An Indigenous Strategy of Inquiry supporting Networked Learning

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Abstract

This paper answers two questions: What philosophical ideas in an Indigenous research paradigm serve as relational 'spaces' for a boundary-crossing Strategy of Inquiry? How do these underpinnings align with Wenger's expanded theory of Communities of Practice, a common theory within Networked Learning? Finding easily available guidance into theoretical frameworks and methods working from Indigenous philosophical underpinnings has proven to be a challenge. However, in Networked Learning there are several theories aligning well with Indigenous philosophy of which Wenger's expanded theory on Communities of Practice serves as one example highlighted in this paper. In finding relational 'spaces', ontological, epistemological and axiological underpinnings in an Indigenous research paradigm has been identified through Indigenous researchers' writings, relating those to Wenger's ideas. The findings in this paper are to be considered as a starting point for further discussions and investigations. They are not aimed at offering a complete picture, rather as something that can be widened as the boundaries between different paradigms are crossed. The readings show that an Indigenous research paradigm is called for when conducting research within an Indigenous context, especially as an Indigenous researcher, but can also inform other research paradigms, offering a boundary-crossing paradigm proliferation. Several relational 'spaces' are identified and accounted for. By looking for relational 'spaces' between an Indigenous research paradigm and Networked Learning, this paper serves as a boundary-crossing object between different paradigms, providing an outline of an Indigenous Strategy of Inquiry for a research study on remote, 1-9, Sami language education where networked learning is promoted.

Keywords

Indigenous research paradigm, Communities of Practice, relational accountability, boundary crossing, Strategy of Inquiry, Networked Learning.

Point of departure

In a similar way as Linda T. Smith describes her personal journey in the final concluding chapter of her book "Decolonizing Methodologies" (2012) and Wilson (2008) in his book Research Is Ceremony - Indigenous Research Methods, this is also a description of my personal journey into research. As a product of a Western school system, I have early on learned how scientific inquiry should be conducted. Consequently, the way I am writing this paper, as a visible author sometimes sharing personal anecdotes, is a decolonization process of my own mind. Maori scholar Smith (2012) provides a clear description of where an Indigenous researcher often departs from:

> From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary (Smith, 2012, pp. 1).

This paper aims at answering two questions: What philosophical ideas in an Indigenous research paradigm serve as relational 'spaces' for a boundary-crossing Strategy of Inquiry for a PhD study on remote, 1-9 Sami language education? How do these underpinnings align with Wenger's expanded theory of Communities of Practice, a common theory within Networked Learning? To find answers I investigate the writings of, mainly, three respected Indigenous researchers; Wilson (2008), Smith (2012) and Kuokkanen (2000). Further, the findings are analysed in relation to aspects from the expanded theory on Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2010).

In this paper, I have chosen to be more visible throughout the text than writers of scientific papers mostly are. This is for you to be able to build a relationship both to me and the ideas I present, something very important

within an Indigenous research paradigm (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Kuokkanen, 2019). To stay accountable for the relationship I want to establish, the point of departure for this investigation starts in my lived experience and myself. Firstly, I argue for the importance of me as an Indigenous person to conduct research in a manner aligning with an Indigenous research paradigm and secondly, as an act of resilience, I do not to compare an Indigenous paradigm with dominant Western paradigms. Rather, I seek possible relational 'spaces' were common theories are informing or being informed by an Indigenous paradigm. In the pursuit of a suitable methodology when investigating remote, Sami, 1-9 language education, this kind of investigation is crucial.

Who am I?

You need to get to know me if I am to stay accountable for the content I am presenting in this paper. Both Wilson (2008) and Smith (2012) offers the readers rich opportunities to get to know them, as it is an important part of an Indigenous research paradigm. It has to do with relational accountability, which I will come back to later. Wilson (2008) points out the difficulty in presenting a circular reasoning in a linear written form. Neither a conversation nor a process of getting to know one another has a linear form, and additionally most Indigenous cultures are oral in character. However, to stimulate boundary-crossing between Indigenous philosophies and Academia, the written, linear form is the expected mode to use as a boundary-crossing practice.

I am Sami, which is the Indigenous peoples of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. We are in minority in most of our traditional areas, not to mention the states we live in. On top of that, we have spread out and moved into towns and cities like most other people in the Western world, maybe to a larger extent, due to discrimination and assimilating politics and policies. "Subtle forms of colonialism", as commented by Kuokkanen (2000) "have made many Indigenous individuals devalue their own culture and anything that is connected to it" (ibid, pp. 412). The number of Sami is today unknown since the Nordic countries do not keep ethnical records. Besides that, an unknown number of Sami have hidden, and still hides their background (or are unaware of it) to avoid discrimination and racism. Even though my mother never hid her background or expressed any shame and I always have felt proud being Sami, I spent my first six years in school in a majority context without any Sami peers, surely 'colonizing' my mind in ways unknown to me.

