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Naming and Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledges in Public Institutions: Intersections of Landscapes and Experience.

Abstract: This paper tells a story of a practitioner’s path to research in classification theory. It leads from a canoe-run through pacific forest to a university campus all of which are located on the traditional lands of the Musqueam people. It found that the university library has no authorized name in its vast catalogues and databases for the people of this place -- the Musqueam. As the first step of an enquiry into the nature of library classification of Indigenous knowledges, the paper explores the relationship of library classification to the dominant discourses, the effects of this relationship on access to Indigenous knowledges held in libraries, and the consequences for the education of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The next steps are to examine theoretical foundations that may serve to guide the design, development and evaluation of classification systems for organizing and naming Indigenous knowledges in public collections.

1. Introduction

Ulqsn¹ is the name of the point of land where the university is located on the traditional lands of the Musqueam people. Walking paths now trace the original Indigenous trails that led from the river to the fresh water site and fishing camps on the inlet, criss-crossing the present day endowment lands. The land remembers the good places for sturgeon, the lookouts, the crab apple gathering places, and places for medicines. As a librarian working at the First Nations library here, I often hear student assistants explaining to visitors, “The name of the Library is Xwi7xwa, pronounced whei’wha, in the Squamish language, it means echo.” This story is told anew as each visitor asks a question about the name and opens the doorway to a new understanding, a different landscape, a landscape with its own ways of knowing, and its own ways of telling. This is the ground of my question: what could an Indigenous library look like here? How would the Indigenous value of the balance of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions manifest in library classification and how could Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies inform knowledge organization -- naming and structures? The principles have already been put in place in the library where I work, guided by the elders and their aspirations for the next generations.²

The Xwi7xwa Library’s knowledge organization and naming systems aim to be congruent with Indigenous worldviews and reflect Indigenous intellectual landscapes in order to support an organizational mandate to make the University's vast resources more accessible to Aboriginal peoples. The commitment to Indigenous knowledge organization emerges from two interrelated considerations: 1) Standard library knowledge organization and naming systems carry the bias of the dominant culture and thereby marginalize or exclude Indigenous histories, cultures, knowledges, languages, and efforts toward self-determination -- jurisdictional and intellectual. 2) The development of meaningful knowledge organization and subject representation systems for Indigenous knowledges within libraries and their educational institutions is integral to the larger project of Indigenous scholarship, research, and pedagogy at local and global levels. It also contributes to capacity building within local communities, and extends foundations for cross-cultural understandings. From an international perspective, it is part of the larger project of repatriation of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property. Due to the convergence of technologies and spread of bibliographic
utilities, the ubiquitous classification systems in global contexts have unprecedented power to erase local and regional knowledge domains. Theoretical and applied research on Indigenous knowledges organization contributes to the larger project of knowledge organization for a global learning society.

2. Background

The First Nations House of Learning is an Aboriginal student services unit at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. It was formed imaging Raven, the northwest coast trickster and symbol of creativity, transforming the university, to reflect First Nations cultures and philosophies, linking the university to First Nations communities (First Nations House of Learning, 2005). A clear vision and many years of negotiations by Aboriginal people secured a separate Aboriginal collection on campus and the building of facilities for Aboriginal student services including a library building in 1993. The library mandate is to collect, organize and preserve textual and non-textual records relating to the Aboriginal peoples of British Columbia with a focus on Indigenous perspectives and scholarship. In the 1980’s librarian, Gene Joseph, Wet’suwet’en Nadleh’den Nations, selected the Brian Deer Indigenous classification scheme for the collections and began to develop Aboriginal subject headings to describe the contents. (Joseph, 1993) She understood that any possible futures for an Aboriginal library were written in the organization of the knowledge and the ways in which it is named.

The Deer classification developed in the 1970’s is the only Indigenous general knowledge classification system in Canada. However, at present, it does not, and was not designed to, accommodate the large historic and contemporary interdisciplinary literature on Indigenous topics and a burgeoning Indigenous scholarship. The research challenge is to investigate principles to inform the development of classification tools and practices that give voice to Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous scholarship and are congruent with the demands of Indigenous research methodologies and ethics.

