achieve equity in education, deep-rooted cultural assumptions must be identified and acknowledged through "dialoguing with, not inculcating, students regarding their perspectives" (Sernak, 2008, p. 119). This means that educators at all levels must go beyond modifying instructional strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners and providing a representative view of multiple cultures. To achieve equity, educators must question the standards being used to evaluate student understanding by considering multiple paradigms in addition to the dominant worldview.

The purpose of this paper is to examine issues of culturally sensitive assessment, specifically within the context of preparing a female American Indian doctoral candidate. How does an instructor with a Western worldview fairly evaluate a research topic proposal written from an Indigenous paradigm? The significance of such a discussion is directly related to facilitating awareness of faculty about the need to question assumptions related to student assessment, especially in cases where the student and instructor may not share the same epistemology. When the instructor and the student embrace different worldviews, there is a mismatch in expectations. Criteria for evaluating a student's understanding from an alternative perspective needs to be explored.

I. The Context.

A case study design bounded by a single assignment and the instructor's reflections of that assignment provides the context for examination. Veronica was one of twelve students in a first year doctoral class on the topic of organizational and leadership theory. She identified herself as belonging to both the Crow and Northern Cheyenne tribes, and was one of two American Indians and one of three women in a class of 12 doctoral students. This was her second semester as a part-time doctoral student and full-time principal of a rural high school on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana.

The culminating assignment for the course was for students to identify a potential dissertation topic appropriate for a doctorate in Educational Leadership and, using the content of the course, write a research topic proposal that would support the selected topic. When assigning this topic, the instructor imagined the product to be similar to a theoretical framework section of a dissertation literature review with the student introducing the topic and providing background information, discussing and elaborating an organizational theoretical or contemporary leadership framework which was heavily supported with reference citations and quotations, and finally a

discussion that overtly connected the theoretical framework to the potential dissertation topic. In fact, almost all students submitted a paper that matched the product imagined by the instructor. Veronica's paper stood out as a well written exception to this envisioned structure. Her paper contained the key aspects, such as a topic, a multicultural/feminist leadership framework supported with scholarship, and a connection between the topic and theoretical framework; yet, the structure and arrangement of ideas were not remotely similar to the products submitted by other students, nor what was envisioned by the instructor.

II. Veronica's Response to the Assignment.

Although a proposed dissertation topic was embedded in the discourse of her paper, Veronica had not explicitly laid out a dissertation topic in a succinct, explicit manner. Most of her classmates objectified their discussion and explicitly connected the topic to a theoretical framework citing the key academic sources as needed to support the connections. Veronica's paper described a personal journey that connected her relationship with her ancestors, her personal experiences, and her topic. The references were used more as a bridge seeking to transform a personal context to a multicultural understanding of that personal context. Nonetheless, she submitted a well crafted, powerful personal account of what transformational leadership meant for her, her relatives, and her ancestors. In explaining this journey, Veronica integrated issues of gender using role congruity theory pertaining to leadership, (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and issues of culture (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta, 2004) into her account by weaving autobiographical meaning into existing literature and sharing what it means to be a female Crow transformational leader.

The instructor's objectives for the assignment were that students be able to: (1) demonstrate an understanding of the theories discussed throughout the course, (2) evaluate current issues and select a potential topic for dissertation study, (3) explicitly connect the topic to an appropriate theory or group of theories, and (4) justify the use of the theory for that topic using referenced sources.

Most students accomplished this standard by writing in a Socratic, direct, concise manner, which exemplifies the Western linear communication style. Veronica's paper, on the other hand, was written in an indirect, circular manner representative of an Eastern communication style which is more common among American Indians. According to Goin (1999) discourse patterns can be divided into the two aforementioned opposing styles, linear or circular communication. How doctoral candidates present a logical argument when writing a research topic proposal appears to be determined by their cultural values and socialization. In other words, their communication style transcends into their academic writing. Those students adhering to a Western communication style tend to get directly to the point whereas those students adhering to a circular communication style talk around and around the point, never directly mentioning it. The Western communication style, while appearing formal and direct, is idea and task focused. Circular communication patterns, in contrast, appear to be indirect, informal, and person and relationship focused. In the linear communication style, the point is stated explicitly, where as in the circular communication style the communicator lets the story make the point. Directness is thought to be equated with honesty and respect for others in the Western communication style and in the Eastern communication style, indirectness is equated with politeness and respect for others. In a Western communication style, priority is given to the

task and getting it done, whereas in the Eastern communication style priority is given to relationships.

Veronica adhered to the circular communication style in her research topic proposal. The four criteria the instructor required were all addressed in Veronica's paper, but presented in a qualitatively different way than they were presented in the other students' research topic proposals. Whereas other students wrote a formal linear narrative research topic proposal, Veronica's instructor categorized her paper as being a genre of qualitative research known as autobiographical ethnography. He commented, "Many scholars from historically oppressed groups have used this method of inquiry to convey their perspective and add to the body of literature."