As I became a teacher later on, I often started my lessons by writing 'Knowledge is power' on the white board. I never reflected any deeper on the philosophical underpinnings behind the concept, but rather thought of it as an instrumental thing. As a new doctoral student, you learn what it is to be a researcher through ontological, epistemological and axiological (the part within philosophy dealing with values), mainly ethical considerations, leading to methodological choices, finally creating a research design. All of these aspects have built-in power making some parts of the research appear and others to stay in the background. Methodological choices are therefore not neutral but loaded with power. Alternatively, as Lather (2006) puts it "science is not the same in all paradigms in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology" (from the note to Table 1, pp 37, italics in original).

Aim of the paper

This paper is an outline of important findings concerning the philosophical underpinnings in an Indigenous research paradigm, with methodological implications for my PhD study on remote, 1-9 Sami language education. The findings are analysed in relation to concepts from the expanded theory on Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2010), aiming at creating a boundary-crossing Strategy of Inquiry. Remote here refers to education where the pupils and teacher are in different locations at the same time mediated through online devices and connections, i.e. synchronous online education. Examples presented within my doctorate programme and supporting research schools are scarce of what an Indigenous research design might look like, especially in an online/digital context. On top of that, as a Sami, to conduct research in a Sami context is not something addressed in most methodological handbooks, which is also noticed by Smith (2012) already in 1985 (pp. 228). Most handbooks that I have encountered hardly mention Indigenous, aboriginal, native or minority issues, let alone philosophical ones. The topic of the paper is also an attempt to deconstruct some parts of colonial thinking, aiming at intellectual self-determination (Kuokkanen, 2000, pp. 415) and decolonization through the process of theorising (Smith, 2012, pp. 39-41). By doing this, I am providing "a different kind of academic voice" as Lather (2006) summarizes Smith's endeavour to describe and develop a hybrid practice between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (ibid, pp. 44).

Important theoretical distinctions

In the following, I will touch upon ontology, epistemology and axiology in an Indigenous research paradigm without separating them into different sections. Instead, I have identified some central aspects that keep

reoccurring, which sometimes are relating to both ontology and epistemology; sometimes ontology and axiology and sometimes they are impossible to separate from each other. However, first some things need to be said about paradigms and boundary-crossing.

On paradigms

According to Kuhn (1978), "A paradigm is what the members of a scientific community, and they alone, share" (ibid, pp. 294). Interestingly enough he continues with "/.../ it is their possession of a common paradigm that constitutes a scientific community of a group of otherwise disparate men" (ibid, pp. 294). By referring to scientists as men, Kuhn clearly shows that a lot has happened since he wrote this, somewhat 40 years ago and is in itself a valid argument against too solidified paradigms. More precisely, Wilson defines a paradigm as a set of beliefs about the world that guides one's actions and he is of the opinion that we have to move from talking about an Indigenous perspective to an Indigenous research paradigm. In Kuokkanen's (2000) words an Indigenous paradigm "would be a culturally specific discourse based on Indigenous peoples' premises, values and world views" (ibid, pp. 413) and she advocates a holistic perspective in research, as do Wilson (2008, pp. 32). A research paradigm would then be a set of beliefs about the world and how to gain knowledge about that world that in turn are guiding your actions as a researcher, i.e. ontological, epistemological and axiological beliefs that in turn lead to methodological choices.

However, Indigenous ways of gaining knowledge has been treated as naive, unsophisticated, primitive and inferior by Western scholars (Kailo, 1998, pp. 89, here cited in Kuokkanen, 2000, pp. 413-413). It is essential for an Indigenous paradigm to recognize other epistemologies as equal, Kuokkanen further argues. Balance is a key component in a holistic world-view, where aspects such as the spiritual and the material, body and mind are not separated into two different entities as in the traditional Cartesian dualistic approach (Kuokkanen, 2000). Digging deeper into what characterizes a Western, often Cartesian worldview, we find the fragmentation of human knowledge and the importance of distancing oneself from the research object, just to mention a couple of things (ibid, pp. 413). Paradigm proliferation has made academia more inclusive, representative and accessible, which is highlighted as a good thing by Lather (2006), who argues that it offers a "move away from narrow scientism and towards an expanded notion of scientificity more capable of sustaining the social sciences" (ibid, pp. 47). I propose that when planning and conducting research a paradigm proliferation would make it easier for doctoral students to "locate themselves in the tensions that characterize fields of knowledge" (Lather, 2006, pp. 47).

