Increasing Inclusion in Educational Research

A continuing debate: Valuing the 'Cosmoscape'?

'So these children learnt that in starry quietness they could be still, know things and keep their identity, because the totemic world is cosmic through and through' (Dark Sparklers, 2003, p.41).

By Ken Masters

Moira Laidlaw initiated the debate in RI 102 and 104 by proposing, in New Zealand and Chinese contexts respectively, that Indigenous Elders with serious educational roles should be recognised as educational researchers in the Academy. I respond to some of their points, and to those of Je Kan Adler in RI 104, via focusing on, and comparing, Whitehead’s and Rayner’s contributions.

In RI 103, Whitehead argued for an 'epistemological transformation in what counts as Educational Research'. It should include knowledge 'not easily encapsulated within written text ... and therefore inappropriately excluded' (Whitehead, 2008, pp.16-17). The Elder’s writing in Dark Sparklers is from oral transcription, metaphorical, allusive. He called for 'new standards of judgement in what counts as educational research in Journals of Educational Research'. Later, he extends his argument to express the importance of visual data which ‘emphasises the importance of flows of life-affirming energy with values in creating a safe “space” for relating, enquiring, learning and researching in educational relationships'. There is plenty of striking visual data in Dark Sparklers evidencing life-affirming energy.
distinguishes ‘educational’ from ‘education’: it’s not about policy or discipline-based theorising but an alternative epistemology which explains the ‘educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations’. The experience of Initiates in Dark Sparklers (p. xx) is based around discovering an ‘alternative’ perception of the ‘Really-real’ in the ‘cosmoscape’. Reducing ‘educational research to policy or practice’ may discount ‘the importance of educational researchers as ‘knowledge creators.’ By coining and sharing the ‘cosmoscape’ etc., Bill Yidumduma Harney creates and enables the embodied assimilation of knowledge. In Rf 110, Whitehead suggests that ‘explanatory principles include the energy-flowing values that individuals use to give meaning and purpose to their lives’ (Whitehead, 2010, pp 25-26). This is at the heart of the Elder’s approach. He suggests an organic view of educational theory which is living in the public conversation of those constituting professional practice. The Ceremonies, in their transformational effectiveness, are private, with alternative epistemology and ontology evidenced in the book. He has now brought the ‘Stories’ within ‘public conversation’. The ‘Living Standards of Judgement’ are presently accountable within the Tribe, and via the Wardaman Corporation to the Australian State. Values are Inclusional, in that they do not come from ‘abstract rationality’: rather from dynamic interfaces’ of the cosmoscape and its related, embodied ‘guidelines’ of Totem and Tabu, based on the ‘thrival of the fitting’ (Rayner, 2002). I suggest that the ‘cosmoscape’ and adjacent metaphors are ‘explanatory principles’ bringing meaning and purpose around a sense of intangible presence within the inclusion of space in Rayner’s sense.

Rayner contributes to the debate in Rf 109. He argues that we can move away from research based on ‘rationalistic generalisation’, fixed-frame analysis, the exclusion of the observer, the separation of Teacher from Student (and treating students like ‘competitive survival machines’), towards his interpretation of the educational. This, critically, involves the ‘co-creative fluid dynamic transformation of all through all in receptive spatial context’, ‘a natural philosophy of kindness’, ‘space as non-resistive presence’, ‘natural flow-form’ with fluidity, openness, circulation, improvisation, and inextricability (Rayner, 2010, pp. 26-27). Dark Sparklers exhibits all this. ‘Transformation expresses its heart. Space is not conceived as ‘empty’, or as ‘connecting the separate/discrete’. The ‘cosmoscape’ emphasises the connectivity of earth/cosmos. The mystery of ‘Source’ is maintained. There is no reduction of the Presences in the Stories/Night Sky to a single, Christian one; to ‘God’ as a Singularity, or a spurious homogeneous Unity or Whole. The Stories are un-refied metaphor, not economically packaged, reductive, intellectual abstraction. This is a striking and moving account of ‘natural inclusion’ which can inspire. Their observer, Cairns, is ‘included’; there is no ‘spurious objectification’. You are reading this because Bill Yidumduma Harney and other Elders have asserted. He may himself, now or later, indicate how/if he wishes to relate to being taken seriously as a knowledge creator, an educational researcher in a context where the epistemological is political. It may well not be appropriate for him to ‘engage’. But just what might ‘inclusion’/ recognition mean in practical terms? This Elder has co-authored three more books with one more to come. His Stories are being archived by an American university. He has been an Artist in Residence within the Law Faculty of Bond University (his paintings hang in the Australian Federal Parliament). He teaches the cosmoscape, with Abor, to visitors at extraordinary Rock Art sites via Dreamtime Stories, and also in colleges in Australia and the USA. He and his people collaborate with local universities in environmental projects. How might respect and appreciation be offered to him for his significant educational research contribution to his People’s learning, and to encouraging us all to ‘find our cosmoscapes’, demonstrating the viability of the authentic via his educational conversation; and to Indigenous people who have evidenced substantial educational research in their own terms, but are not educated into the literacy and abstract rationality of the (neo-colonial?) university, and for whom an academic career as such is not the point? Perhaps appreciation can lead to dissemination.

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