Autoethnography, research in which the researcher is a full member in the research group or setting, has become a popular form of qualitative research (Anderson, 2006; Bateson, 1994; Ellis, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Anderson (2006) traced the history of autoethnographic research and proposed five key features of analytic autoethnography. So, although Veronica provided a product that was decidedly atypical, her instructor interpreted her paper as having met the standards of scholarship based on criteria listed above. Yet, the difference between her paper and those of her classmates were numerous. The key sources of difference lay in issues of identity, relational framework, contextualization of the situation, and spirituality.

III. Cultural Identity.

Cultural identity is composed of a number of interrelated components including religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, geographic location, ability, and language, in addition to ethnicity and race (Gollnick and Chinn, 2009). Norquay emphasized that "identity is multiple, shifting, and contradictory," (1990, p.291). Gollnick and Chinn offer this description of the importance of culture, "Culture provides the blueprint that determines the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves in society. We are not born with culture, but rather learn it through enculturation and socialization. It is manifested through societal institutions, lived experiences, and the individual's fulfillment of psychological and basic needs," (2002, p.31). As is evident in Veronica's course project, one's cultural heritage and life experiences frame the cultural lens though which one experiences the world and infiltrates every aspect of one's life.

Relational Context as a Framework. In her research topic proposal, Veronica detailed what it took for an American Indian woman to be an effective leader in the Crow nation. She drew on her personal narrative throughout her writing. She opened with the following question, "Who are my mentors?" and provided a contextualized (place-based) background of her personal experiences and those of other female Crow leaders.

Veronica contextualized her understanding of the attributes of a transformational leader based on ancestral experience. She explained that her female ancestors, members of her family of origin, her nuclear family, and her extended family members all influenced her understanding of the concept of leadership. She explained how their experiences and cultural backgrounds have influenced who they are and the roles they have played,

> … My female ancestors, grandmothers, mom, aunt, and cousins are my mentors. Why? Because these are courageous women leaders who have warrior attributes of heart. They have been instructed, formed and developed through the Crow and Northern Cheyenne spiritual, cultural, and social values of their tribe. (Veronica, 2007, p.1)

Veronica emphasized the courageousness of these female leaders.

> One of these women, North Woman (medicine woman) along with Chief Dull Knife led the great nation of the Northern Cheyenne home from Oklahoma where they were held in bondage on a reservation which was not their homeland along the Tongue River in Montana. Next, was Head Woman (leader of Women), who owned and trained many grey and roan horses; she was a strong horsewoman and gentle wife. … I remind us of this story because Cheyenne women have always been warriors and leaders. (Veronica, 2007, p. 2)

Veronica also described the political service her relatives have performed for the Crow Nation and the adversity they experienced in a man's world. She explained:

> My mother was the first Crow woman to be a Crow Tribal Officer; she was the Crow Tribal Vice-Secretary. My grandparents raised my mom not only as a Crow woman, but also as a Crow man; she was more comfortable being in a man's world than in a woman's world…. However, it became ever so clear to Mom that she was living in the red man's world, the world of insecure egotistical Crow men. (Veronica, 2007, p. 3)

In explaining the response taken to adversity, Veronica conveyed the strength and courage necessary to lead.

> Although Mom has gone over to the other side, she has left a lasting legacy of strong and wise leadership with me and my brothers. Mom loved and knew the political field and territory of how to gain leadership within the Crow tribe. (Veronica, 2007, p. 4)

In addition to connecting and conveying leadership stories of her ancestors, Veronica drew a clear intergenerational connection from ancestors to posterity.

> My oldest brother, Ivan, broke the ice for future Native American school administrators by making it to the final round of two very competent school superintendent applicants in the Hardin School District … Perhaps someday, my niece, Roxanne, who is a teacher in that school district and an "I LEAD" [Indian Leadership Education and Development] candidate, will be able to ascend to the Hardin School District superintendency! (Veronica, 2007, p. 4)

IV. Contextualization of the Situation.

Throughout her topic proposal, Veronica noted the generalized attributes of specific theories, but they were consistently linked to a specific context as the theories were discussed. One example of this is her use of reference sources. In addition to references to the literature on transformational leadership theory, Veronica, also includes references from the Billings Gazette. For example, she wrote:

> Most of the impediments women face in the leadership domain stem from incongruity between the female gender role and the leadership role …. They must come across as extremely competent but also be seen as appropriately 'female', a set of standards men are not held to. (Northouse, 2007, p.280), "… despite the critical role they played in Indian society, Indian women are almost ignored in history, even Indian history where the 'invisible, silent status' typically conveyed in history and literature ignores the significant role Indian women had. American Indian women are virtually ignored by the

