# What does 'indigenous' mean, for me?

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EDITORIAL

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This editorial starts from the understanding that identity formation is one of the primary purposes of formal education, especially schooling, and that processes of national identity-building are reflected in the national school curriculum, both the acknowledged curriculum, and what is called the 'hidden curriculum' (Anyon, 2006). One intriguing identity concept often raised in schooling in relation to culture or ethnicity is the notion of the 'indigenous'—but this term is controversial; its meaning contested. I will explain my understanding of this term in order to clarify why PESA established the IPG or Indigenous Philosophy Group, and comment on the group's experiences and future aspirations.

The word 'indigenous' is an adjective used of a person, language, culture, or some aspect of culture— and it is a word I do not capitalise, for reasons explained in the following paragraph. As commonly used, 'indigenous' means something similar to the older word 'native'; nowadays not considered 'polite' given its overtones of meaning of 'primitive' and all the associated negative implications. But this likeness to older words such as 'native' does not capture the full meaning described by 'indigenous'. Indigenous is a primary adjective that does not stem from a noun: Despite the emergence of 'indigene' for an indigenous person/people and 'indigeneity' for the quality of being indigenous, it is the adjective 'indigenous' that remains the dominant usage.

The reason for the dominance of the adjectival form is clear once the full meaning of the 'indigenous' concept is taken into account. The word 'indigenous' refers to the notion of a place-based human ethnic culture that has not migrated from its homeland, and is not a settler or colonial population. To be indigenous is therefore by definition different from being of a world culture, such as the Western or Euro-American culture. Despite this fundamental difference, however, 'Western' and 'indigenous' are similar identity labels in the sense that both are general words for heterogeneous groups of peoples, who nevertheless understand themselves as aligned in some way.

I borrow the idea of 'placeholder' from mathematics to describe the concept of 'indigenous', in the sense that 'indigenous' is a placeholder for any of many specific identity names. Indigenous is an umbrella term that includes peoples from Aotearoa, Aboriginal Australia and Indigenous America, the island nations of the Pacific, the Sami people of Finland, and others. Indigenous is a generic term that has no positive categorical content, except in relation to terms such as Western. As such, as a place-holder for a specific cultural identity (such as Māori, etc.) I consider 'indigenous' better uncapitalised. Conversely, those who consider themselves Westerners relate to the contemporary dominant global culture, dominated by the West, also known as Euro-America. Therefore, although 'Western' is also an umbrella term, it is not a placeholder term because it has definitional specificity, in that it refers to the globally dominant Western culture, which thereby counts as an ethnicity or identity label, thus deserving of a capital 'W'.

A recent academic fad is to decapitalise 'western' in a purportedly political move: A symbol (letter) of defiance, of seeking to decentre or de-emphasise the dominance of the West. But this textual preference is not only ineffectual, it is also illogical, according to the argument given in the previous paragraphs. Decapitalisation normalises the West in the text, and makes it easier to write and think of 'western' ways as acultural. These are strong grounds for retaining capitalisation, understood as the right to call attention to the Western ethnicity: Indeed to do so is undoubtedly an important function of the adjectival concept of 'indigenous'.

This argument suggests that 'indigenous' and 'Western' operate at least in part as a reified binary, which can be deployed in an example of what Gayatri Spivak called 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak, 1990): A strategem involving essentialism used by indigenous people to support their political projects. Te Kawehau Hoskins explains in detail how Māori employ strategic essentialism in relation to this indigenous-Western reified binary:

> Strategic essentialism involves temporarily promoting Māori ethnic/cultural identity as authentic, homogenous and stable—the simplification of group identity to achieve certain political and social goals. Assertions of profound difference are evoked to achieve political recognition and the redistribution of authority and resources within the prevailing liberal political economy—usually because promises of equality and inclusion within the nation-state have failed to deliver justice. As [Kelly] Barclay (2005) points out, Māori have declared themselves outside the nation because they were *effectively* excluded from it. In order to break with the egalitarian myth that has masked differential access to power and social privilege along colonised–coloniser lines:

> … Māori first had to reify [the nation]. In the end they had to reify their oppression; they had to reify their 'other' and declare them colonisers. They had to be prepared to reify themselves, their subjectivity as Māori … before anyone would listen. (Barclay, 2005, p. 123; cited in Hoskins, 2012, pp. 85–686)

It is interesting and instructive to consider how such a reified binary works in different ways at differing levels across both empirical and philosophical realms. One hazard of invoking the reified binary as political strategem is that its purpose may be invalidly extended beyond its proper bounds. To continue with the above example, in relation to the reified binary of Aotearoa, both Pākehā and Māori scholars can become confused by the strategy, leading to incoherent arguments.

