

INDIGENOUS HEURISTIC ACTION RESEARCH: BRIDGING WESTERN AND INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

Kū Kahakalau

Research by indigenous researchers must be first and foremost accountable to our indigenous community. In this article, I describe the evolution of *indigenous heuristic action research*. This approach—which stems from my doctoral work on indigenous education and is informed by multiple methodologies—adheres to Hawaiian protocol in terms of dealing with research participants and processes. For example, I establish personal relations with participants and utilize primarily Hawaiian ways of communication and data collection, such as observation and talk story. In addition, I conduct my research in a Hawaiian community, for the benefit of the Hawaiian community, and with the help of the Hawaiian community. Indigenous heuristic action research represents one step toward truly indigenous research methodologies based entirely on native perspectives.

CORRESPONDENCE MAY BE SENT TO:

Kū Kahakalau, P.O. Box 398, Kamuela, Hawai'i 96743.

Email: kukahaka@verizon.net

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Things happen in mysterious ways—at least in my life. While in the process of doing one thing, other exciting things happen that are neither planned nor even fully understood until they have taken on a life of their own. One such example concerns the development of a unique research methodology, which I developed inadvertently in the process of completing my doctoral program in Indigenous Education.

In this article, I describe the evolution and the components of this methodology, which I coined *indigenous heuristic action research*. It is my hope that by sharing this aspect of my work, I can help inspire current and future researchers to look critically at existing methodologies and tweak them until we can create truly indigenous research methodologies frameworked entirely from a native perspective.

For decades, indigenous scholars have critiqued the colonizing practices of Western research methodologies. However, more recently, the discussion among indigenous researchers has gone beyond criticism. For example, researchers like Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Kawagley (1990) assert that native researchers have not only the right but also the responsibility to develop our own native methods of research. These methods must be congruent with native values and traditions and accountable to our indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Furthermore, indigenous methodologies must be sophisticated and scholarly to convince academia that they are of equal scope and breadth as established Western ways of research. This is critical, because indigenous researchers must be able to utilize indigenous methodologies, not just at institutions controlled by indigenous peoples, or in disciplines oriented toward native studies, but even at the most conservative and prestigious Western universities, and in fields seemingly unrelated to native life and native ways.

One goal of my work has been to demonstrate that indigenous peoples can conduct quality scholarly research utilizing native ways of inquiry, and that such research can solve native problems and advance native knowledge. In fact, many indigenous scholars today believe that the only way indigenous peoples and indigenous issues should be studied is by indigenous peoples, using indigenous methodologies. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asserted that most current indigenous methodologies are a mix of existing methodological approaches and indigenous practices. Tuhiwai Smith believes that this mix reflects the training of indigenous researchers, which continues to be

within the academy, and “the parameters and common sense understanding of research, which govern how Indigenous communities and researchers define their activities” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 143).

When I first entered The Union Institute (TUI), I had little knowledge of doctoral research in general, or indigenous methodologies specifically, and had never heard of Tuhiwai Smith’s “mix” concept. Although I knew the ultimate goal I wanted to achieve as a result of my research—creating a Hawaiian model of education had been my dream for many years—I had not determined the exact nature of my method of inquiry nor the specifics of how I would conduct my research. One aspect that had attracted me to TUI was the fact that TUI appeared more flexible than most Western universities in terms of the types of research projects one could undertake. For example, rather than requiring either a conventional quantitative or qualitative research dissertation, TUI also allows for the completion of a social action project or a theoretical paper as a project demonstrating excellence. Interestingly, as part of my research at TUI, I ended up being involved in both quantitative and qualitative research. I implemented a social action project, wrote a theoretical paper, and, as mentioned previously, designed my own research methodology.

INFLUENCE OF HEURISTICS

Indigenous heuristic action research constitutes a peculiar fusion of existing methodologies blended with features identified as distinctly indigenous—the exact mix Tuhiwai Smith (1999) discussed. The existing methodology that provided the main framework for my “mix” was a qualitative research methodology called heuristics. Over time I would instinctively alter and adapt this methodology until it had a distinct indigenous flavor. I chose heuristics, which was developed by TUI graduate and faculty Clark Moustakas in the 1960s, because among all the Western methodologies that I examined, heuristics aligns itself best with native ways of learning and knowing. According to Moustakas (1990), “the heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing” (p. 10), which involves the researcher on a personal level. It is a disciplined and devoted way to deepen the researcher’s understanding of a phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1990).

Contrary to most Western research methodologies, heuristics allows, actually necessitates, involvement by the researcher, keeping the scientist as a human being in the picture at all times (Moustakas, 1990; Rogers, 1968). Generally described as an “organized and systematic form for investigating human experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9), heuristic research requires that the investigator have a “direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated and [be] present throughout the process” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). Only through continuous self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery, and an unwavering belief that knowledge grows out of direct human experience and can be discovered and explicated through self-inquiry, can an environment be created that allows the research question and the methodology to flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985; Maslow, 1966). This involvement of the researcher in the process distinguishes heuristics from other phenomenological methodologies.