> historians, instead the focus is on the men's leadership, their warrior exploits and their leadership," (Billings Gazette, 11/20/05). (Veronica, 2007, p. 10)

Another way that Veronica demonstrated contextualization was through her use of voice and by framing the narrative as a personal journey. Throughout this assignment, Veronica used the first person singular form. Her personal voice narrates a personal journey of growth. This assignment was approached as more than an academic exercise. Veronica talks about the many hats she wears and the various roles she negotiates, "It took many years of self-reflection and counseling to emotionally recover and to value myself first as a woman, wife, mother, grandmother, legislator, and educator," (Veronica, 2007, p. 8). She also shared her personal reflections on her experiences, "You see, I lost my self-esteem and I needed to rebuild," (Veronica, 2007, p 8). Throughout the narrative, she conveyed lessons that were learned along the way of the journey, such as: "I have even realized that I must analyze my failures and learn from them," (Veronica, 2007, p.8), and "Stereotypic expectations not only affect others' perceptions and evaluations of women leaders but also can directly affect the women themselves," (Veronica, 2007, p.9).

V. Spirituality.

Another recurring theme throughout the paper was Veronica's demonstration of spirituality. For example, "It is my prayer for Janine to become not only the first Native American Indian Woman president of Rocky Mountain College …," (Veronica, 2007, p.6). Spirituality was not just seen in an expression of prayer, but as transformational, "… I have come to realize how God has changed me over the past fifteen years and how my new marriage has helped me to become a stronger woman," (Veronica, 2007, p.7), and as a gift, "…I have come to realize that I need to not only be thankful, but to realize that God gave me some natural talents and that I need to be ever changing and growing into a transformational leader," (Veronica, 2007, p. 8)

VI. Culturally Competent Instructional Assessment.

There is no universally accepted worldview; however, a Western paradigm is imposed in academe (Scheurich and Young, 1997). For many American Indian students in higher education, meeting the expectations and conforming to the standards framed in the dominant worldview while respecting traditional ways of knowing, being, and doing, requires a delicate balancing act, (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Since individuals see the world through their respective cultural lenses, it follows that they would interpret the requirements for a writing assignment through their personal worldview. Consequently, a Crow graduate student who embraces an Indigenous paradigm would produce a personal research topic proposal reflecting her cultural understanding and personal interpretation of the assignment while the instructor would be expecting a product that conforms to the Western paradigm.

If the instructor adheres to a rigid Western paradigm while assessing the student's work, he or she will frame his or her expectations for success from his or her worldview. He or she could, therefore, be disappointed in the Crow student's more subjective, more fluid, differently framed research topic proposal and he or she could judge the student's work to be less than satisfactory. On the other hand, if the instructor is to fairly evaluate the student's work and not be biased by the student's cultural heritage, then he or she must design new, flexible assessment

standards that allow for a more inclusive interpretation of the assignment but yet exhibit an equal level of quality. The practice of culturally competent instruction requires the use of unbiased standards—standards that take into account both the cultural worldview of the student as well as that of the instructor.

Standards need to be renegotiated to be more inclusive. Differentiated instruction requires differentiated assessment thus making a renegotiated standard critical. Maintaining standards based on the Western paradigm perpetuate a deficit model of diversity because any work developed from a non-Western paradigm will be considered substandard (Swartz, 2003). As an analogy using base-10 mathematics, (the dominant paradigm) 4 + 4 = 8; however using base-5 mathematics 4 + 4 = 13, both equations are correct within the mathematical base specified; however, when the mathematical base is not specified, a base-10 system is assumed resulting in the equation using a base-5 system being viewed as incorrect. Before holding students who view the world from a different epistemological system to a standard developed solely from the perspective of our own epistemological system, we must question the assumptions inherent in those standards and renegotiate the standards to be more inclusive. In other words, continuing the mathematical analogy, we must stop assuming that all students are solving the equation from a base-10 system, and ask what system the student is using to arrive at his or her answer.

Renegotiating standards should not be construed as lowering standards. Lowering standards perpetuates oppression by giving the illusion of access without providing empowerment because the outcome expectations have not changed. Renegotiated standards require a sincere dialogue between members of different cultures who possess differing epistemologies. Through the process of dialogue, a comprehension and appreciation for different ways of knowing and seeing the world emerges. It is this process that makes differentiated assessment and renegotiated standards possible because the outcome expectations are transformed by the process of inclusion. The catalyst for such a process to occur lies in the instructor-student relationship, and in the instructor's ability to learn from the student as a function of teaching.

Indigenous pedagogies highlight the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning, and differ greatly from the Western philosophy on education. The incongruence between these two pedagogical approaches has had a negative impact on Indian students since the Boarding School era (Smith, 2005). In the dominant paradigm the idea that knowledge should be approached through the intellect leads to the belief that scholarship must be objective rather than subjective, that personal emotions, histories, and motives must be removed if the conclusions are to be valid. Veronica's scholarship exhibited this subjective framework in terms of cultural identity, relational framework, contextualization, and spirituality as discussed above.

