Women’s Research Network at BU

Brown Bag Lunch Workshop

The first in an ongoing series of workshops on

Research Methodology

This workshop features: Aboriginal Research.

Tuesday, March 19th, 2013.

The discussion will be led by a three-member panel:

Dr. Lorraine Mayer, Native Studies

Dr. Kelly Saunders, Political Science

Cathy Mattes, Visual Arts

They will discuss:

Different ways of knowing: how do you learn about Aboriginal people?

Different ways of sharing: how do Aboriginal people tell their stories to others?

Intro: Welcome to the first in a series of research methodologies: aboriginal research: different ways of knowing, different ways of sharing. The panel consists of Dr. Lorraine Mayer, Professor in Native Studies, Editor of the Canadian Journal of Native Studies; Dr. Kelly Saunders, Assistant Professor in Political Science; and Cathy Mattes, Lecturer in Visual Arts, working on her PhD, in creative curating of art. Welcome! Thank you very much for being our panel. Etsuko has some questions to seed the discussion.

Can you tell us the three main aboriginal approaches?

Lorraine: 1) wanting to learn &

2) immerse yourself in the culture – festivals, meet the elders.

Kelly: invest the time with open heart and mind; for any culture.

LM: Aboriginal research – is what? By aboriginals? With Aboriginal communities?

* It is different if you are aboriginal or you are not aboriginal
* Leave contribution from community
* Form long term relationships

CM: sometime have a great responsibility, e.g. she has been told and shown where some sacred objects are ; e.g. where petroglyphs are – promised not to tell – and must not!

* Often there is poor writing about aboriginals – don’t use them as your information.

Rupert Wolf: Nigo: Manitowappa (not correct spelling, I believe) – these are accurate, good stories.

* Good emotions and stories and histories.
* Talk to aboriginal people and/or their sources to get true picture.
* Aboriginal writers are activists.

Serena: how does one start? What is the first step?

LM: you already have – you invited me to dinner as a guest.

Anisha: also had invited Lorraine over. Then said she would like to meet some aboriginals. So Lorraine phoned up her sister and asked if she could bring “A real Indian” to visit. And so it began.

KS: relationship building. Must be trust and respect on both sides.

LM: do gooders don’t stay. People want to know what the research is for. Aboriginals are a “hot topic” because there’s money out there to do research related to aboriginal populations.

KS: Social scientists are taught to be “observers”, not involved – but she must “be biased”, “go native”, not be “not objective” in order to do good research. That is a dilemns!

LM: “not objective”? Lorraine claims to be subjective, by choice, because she cares.

CM: why be objective? Emotion IS in art.

LM: emotions are part of what you do.

CM: She brought together some young women in conflict with the law to speak of their experiences. Once they were finished, no one asked any questions or made any comments. That was a real insult. She refused to let anyone leave until they did ask questions – she held them hostage.

LM: elders of native and non-native.

LM: come with a prepared set of questions? No ! Insist on signed consent from participants? No !

CM and LM: but BUREC said theirs was not a valid ethical research approach.

CM: met with and spoke with “Alex” – a talented aboriginal artist. He had “gold” to offer – insights, knowledge, lore … But he had to approve it before he would share. She had to give him respect. They control how much and what they offer to share.

SP: must change the BUREC guidelines.

MR: did not have all the paperwork.

LM: BUREC guidelines compromise her relationship and reputation with aboriginal communitites. She wrote that she would have an elder in every session to interview women (because she is a native elder, herself).

SP: the BUREC guidelines were meant to prevent harm to “subjects” – so guidelines must change if they do harm the subjects.

Renee Robinson: there are Native Aboriginal Health Organization guidelines – they could be used but they are health-specific. They say, basically: must share the research with the community and must have community engagement and must benefit the community. Need various requirements for each situation. OCAP (Ownership Control Access Possession) is a national body to educate existing Ethics bodies and faculty. They have been to U of W and U of M. They were making their rounds during the BU strike so didn’t come to BU. They have the approval of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. Renee mentioned Lisa – who would be willing to come to BU. Rupert Wolf was another person mentioned.

RR: she WANTS people to apply to BUREC. Must change things so it works.

LM: Dr. Joe Sawchuk advised her on how to make her application to BUREC. She planned to have conversations with families, get their permission first. Her application was denied. She was confused – it was accepted when submitted by a white man – Joe Sawchuk. BUREC rep came to her class. She explained.

KS: she has “bias”. She refuses to dance to BUREC’s tune.

CM: believes in the ethics process. But it compromised her research. It was an insult to her contact when she was expected to get signed consent. His way is for her to earn her right to listen to him – and he has a lot worth listening to – she had to earn his respect – he had to get to know her – and vice versa. It is more like a personal relationship sharing than a researcher-subject transfer of information. He had to “put her in her place”. Survivors for TRC – wanted. BUREC did not have good guidelines.

LM: BUREC presently has an invitation out to aboriginals to sit on the committee. Lorraine said she did not feel being on BUREC would be constructive – she felt she would just get castigated.

LM: What tools are necessary for aboriginal research? Ask aboriginal communities what they want. If just a theme, it takes time and stories. As researchers, all three said they got “kicked in the butt” – put in their place – by the elders they wished to learn from before earning permission to hear some stories. LM said bring tobacco – but … if aboriginal that is a sign of respect … if you are non-aboriginal it may very well not be accepted. The information is high quality, but is given in different ways, usually – NOT through a structured interview. LM was told to turn on her tape recorder – she was allowed to tape.

CM: ask someone else what elder wants or what is appropriate. The elder makes the bridge their own way. Cryptic way that they spoke to her – she had to remember and think and often it took months before it made sense to her – the words sent her on a journey to find their meaning. It’s okay to ask questions – but don’t expect the answer the way you expect - it may be told in stories – a long conversation.

KS: The elder she was conversing with spoke of other things for two hours (not the half hour she had allotted) in stories and she did get answers – more than she expected. Go on the journey. You won’t be able to adhere to rigid deadlines in getting research completed.

LM: however the university does have deadlines. Dilemna!

Meagan PB: Mayan people seem similar. She has to have long term goals … and short term diversions … to get publications out. Juggle what you hope to study. Questions become more open. Must be an opportunistic researcher.

LM: women fill in the answers. Time is flexible.

KS: other opportunities present themselves.

MPB: The usual order of research is … applying for grants, doing the research and reaching the goal. You often have to juggle the order. You may be applying for grants after you have done the research, for example.

CM: Maintain relationships AFTER research. They are gifts.

Alex Gendre’s name was mentioned.

LM: cannot turn off relationships.

MPB: research is your life. Always dealing with relationships and research.

LM: be prepared to live on a reserve for a year to get data, for example. Be prepared to live in their shoes.

CM: read people’s words AND expressions. Silence can mean various things. Wonder why if silent; perhaps ask. Their stories bring up too much emotion, perhaps? Maybe you have been rude? May be thinking of a smart retort!

Question: Who do you inform first?

* Go to band council.
* Or ask someone you know to be a mediator.

They may change their mind during the research – think why?

KS: Aboriginal research is an opportunity for a challenge. It is the most rewarding research for her!

Etsuko: is on BUREC. What can be done to improve guidelines? LM thinking of joining.