Boundary-crossing

When learning theory expands outside of specific domains and focus on the potential continuity across boundaries, the terms boundary-crossing and boundary objects have become central concepts (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011a; 2011b). Boundary-crossing as used in situated learning theories on communities of practice (Wenger, 2010) aims at the "delicate balancing act between honoring the history of the practice and shaking free from it. This is often only possible when communities interact with and explore other perspectives beyond their boundaries" (ibid, pp. 3). Both people and objects can cross boundaries, then referred to as boundary-crossers/brokers and boundary-objects.

Reoccurring concepts within an Indigenous research paradigm

Relations and relational accountability

In Wilson's research on Indigenous psychology, one of the major differences he found between some of the dominant research paradigms and an Indigenous one was the attitude towards knowledge. Knowledge is relational, Wilson (2001) claims. Knowledge itself is nothing without the relationship between myself, the researcher, and that knowledge, whether an object or something else (ibid, pp. 177). To extract knowledge and try to contain it in tables and bar charts will transform it into something different from the contextual knowledge it came from. From the perspective of an Indigenous epistemology, there is no such thing as objectivity. All kinds of relations can be a part an Indigenous relational epistemology: between people, people and history, people and ancestors, people and ideas, people and artefacts and so on.

Relations and relational accountability are two central aspects in an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008, pp. 7; Hart, 2010, pp. 3; Kuokkanen, 2019). There are throughout history many examples of when relational accountability has been violated by researchers and those stories are part of Indigenous peoples' minds concerning research. In that sense, my journey into life as a researcher started already in childhood. My grandfather was a great storyteller and in the summer, he told all kinds of stories, in the light of the open fire. He then shared how he could never forgive himself for showing a sacred artefact, a Sieidi, to a travelling researcher

looking for the 'true' Sami culture. When the man left, he took the Sieidi with him, now probably placed in a dusty basement at some museum in the south of Sweden. Removing the sacred artefact from its original place, can be seen as a symbol of the kind of disrespect my relatives, myself and other Indigenous individuals and groups repeatedly have had to endure throughout history. There are more examples, both from my own family and other Indigenous contexts and this anecdote only serves as an example of the importance of relational accountability as a researcher in an Indigenous context, not to repeat historical atrocities. The challenge as an Indigenous researcher is about there being disconnections, as Smith (2012) talks about, between the community where lifelong relationships are shared, and demands from research (ibid, pp. 5). An example could be whether participants should be anonymous or not, which ethical guidelines stipulate. In an Indigenous context could this be perceived as an attempt to appropriate knowledge, i.e. a theft. In historical days, the research had not been asked for or had no use for the Indigenous community (Wilson, 2008, pp. 15), and maybe this is often still the case. To deal with demands and wishes from both sides is therefore the balance act of the Indigenous researcher.

Research as self-determination and decolonization

Kuokkanen (2000) talks about educational institutions as one of the major societal phenomena responsible for colonizing Indigenous peoples' minds throughout the world (ibid, pp. 412). Even though there are great differences among Indigenous peoples, which makes a joint definition hard to make, many experiences are the same. One such thing is the break of generational continuation through the practice of either removing Indigenous children from their parents by adoption or sending them to boarding schools (ibid, 2000: 413). To maintain cultural practices, such as spiritual and intellectual properties, when the main schooling is happening far away from your family and relatives is very difficult (ibid, pp. 412). My mother, who was sent away to boarding school at the age of seven used to refer to herself as belonging to 'the lost generation', which says something about how she experienced her childhood. One of my roles as an Indigenous researcher is to find the way back and forward at the same time. The described power abuse can also be seen as an example of why Indigenous research always ends up being political (Wilson, 2008; Kuokkanen, 2000, pp. 415).

According to Bernstein (2000) the role of description, is in the centre of research, where easily expressed there are two different languages interacting. In his words "a language of description is a translation device whereby one language is transformed into another" (ibid, pp. 132). The language of the researched is translated by the researcher into something, which should contain the power of redescription by the researched (ibid, pp. 139). This is closely linked to both history, writing and self-determination (Smith, 2012, pp. 29-41) as history most often has been written by researchers not being Indigenous themselves. The researcher is in this sense a translator, which is sometimes needed for relations to form, but also takes on the part of boundary-crosser or boundary-broker.