3. A Theoretical Lens: The Sociology of Education

In seeking a theoretical lens with which to view the intersections of libraries, education and Aboriginal peoples, the scholarship of the New Sociology of Education represented by Michael Young, Basil Bernstein and Michael Apple offers some insight. Interested in knowledge and power relations, these theorists view curriculum as a form of knowledge organization. It is understood as a symbolic, material and human environment that is socially constructed and socially distributed. They question what knowledge is selected to be legitimized by educational and social systems, examine how it becomes available to certain groups (and not to others) and how some knowledge is incorporated into the processes and content of education, such as inclusion in curriculum. Bernstein states, “The distribution of power and principles of social control are reflected in the ways in which society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers public” (p. 47). Textbooks transmit and distribute educational knowledge and controversies over what is considered to be legitimate knowledge often centre on what is included or excluded from textbooks: “They help set the canons of truthfulness ...” (Apple, 2000, 46). Some classification theorists hold that library subject headings and classifications can be viewed as text, as a discourse that carries traces of histories and political and social contexts. (Bowker and Star, 1999, 55) If viewed in this way, the new sociology of education could also provide tools to understand how dominant classification and subject representation systems entrench what is ‘taken for granted’ as legitimate knowledge, and how socially marginalized groups and their knowledge domains are excluded.
4. Aboriginal Education

Since the Native Indian Brotherhood published its first national policy paper Indian Control of Indian Education in 1972, Aboriginal people have emphasized the primacy of culturally appropriate curriculum to the successful education of Aboriginal students. Bias in curriculum still continues to be viewed as a crucial factor contributing to the failure of the education system for Aboriginal children (Hampton 1995; Battiste 2000). Post-secondary institutions also teach about First Nations in their hidden curriculum, as well as, their stated curriculum. “They transmit attitudes, values, and beliefs about what is important, who is credible, the “right” way to do things, and place of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.” The design of these educational processes occurs at both conscious and unconscious levels. (Hampton, 2000, 215).

The National Indian Brotherhood’s early analysis of the public school curriculum concluded that Aboriginal children will “continue to be strangers in Canadian classrooms until the curriculum recognizes Indian customs and values, Indian languages …” and their ongoing contributions to Canadian society (p. 26). In 1974, Manitoba Indian Brotherhood’s The Shocking Truth about Indians in Textbooks presented a thorough content analysis of the representation of Aboriginal peoples in textbooks. The study found texts to be derogatory, incomplete, and distorted as regards Aboriginal people and identified ten types of bias. These ten types of bias present in Canadian school textbooks thirty years ago could also be identified in the standard Anglo American classification and subject representation systems currently used by libraries. The effects on the education and self image of Aboriginal people, cross cultural understandings, and homogenization of society’s knowledge systems are similar. For example, in the university library catalogue there no subject entry for Musqueam, the Nation on whose unceded land the university is built. A search for works on Indigenous classification retrieved the pejorative term ‘primitive classification’, and a search for elders in this locale retrieves the heading, ‘Salish aged’ a term which skews the meaning and ignores the ubiquity of the term ‘elder’ in Indigenous contexts.

