*Book Review from Higher Education Research and Development School of Education, University of New England*

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**The Authentic Dissertation: alternative ways of knowing, research and representation**

edited by Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs), London, Routledge, 2008, 262 pp.,

£22.99 (paperback), ISBN 10: 0-415-44223-0

Ten years ago, when I began my honours research, I did not set out to write an

‘authentic’ dissertation. However, according to the descriptions provided in Four

Arrows’ edited collection of writings, my Master’s dissertation, and my subsequent

Doctoral dissertation, are both ‘authentic’ dissertations: dissertations that acknowledge

the voice and embodiment of the researcher in the research process and that are

presented in a format chosen so as to represent the researcher’s interpretations as

authentically as possible.

The book consists of over 30 brief dissertation stories, which are described by the

editor as ‘spiritual undertakings and reflections that honor the centrality of the

researcher’s voice, experience, creativity and authority’ (p. 1). The disciplines covered

are as varied as neuroscience and education, psychology and theatre and include a

variety of qualitative methodologies. The book itself is constructed as an imaginary

conference, with many of the authors’ presentations responded to by various ‘invited

guests’. My initial reaction was a reluctance to engage with this style – I would simply

read the presentations. However, I found I could not resist the ensuing conversations,

which involved noted researchers from various fields, including Lorri Neilsen, Elliot

Eisner, Eileen Honan and Tom Barone. There were also some dissenting voices with

regard to the various alternative forms of doctoral research, one of these being Howard

Gardner. While at times I found the format of the discussions a little forced, they are

generally quite engaging and informative. I did wonder, however, how the guest

voices were written into the discussions: Were they invited by the author or the editor?

Were they co-written? Were they an actual conversation about the author’s work,

which was recorded, transcribed and edited?

The writings are arranged into seven collections: indigenous ways of knowing;

creative story telling; poetic inquiry and visual art; documentary film and photographs;

drama, dialogue and performance; autobiography/autoethnography; and

participants’ voices. The placement of the Indigenous research pieces as the first chapter

in the collection is explicitly purposeful. Four Arrows describes Indigenous

research as being based upon:

the sacredness of space and place; the purpose of research to benefit the community; and

the spiritual awareness that everything is connected; and that knowledge must incorporate

the mysterious. (p. 5)

I noted that the methodologies in my dissertations bore all the hallmarks of

‘Indigenous’ research, however, I am not a traditional ‘indigenous’ person. This

troubled me. Later in the book Four Arrows explains that he understands the term

‘Indigenous’ as going ‘beyond race, tribal affiliation or even the teachings … [from]

a specific geographical place’ (p. 13). He suggests that we all have in our DNA the

potential to recall the harmony and balance of life that our (Indigenous) ancestors

understood and that one of his hopes is that this book will support research students

wanting to ‘create or discover vital knowledge for bringing health and harmony

back into the world’ (p. 249). As the Indigenous contributors are all either Canadian,

American or Australian, this limits the relevance of the book in a global sense,

however, it provides a much needed resource for researchers in Western, colonised

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nations, asking all researchers in these contexts to consider Indigenous knowledges

and ways of learning in their research.

Although the book has its foundations in indigenous ways of knowing, the majority

of the contributors are not indigenous researchers. Among the many other themes

explored in the book are the notion of *emergent* methodology and the related notion

of *embodiment.* One guest suggests that, as a supervisor, he would have been very

nervous if a student suggested that their approach would, rather than following tried

and tested reliable and valid methods, be allowed to *emerge* from the research process

itself. Margaret Somerville (2008), in writing about emergent methodologies, links

them with embodiment, a notion that is addressed directly by two of the contributors

to this collection:

A supervisor suggested I place myself at the core of my study. I was, for the first time,

embodied. This embodiment was a new freedom … I was now located in the complex

issues … I was engaged from within. (Veronica Arbon, p. 24)

Embodied scholarship means embracing the full nature of both our heads and our hearts

to bring to bear on epistemological questions. It offers a comprehensive way of knowing,

which doesn’t privilege certain methods or others, or certain cultural norms over others.

(Katrina Rogers, p. 168)

This notion of embodiment seems to capture the essence of authentic research as

research that emerges from the researcher’s engagement with the research itself.

The book dares us to explore, collaboratively with our faculty colleagues, different,

authentic ways of knowing and researching. Four Arrows (p. 3) notes that there

are already many excellent publications about alternative dissertations. This book,

however, presents the stories of the writers. Many of the contributors write about the

struggle to find both an appropriate methodology and voice for their research, along

with a committee who are encouraging and supportive of the process of producing

such a dissertation. One contributor expresses her regret at not having been able to

successfully do so and another, the creator of the first web-based electronic thesis,

relates how, ‘on the eve of submission, a politicised University Ethics Committee

deleted the entire site from the University server’, the examiners withdrew and the

author became ‘an academic untouchable’ (Simon Pockley, p. 237). These stories of

apparent failure provide a balance to the success, though hard won, achieved by most

of the contributors.

Although the preface describes the book as providing ‘practical guidance’ to

students and their supervisors, it is not a ‘how to’ book. Rather, it describes the experiences

of those who have chosen to research and write authentically and the landscapes

in which their research took place. The story told in Sandi Warren’s chapter is

a good description of the usefulness of this book:

In the past, when someone approached a skilled angler and asked ‘show me how to fish’,

the skilled one would answer, ‘I will show you the water, the land, the seasons, and all

the relations that connect you and the fish. When you understand these things you will

understand how to harvest fish. (p. 29)

The inclusion of both an author index and a bibliography add to the book’s value as a

guide. This book is best read by those who are already open to, or at least interested

in, exploring alternative knowledge, research and representation, either as researcher

or supervisor.

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The book’s stated aim is to challenge the values of academic research in the

Western tradition. In the very first chapter there is a debate about the definition of

research: is it about ‘explaining’ the world or ‘interpreting’ it? Are knowledge and

truth the goal of research or should research be seen as a dynamic process where

knowledge is ‘constantly becoming’ (p. 18)? It is suggested that research is something

that contributes to our understanding of the world, or makes the world a better place

to live in, and that any form of research is valid provided that it does this (p. 5). One

of the contributors goes so far as to suggest that ‘we are not likely to stop the social

and ecological injustices surrounding us if higher education does not embrace’ these

new forms of research (Sarah MacDougall, p. 191). This is a bold claim, but one that

is strongly supported by the contributions in this book.

**References**

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