

The role of research and knowledge creation in decolonization

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Geraldine Balzer from the University of Saskatchewan emphasizes the importance of reciprocity and relationality in research with Indigenous communities, advocating for collaborative knowledge generation that respects community values and involves extended engagement

When considering the decolonization of education, it is essential to acknowledge the role research has historically played in the colonization process. Research, deeply rooted in Western academic traditions, has often positioned Indigenous peoples and the original inhabitants of colonized lands as objects of study rather than as active participants. In my efforts to build research partnerships with Indigenous communities, I have come to understand that research is frequently perceived as yet another extractive practice, one that removes knowledge from communities without returning meaningful outcomes or benefits.

Western researchers, privileged by their institutional affiliations, typically have access to funding, and their academic careers are advanced through this work, while little changes for the people in the communities being studied. Our research participants have challenged us to critically examine this power dynamic and to consider how it might be restructured so that their visions are genuinely respected and meaningfully integrated by academic collaborators. Concepts such as reciprocity and relationality have emerged as foundational concerns voiced by communities when envisioning future research relationships.

Valuing local knowledge over academic power

As a theoretical construct, decolonization requires researchers to acknowledge their settler-colonial positionality (Peltier et al., 2019) and, as non-Indigenous research teams, to engage in ongoing reflexive practice. This involves critically assessing how their research design and methods may reproduce control and power dynamics. For Indigenous participants involved in research, it is important to recognize that their communities are actively engaged in decolonization efforts. Researchers must therefore align their work with this momentum by co-developing methodologies that disrupt 'the hierarchical relation of power that privileges academic over local Indigenous knowledges and the production of knowledge that has very little practical value' (Zavala, 2013, p. 57). Both postcolonialism and decolonization invite a search for alternative forms of knowledge.

To entertain these frameworks in research is to become ‘concerned with the grounds of knowledge – epistemology,’ understanding that knowledge systems are often shaped by Eurocentric and ethnocentric narratives (Young, 2015, p. 152).

Decolonizing research practices requires researchers to set aside preconceived notions and to critically question the methodologies entrenched in Western academia. This means embracing new ways of seeing and understanding the world. As Saltmarsh et al. (2009) assert, ‘knowledge generation is a process of co-creation, breaking down the distinctions between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers’ (p. 10). Conducting research in colonized spaces compels researchers to reconsider these distinctions and to value knowledge systems rooted in community. Jimenez Estrada (2005) emphasizes that ‘oral traditions, cultural understandings and ceremonies are a vast field of knowledge where metaphors connect diverse Indigenous cultures while also providing a vehicle for sharing and communicating important lessons in a culturally-appropriate manner’ (p. 44). She further reminds us that ‘research is a complex endeavour that needs to remember and prioritise the values of respect, responsibility and accountability’ (p. 51), particularly given that ‘the implications of conducting Indigenous-based research within institutions where ethical processes are conceptually different from the understanding of Indigenous communities cannot be ignored’ (p. 49). Decolonizing research must be grounded in relationship – relationships that are built carefully and over time. This often requires extending research timelines and adopting slower, more deliberate data-gathering processes. Such approaches frequently run counter to the productivity-driven agendas of Western institutions. However, this extended timeframe is essential if researchers are to work in true collaboration with colonized and Indigenous communities to meaningfully interrogate colonial legacies.

Decolonizing education

Decolonizing research is imperative if education itself is to be decolonized. The current structures of primary, secondary, and tertiary education are built on Eurocentric foundations and have historically failed to serve Indigenous and colonized students. However, new research and knowledge creation offer opportunities for radical transformation, opening the door to more meaningful and inclusive forms of education. Efforts to decolonize academic research structures, and by extension to reimagine the function of classrooms, are often hindered by dominant political ideologies. Globally, both education and community engagement have been constrained by ‘neoliberal logics of decreased state support, privatization, and quasi-markets’ (Brackman, 2015, p. 141). Kliewer (2013) similarly observes that ‘Neoliberal ideology produces a very specific governing and organizing regime that makes democratic and justice aims difficult to achieve’ (p. 74). At its core, decolonized education is driven by a commitment to justice and democracy; goals cannot be realized without decolonizing the research practices that inform and shape educational systems.

Decolonizing education is a long-term commitment – one that requires deep engagement with classroom diversity, the multiplicity of stories and experiences held by both learners and educators, and a critical understanding of the systemic structures that perpetuate

colonial attitudes. Effective and thoughtful research can help counter these forces, but only if researchers remain mindful of their own roles in sustaining colonial frameworks. We are all partners in this work – co-learners, co-educators, and co-creators of knowledge, working together to build communities grounded in reciprocity and shared purpose. It is through these collective efforts that the dismantling of colonial structures becomes possible.

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