5. Library Classification and Homogenization: Erasures and Loss

Library and Information Science (LIS) scholarship has documented cultural bias in subject access through classification and subject headings since the 1930’s (Berman, 1971, 1981; Yeh, 1971; Olson, 2002; Hermalata, 1995; Foskett, 1982). Indigenous knowledges have been marginalized through historicization, omission, lack of specificity, lack of relevance and lack of recognition of sovereign nations. This is documented in Canada (Lee, 2001; Lawson, 2004; Blake, 2003) and internationally, in the United States (Olson, 2002; Carter, 2002; Exner, 2005), Australia (Moorecroft, 1997) and New Zealand (Simpson, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Classification systems reinforce the established intellectual and literary canon by placing subjects in traditional places, and reinforcing the expectations of users to find them there (Olson, 2002, 29). Notions about quality and authority underlie canon development and what is chosen as part of the canon (Searing, 1986). These same notions underlie the criteria that libraries use in selecting materials, such as, favourable reviews or indexing by standard sources. The problem is that the reviewers often lack a depth of knowledge of Indigenous topics and scholarship (Taylor and Patterson, 2004), and at a systemic level, the standard sources by definition choose more of the same. The information industry not only acts as a gatekeeper to knowledge, it also controls the interpretation of knowledge through the naming of concepts, and application of subject headings (Moorecroft 1993). These practices shape the current library collections that in turn shape research patterns and determine options that are available to future researchers. In this way they also construct memory (Traister, 1999, 213), and skew the telling and retelling of Aboriginal histories (Moorecroft, 1997, 108-112; Shilling
and Hausia, 1999, 18). Collections and subject representation “affect the way library patrons view themselves and their relation to their academic community, as well as, to the larger culture” (Manoff, 1992, 3-4). Moreover, understandings of identity are related to self-image and psychological well-being (Joseph and Lawson, 2003). Librarians are urged to acknowledge the importance of tribal governments through their acquisitions collections, reference publications and classification schemes (Carter, 2002, 14) and to recognize that First Nations and Aboriginal people “are not just racial groups, they are also self-governing, sovereign political entities empowered to exercise governmental functions” (p. 23).

Hope Olson points out that the Dewey Decimal System (DDC), the most widely used classification system in the world, is in use in over 135 countries and translated into over 30 languages. Similarly, the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) is used in libraries and around the world: it is gradually becoming an “international subject language” (2002, 13). Convergence of networks and bibliographic utilities facilitate copying of catalogue records among libraries, sharing data over networks and through consortia Libraries in 82 countries use OCLC and copy millions of its records worldwide (Kyung-Sun, 2003; Olson, 2002). The standardization of knowledge organization and subject representation systems enables unprecedented sharing of knowledge and also unprecedented power to erase local and regional knowledge domains. At risk are the voices that represent diversity of human experience, such as, the uniqueness of Indigenous cultures, languages, stories and the ways of expressing them. The result could be the loss of representation and access to alternative ways of understanding, conduct and being in the world (Smith, 2005).

4. Challenges for Library Classification

LIS classification theory recognizes that its traditional foundations of logical division and postpositivistic paradigms do not adequately express the perspectival (Ranganathan, 1967) and ‘border areas’ (Broadfield, 1946) and its challenge is to seriously imagine theoretical alternatives. Feminist theorists interested in the relationships between power and knowledge, and in multivocality produce an interdisciplinary literature that develops theoretical strategies for bridging limits. (Rose 1994) cited in Olson (2002). This literature envisions ‘boundary objects’ to link disparate knowledge domains, (Bowker and Star, 1999) and ‘eccentric techniques’ to create spaces for multiple voices (Olson, 2002). Digital library researchers also seek methods of traversing boundaries, both disciplinary and technical, for information retrieval of web resources and electronic collections (Dean, 2003; Manoff, 2000).

Internationally, there are Indigenous thesaurus projects in Australia and New Zealand. The Maori Subject Headings grew out research on the information needs of Maori people and aims to provide access to the Maori body of knowledge held in public institutions for Maori people. In Australia, the Aboriginal Thesaurus aims to improve access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander materials. The Rasmussen Library at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, in recognition of local Indigenous language revitalization efforts, has undertaken the reclassification of all Hyperborean languages, Alaskan and Other Arctic Native languages due to multiple inaccuracies and omissions within the Library of Congress classification. “We do not want to be perceived, as libraries often are, as a component of a white, European imperialist institution but rather as supportive partners in this process of cultural reassertion” (Lincoln 2003: 266). In Canada, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) calls for educational improvement through establishing an Aboriginal documentation centre and clearinghouse to provide access to Indigenous histories, knowledges and research (1996, Vol 3, 24). The repatriation of Indigenous knowledges is viewed as integral to the larger repatriation of cultural and intellectual property taken historically. Library and Archives Canada notes in a recent consultation report that Aboriginal resources and services are
affected by “issues of racism and ignorance raised by present cataloguing standards and terminology” (2003 p. 23).