For example, Western scholars across time and many disciplines have repeatedly 'discovered' the potential of indigenous knowledge in relation to their own work. On such occasions, Western scholars commonly herald the benefits of working across multiple knowledge systems. This is also a conventional move for indigenous scholars, particularly at the start of their academic careers, when they are frequently exploring both indigenous and Western knowledge from an indigenous perspective. These arguments are facile and uncritical when they omit to notice, as they frequently do, that indigenous peoples have invariably remained concentrated in the deprived and non-elite sectors of their Westernised societies, despite acquiring knowledge of multiple knowledge systems via colonisation processes, of which schooling is one of the most effective.

Taking Māori science education as an example, ideas of 'Māori science' and 'science in Māori' have guided attempts over the years to reform the science curriculum and help Māori students, but the messages are easily confused. There is a current craze for 'translating science into Māori' despite rational arguments to show that this a complete waste of time and energy. Everyone involved in translating science into Māori genuinely wants to help Māori students achieve better in science, but this motivation alone does not guarantee that a rational approach will be followed. Māori science education is an interesting example of interaction between indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge represented by the science curriculum.

Working in the intercultural knowledge space, it becomes clear that indigenous knowledge interacts differently with Western knowledge in each of the disciplines. In science these questions remain extremely contentious, and frequently fall prey to poor argumentation. Given the history of indigenous knowledge being obliterated, stolen and denied by the West, contemporary declarations of interest and respect for indigenous knowledge by Western scholars are experienced by indigenous peoples as further bouts of colonisation, this time at an epistemic level: a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1991).

Less pessimistically, collaborations involving both Western and indigenous knowledge forms often provide examples of the creative tension of hybridity, for which Homi Bhabha coined the term the 'third space' (Bhabha, 2009). In Aotearoa New Zealand, local art and literature, including movies and music, have taken advantage of the creative synergies that arise in the intercultural encounter.

## Indigenous philosophy and PESA: The rationale for the IPG

Education and philosophy are two parts of the academy that are of particular importance and relevance to the sociopolitical projects of indigenous peoples. Education is based on knowledge, and the key difference between Western and indigenous knowledges is at the level of philosophy. Education for indigenous people is a key strategy for reclaiming and regenerating indigenous languages, narratives, histories and wisdom traditions. Education is centrally concerned with literacy and identity, i.e. with aspects of symbolic culture in particular with literacy and numeracy and everything that goes with them. Indigenous education is one of the most important pathways by which some kind of restitution could be sought for peoples whose language and culture have been stamped out within schooling. But indigenous education must be based on sound understanding of indigenous philosophies, and how these differ from and intersect with Western knowledge frameworks, in order to achieve the desired outcomes for indigenous students and their people, and avoid 'domestication' (Smith, 2012). This reasoning highlights the importance of philosophy of education to indigenous people, and hence the rationale behind establishing the IPG.

As a co-leader of the IPG I have convened writing projects as opportunities for indigenous scholars to publish. With other Māori colleagues, we co-wrote an introductory guest editorial (Stewart, Mika, Cooper, Bidois, & Hoskins, 2014). We then co-edited two Special Issues for indigenous authors: One in Knowledge Cultures (Stewart & Mika, 2016); the other in EPAT (Stewart, 2016). The 2016 PESA Conference held in Fiji in December 2016 saw the biggest IPG meeting so far, with indigenous participants from Fiji as well as Tonga, Samoa, Hawai'i and Australia, as well as Aotearoa. Following that meeting, we are working on another group guest editorial for EPAT, applying and adapting the models of practice evolving in the Editors Collective, in which both IPG co-leaders participate (www.editorscollective.org.nz). This overlap demonstrates the power of an 'ecology of journals'—indigenous authors benefit from participation by the IPG co-leaders in the editorial network that has coalesced and grown around PESA, catalysed by global networker Michael Peters as editor-in-chief of EPAT and ex-officio member of the PESA Executive Committee. IPG members are also working with the Australian convenors towards the upcoming conference to be held in December 2017, in Newcastle, NSW: planning an an Indigenous Philosophies symposium, and supporting cultural representation in the conference programme.

The indigenous philosopher of education works in a liminal space, defined by intersectionality, criss-crossed by fissures and aporia; and recognises alignment, alliance and often camaraderie with scholars from other contested academic territories, especially feminism, LGBTQI studies, and various other projects at the leading edge of knowledge, including posthumanism and new materialism. The field of indigenous education seldom yields quick fixes, and its difficulties can be adequately understood only through a philosophical frame of analysis. The philosophy of indigenous education draws on critical theory and indigenous traditions to resist the colonising effects built into the traditions of schooling. Indigenous philosophy is therefore a politically significant form of scholarship, at the centre of larger struggles by indigenous peoples for control over symbolic culture and the way they are represented in educational media, mass media, and other social contexts.

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