The rational categorization of knowledge assumed by the dominant research paradigm is at odds with a more holistic Indigenous perspective. Tafoya, as quoted in Wilson, (2008) explains this by saying that Western scholarship "has a history of people being told to amputate a part of themselves to be able to fit something that's rigid, and not built for them in the first place" (p. 56). Practices within the Western paradigm, as evidenced from this example, can isolate aspects of one's cultural identity by focusing on individual components rather than by looking at the person as a whole. Comparing Western and traditional knowledge, we see that educational practices and research procedures are not universal but culturally bound.

VII. A Proposed Framework for Renegotiated Assessment Standards.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) identify four requirements for promoting more equitable relationships and interactions between Indigenous peoples and the academy. These four Rs include: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. Practicing respect demands a negotiation that addresses cultural standards and a repositioning of the instructor from interpreter to listener with an openness to learning from non-dominant perspectives rather judging based on dominant assumptions (Bishop 2005; Smith, 1999).

Cajete (2008) notes, "meaning is key to relevance," (p. 496) and it is incumbent on the instructor to consider the intersection of scholarly practice and the cultural landscape. Assigning universality to Western knowledge maintains the frameworks for scholarship and the representation of knowledge (Findlay, 2000; Smith, 1999). "Indigenous [and non-Indigenous] scholars and intellectuals are pressed to produce technical knowledge that conforms to Western standards of truth and validity" (Denzin, 2005, p. 936). Recognition of the relevance of non-Western knowledge calls into question the tacit assumptions contained within Western standards. These assumptions need to be identified and questioned to facilitate culturally competent instructional assessment. Questioning academic practices is tantamount to acknowledging the lack of neutrality in academic rationality and from this recognition assessment standards can be renegotiated to facilitate cultural equity.

Reciprocity implies a give-and-take within the teaching and learning process that has largely been absent in Western academic standards. It is an issue of power. The power differential is determined by whose knowledge is valued, who determines the importance of ideas, and who determines the rules for procedures for examining knowledge (Fine, Tuck, and Zeller-Berkman, 2008). Dismantling or interrogating this power differential requires an examination of purpose and clarification of protocols. Reciprocity demands collaboration, interchange of ideas, sharing power, learning *from* the "other." Hermes (1997) defines the concept of reciprocity as "going back and forth between the problem, the practice, and the community" (p. 23). However, this process is more complex than it first appears. Jones and Jenkins (2008) point out that overcoming the power differential through a dialogic process may move participants to disregard or downplay differences in the movement toward shared understandings, which leads to a spirit of unity. While this may be useful when working toward a shared goal, the melding of ideas may also establish a sort of hybridity or democratic ideal of equality or sameness that, in reality, does not exist. Grande (2008) argued this point in terms of sovereignty and self-determination through protection of tradition and language as necessary considerations to maintaining identity as Indigenous peoples. Recognition of ever present issues of power and privilege are necessary for the instructor and student to successfully engage in truly collaborative and reciprocal relationships.

The most important responsibility for instructors is a willingness to learn from rather than about those who primarily think and operate from a non-Western epistemological system. This creates opportunities for a re-conceptualization of assessment standards that recognize issues of sovereignty, identity, culture, and place (Lincoln and Cannella, 2009; Mihesuah, 1998). Instructors are also responsible for ethical use of knowledge that has been entrusted to them. This translates into providing a venue for the voices of the "other" as well as a critical examination of the systems and discourses that continue to promote colonization. Indigenous knowledge and heritage are sacred gifts and responsibilities that must be honored and held for the benefit of future generations," (Battiste, 2000, p.144).

Many Indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of relationships, not just current human relationships, but the connection Indigenous peoples have to their ancestors, the future generations, nature, and to the land. When Wilson (2008) polled his colleagues, "Several stated that the relational way of being was at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous," (p. 80). He emphasized that the sharing and participation that relationship building entails is an important aspect of ethical Indigenous research. Deloria (1992) stated, "The Indian principle of interpretation/observation is simplicity itself: "We are all relatives," (p.36). He further explains that relying on our interconnectedness as a methodological tool for obtaining knowledge "means that we observe the natural world by looking for relationships between various things in it," (Deloria, 1992, p. 37). The four Rs, as discussed earlier, are practices that provide entry to the relationship building process; however, it is relationality that will allow both parties to create intimate, on-going relationships and is the key to understanding and embracing Indigenous ways of knowing. According to Wilson (2008), if Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens (which it certainly does not), then surely that lens would be relationality. In fact, the key to being included has just as much to do with how well you have connected with members of that community than the work you have done in the past.

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