Although there are approximately ten specialized Indigenous classifications in use in North America (Hills 1997), LIS theoretical work deriving from Indigenous epistemologies and values that also comprehends the contemporary self-determination projects of First Nations has not been imagined. Libraries, archives, museums, cultural centres, and digital collections could benefit from conceptual and theoretical research on knowledge organization of Indigenous topics. From Indigenous perspectives, “research like schooling, once the tool of colonization and oppression, is very gradually coming to be seen as a potential means to reclaim languages histories and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impacts of colonialism and to give voice to alternative ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2005, 91).

5. Next Steps
This paper is the first part of an enquiry into the nature of library classification of Indigenous knowledges. It is contextual and explores the relationship of library classification to hegemonic discourses, the effects of this relationship on access to Indigenous knowledge held in libraries, the consequences for the education of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and for the self-determination efforts of First Nations and Aboriginal communities. It is necessary for designers of classification tools to gain an understanding our own intellectual genealogies and proclivities in order to be aware of what is useful and what is not useful for the purposes of the project. The next steps are to examine theoretical foundations to guide the design, development and evaluation of classification systems for organizing Indigenous knowledges in public collections. As some forms of Indigenous knowledge are considered to be the cultural and/or intellectual property of the Nations, the research focus is on public collections. A further phase of the research will seek grounds of compatibility between Indigenous classifications and existing classification systems. There is a gap in the North American literature on theoretical foundations for organizing and describing Indigenous knowledges, however, there is a growing Maori literature (Simpson 2005) describing Maori classification projects in New Zealand. The research will build on the existing theoretical literature guided by the scholarship on Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous research methodologies and ethics. Indigenous knowledges typically recognize the primacy of relationship and interconnectedness, (Hampton, 1995) are place based, (Kawagely, 1993) rooted in genealogy, informed by Indigenous language, and attuned to the wisdom of revelation (Cajete, 1994). Indigenous research methodology (Smith, 1999; Castellano, 2004) requires a commitment to produce work relevant to Aboriginal community needs. The ethics of the “The 4 R’s Protocol”: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) guide such work. This type of qualitative research project is a blend of pragmatic and interpretive methods and could follow a plan to: (1) collect existing Indigenous library classifications and subject headings (2) conduct interviews with the creators and users of those classifications and subject headings to determine design principles and usability (3) undertake a collaborative project with an Aboriginal community that intends to describe Aboriginal collections from an Aboriginal perspective (4) reflect on the principles that informed the collaborative research (5) present a case study of the use of the classifications and subject headings that is a proof of concept.

The purpose of the research is to explore theoretical tools to aid in the development of classifications of Indigenous collections. It intends to improve access to information that is germane to Indigenous interests and to facilitate Indigenous research and knowledge production. Improved access may serve to foster the success and participation of Indigenous students within educational institutions. The research is congruent with The Royal
Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) policy goal of the affirmation of Aboriginal knowledges (Castellano, 2000). From an international perspective, it is part of the larger project of repatriation of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property held in public institutions. Finally, it aims to make space for Indigenous research and scholarship within the academy to benefit Aboriginal students and thereby also contribute to a more relevant and vibrant academic community.

Notes
1  Larry Grant, Musqueam elder. Musqueam Language class. Musqueam Elders’ Centre, Musqueam Nation, British Columbia, Term 1. 2000. Ulqsn means nose or point in the hon’q’amin’om’ language, one of three dialects of Halkomelem which, like many Indigenous languages in Canada, is endangered.

2  For definitional purposes, this paper uses the terminology of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996): Aboriginal people refer to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada when referring to Inuit, First Nations and Metis without regard to separate origins and identities. The term Native is used as a synonym when it is used in cited materials. The term First Nations replaces Indian except when the later is used in a source document. Aboriginal peoples refers to organic political and cultural entities arising historically from the original peoples of North America. Indigenous and Indigenous peoples refers to organic political and cultural entities arising as the original peoples of the world. Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Minister of Supply and Services, 1966): xv

3  Manitoba Indian Brotherhood The Shocking Truth About Indians in Textbooks (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, 1974). The ten types of bias include: bias by omission, defamation, disparagement, cumulative implication, lack of validity, inertia, obliteration, disembodiment, lack of concreteness, lack of comprehensiveness. 1a.

References