Methodology and method

Harding (1987) offers an important distinction between method and methodology and opposes that feminist research should be conceptualized as being about new research methods (ibid, pp. 2), neither is Indigenous research. Whereas methods aim at specific techniques to gather evidence, methodology is about strategies for how to proceed the research concerning theory and analysis (ibid, pp. 2), relating methodological issues to both epistemology and ontology. Methodology can also be explained as "providing the final destination in the research journey" (Wilson, 2008, pp. 39) or the process where the researchers" clarify and justify their intentions" (Smith, 2012, pp. 144).

For Indigenous research to be able to enrich social sciences, appreciating the differences Indigenous peoples have concerning not only methodology, epistemology and ontology, but also axiology is an important aspect. This can lead to research methods that align more to an Indigenous worldview (Wilson, 2008, pp. 20-21). The concept of worldview is defined as "cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that people continuously use to make sense of the social landscape and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek" (Hart, 2010, pp. 2). The importance of creating a Strategy of Inquiry, rather than choosing methods and stick to them, is lifted by Wilson (2008) as a way of creating a flexible research design, which can adapt to contextual changes along the way (ibid, pp. 40).

For Hart (2010) Indigenous methodologies are "those that permit and enable Indigenous researchers to be who they are while they are actively engaged as participants in the research processes" (ibid, pp. 9). Instead of talking about methods, Smith uses the word 'projects', when giving 25 examples of what strategies of inquiry might look like in an Indigenous context (Smith, 2012, chapter 8). I will pick out some of them in my outline of a Strategy of Inquiry, present why they are of particular use for my study and what relational 'spaces' they share with Wenger's expanded theory on Communities of Practice.

Methodological implications

In this part of the text, methodological implications for my research design on remote, 1-9 Sami language education are presented as a Strategy of Inquiry. I have chosen from the 25 projects described by Smith (2012, elaborated explanations of them are found in chapter 8) and created a Strategy of Inquiry based on them. The projects are Storytelling, Reading, Writing, Reframing, Connecting, Networks, Sharing and Representing and I will also share how they relate to some ideas within Wenger's expanded theory on Communities of Practice.

Strategy of Inquiry

The basic assumption behind the strategy is that remote education is a realisation of a pedagogical practice (Bernstein, 2003), a practice produced by those engaged in it (Wenger, 2010), with the potential of working as a boundary-crossing practice. When reflecting on what strategy of inquiry to adopt, and aligning that with an Indigenous research paradigm, I am at least trying to minimize the risk of "/.../ unconsciously, perhaps consciously in some cases, leading other Indigenous peoples down the path of internalized oppression" (Hart, 2010, pp. 11). The theory on communities of practice (Wenger, 2010) align well with an Indigenous research paradigm. Wenger (2010) emphasises the relational and contextual aspects between the individual and the social community of practice, where learning is "becoming a certain person—a knower in a context" (ibid, 2010, pp.2). However, if emphasising "a social person in a social world" (ibid, pp 1), we end up moving away from an Indigenous worldview. In an Indigenous paradigm not only the social and the individual constitute each other, but all relationships. 'The World' constitutes of e.g. nature, ancestors and spirituality in addition to human beings. When learning e.g. handcrafting you are encouraged to consult, not only more experienced practitioners, but also the material, other similar objects and your own preferences. I.e. participation in a practice is important, but there are more aspects to take into consideration.

Information about Indigenous peoples have often been transferred through traveller's tales. Smith (2012) puts forward that Indigenous peoples themselves have other stories to tell. The strong oral tradition within many of the Indigenous groups around the world is of great importance in creating a certain epistemology. Today stories told by, especially elders and women is a common feature within Indigenous research (ibid, pp. 145). By telling stories, relationships are formed between e.g. the past and the future, people and nature and between one generation and the next (ibid, pp. 146).

The stakeholders in remote education are scattered all over Sweden, connected through online devices and tools. These tools can facilitate communication between them, with the possibility of connecting, sharing, discussing and building relationships without the constraints of time and distance (Embury, 2015, pp. 533-534). Shared documents such as wikis stretches Indigenous story telling from being mainly oral to also include reading and writing. Through happenings: writing sessions, talking circles, film making or where "the context is the self in connection with happenings, and the findings from such experience is knowledge" (Hart, 2010, pp. 8), a shared story about remote education can facilitate Networked Learning. Happenings can also tap into many of the projects suggested by Smith. A story about remote, Sami language education could bring the different stakeholders in remote education together in creating a shared understanding of the different aspects of this mode of education. By connecting people, allowing discussions and sharing that in turn forms new relationships, i.e. networks (ibid, pp. 534) new knowledge is gained. Networks in turn, are important in empowering Indigenous peoples. According to Smith, networks are "about building knowledge and data bases which are based on the principles of relationships and connections (Smith, 2012, pp. 157-158).

An important feature of an Indigenous epistemology and axiology is sharing (Smith, 2012, pp. 162), something also highlighted as an important aspect by Wilson (2008): "/.../ as I was listening I was learning, and as I was learning I was sharing" (ibid, pp. 131). The researcher is a part of a growing relationship, where relational accountability to what is being researched and to the community involved stipulates that findings should be continuously shared with the stakeholders. Smith (2012) claims that this is a responsibility researchers have towards Indigenous peoples due to the failure in providing proper education, a former hostile attitude towards Indigenous knowledge and keeping people informed properly (ibid, pp. 162). As an Indigenous researcher, I am also expected to demystify research. By working like this, I also assure that Indigenous peoples, in this case Sami, are represented with a true opportunity to offer solutions to possible dilemmas within remote Sami language education (ibid, pp. 152). By taking control over how Indigenous issues are presented, discussed and approached this study also contributes to a reframing of Indigenous matters. What is in the foreground, what

complexities exist and what parameters are to be considered (ibid, pp. 154)? The answers to these questions are preferably pursued together with the stakeholders.

Conclusions

When taking part of thoughts presented by other Indigenous, and in particular Sami researchers on the notion of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology, I finally understand where my strange "gut feeling", that has followed me throughout the first year of my doctoral studies, originates. As you probably know, gut feeling is not considered a reliable research method. However, within an Indigenous paradigm, this would rather be described in terms of intuition, which is part of an Indigenous epistemology (Cordero, 1995, cited in Wilson, 2008, p. 55). Graduate courses on the topic of ontology and epistemology have left me with questions and unease, rather than answers and confidence. Today I understand that I have not felt related to or represented in the content of those courses.

Within the field of Technologies in Education, the research rests on a technological optimism that seems to dominate the field (Player-Koro, 2016). There is no doubt digital technologies carry the potential of supporting learning, networking, collaborating and so much more. However, there are no guarantees that this actually happens without a strategy promoting these features. If a technological optimism together with a pragmatic approach form the basic assumptions in a research study on e.g. remote education, possible discriminatory practices or power imbalances are in turn hard to discover. These are areas where an Indigenous research paradigm and this kind of Strategy of Inquiry can proliferate the field. By creating a boundary-crossing Indigenous Strategy of Inquiry, the PhD study on remote, 1-9 Sami language education provides a boundary-crossing object to the field of Networked Learning, as well as Digital Technologies in Education.

This paper leaves the question of methods open, even though some are mentioned as examples in the Strategy of Inquiry. The reason for this is that the participants of the study have their saying on the matter. The important feature I want to carry with me, and try to find acceptance for, is storytelling as a Strategy of Inquiry to learn more about remote Sami language education. The story can be created through a series of happenings, such as writing sessions through shared documents, talking circles in Zoom or some other conference system. A survey answered by teachers, parents and pupils, where the results are analysed in one or more of these happenings is also a possible way of creating a shared story that strengthens the networks and relationships between the different stakeholders. What I propose here is absolutely found elsewhere and might go under different names depending on the paradigm framing the study. However, to be able to choose discursive framing of a research study is an important part of self-determination and decolonization within Indigenous research.

Due to the emphasis on accountability, identity and participation, Wenger offers interesting possibilities for further informing both this Strategy of Inquiry as well as my PhD study at large. Identification with a community of practice is highlighted as a key feature for accountability. "The regime of competence of a community of practice translates into a regime of accountability /.../ when you don't identify with a practice you don't feel accountable" (Wenger, 2010, pp. 6). This might serve as an explanation to why the sacred artefact, the Sieidi, has not been returned. Whoever is in the possession of it is unaware of the fact that people still miss it at its original site, a lack of relationality leading to a lack of accountability. Another aspect of particular interest is the notion on becoming a certain person where the practice has to enable such becoming (ibid, pp. 3). What kind of identities are the stakeholders involved in remote education developing and how does this mode of education enable that becoming? A reasonable assumption is that e.g. the pupils are expected to become active Sami language users outside of the educational practice, i.e. cross the boundaries created in this particular practice (Wenger, 2010, pp. 3), sometimes a conflicting process (ibid, pp. 4). Engagement, imagination and alignment are mentioned as working both inside the practice and across boundaries. There is, however, a risk of wasting time as competence is not well defined when working within boundaries (ibid, pp. 4-5).

Making sense of both the system and our position in it is necessary when broadening our perspective, a contribution my PhD study aims at offering.

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