One widely accepted aspect of Western research methods with which I have intrinsically been uncomfortable from as long as I can remember is the stipulation that, as a researcher, one must remain neutral and unbiased and must remove one’s personal opinion from the research process (Patton, 1986). As a Native Hawaiian, I bring to every task my *mana*, my personal power, which includes all my strengths: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. I also bring with me my personal skills and experiences, my hopes, my dreams, my visions, and my ancestral endowments, including the wisdom that my ancestors share with me while I sleep, as well as the knowledge my many teachers have imparted to me. These cumulative experiences influence what I do as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend, as much as they influence my behavior as a researcher, scholar, educator, administrator, native practitioner, composer, grassroots organizer, and social activist. Therefore, the fact that I could actually be part of my research and actively participate in the process immediately attracted me to heuristics as a research method. This was long before I realized that the intricate involvement of the researcher in the research process is also a distinct feature of indigenous methodologies.

Another aspect that attracted me to heuristics was the fact that although the heuristic process is autobiographic, with virtually every question having relevance on a personal level, there is also a social, and perhaps universal, significance (Moustakas, 1990). Making a social impact is something required by TUI—and one of the reasons I chose this university over other programs. It is also something I, as an avid activist, felt is an absolutely essential component of a doctoral disserta-

tion. For many years prior to joining TUI, my personal and professional focus had been to make a positive difference for Hawai‘i’s native people, to help myself, my family, my community, my *lāhui* (nation) achieve *pono* (excellence) and contribute to the perpetuation of my native language, culture, and traditions. It was only logical that my doctoral research should do the same. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) wrote that research that involves native people, as individuals or as communities, should set out to make a positive difference for the one researched. This is exactly what I hope my research does: bring about positive change for my people, my community, and my children by challenging the status quo and calling on the current inequalities in education as they relate to Native Hawaiians. This is congruent with the notion that if research is to play “a useful and progressive role in the process of decolonization, it will ultimately require a political commitment in support of Indigenous peoples and an unambiguous recognition of the colonial role played by mainstream paradigms” (Menzies, 2001, p. 33).

As I began to analyze heuristics and as my research question began to develop, I realized that instead of studying an existing phenomenon, which is normally the case in heuristics, I was about to study a phenomenon that did not exist yet, but that I hoped my research would bring about in the future. This deviation from the heuristic process initially caused me some concern and prompted me to personally contact Dr. Moustakas to discuss the issue. As part of this discourse, I realized that it was not necessarily the time frame of the phenomenon, but the process, that distinguishes heuristics from other methods. I also began to realize that—as part of my right as an indigenous researcher to develop my own methodology—I could modify and alter Moustakas’s methodology, as long as I could define and justify my actions and explain the process I was developing.

Although I had some personal contact with Dr. Moustakas, my primary resource pertaining to heuristic studies was one of his books, titled *Heuristic Research* (Moustakas, 1990). In this book, Moustakas outlines six phases that make up the basic heuristic research design. These phases include initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication, and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis. Over a four-year period I completed all six phases, studying each phase intensely before, during, and after I would enter it. This process was consistent with the heuristic notion that the researcher should be open, receptive, and attuned to all facets of one’s experience of a phenomenon, allowing comprehension and compassion to mingle and recognizing the place and unity of intellect, emotion, and spirit (Bronowski, 1965;

Craig, 1978; Rogers, 1969). As I familiarized myself with Moustakas's six phases, I also left myself open to be sensitive to my *na'au* (heart) and if need be, shift in a different direction to align my research with indigenous approaches.

I entered the initial engagement stage, during my colloquium, when I first actively began to formulate my research question. Over time, my question evolved from "How do we teach Hawaiian students to be pono?" and "What is an educated Hawaiian?" to "What constitutes a quality K–12 model of education?" From the initial engagement stage, I entered what Moustakas (1990) called the immersion process, in which the researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states. Everything in the researcher's life becomes crystallized around the question. This immersion phase lasted for more than two years, during which time I submerged myself day and night in the phenomenon of Hawaiian liberatory pedagogy. Not only I, but also my entire family, became directly and personally involved in this phenomenon as the question took on both intense personal and social significance.

During this time, I spent countless hours in self-dialogues and quiet periods, focusing on the knowledge I had absorbed over the years. I took time getting in touch with my ancestral knowledge of what traditional Hawaiian education encompassed and even utilized the Hawaiian technique of dream learning as a valuable resource to tap into insights hidden deep within me. I also collected a wide variety of data, as I conducted a scholarly review of existing literature dealing with indigenous pedagogy and Hawaiian ways of knowing. The data ranged from educational statistics about Hawaiians and other indigenous people to evaluations of a variety of educational programs designed for Hawaiians. I attended and presented at countless conferences and workshops dealing with school reform both in Hawai'i and on the American continent. In addition, I had innumerable in-depth formal and informal discussions with indigenous teachers, administrators, scholars, students, parents, community members, and grassroots activists about what Paulo Freire (1994) termed liberatory pedagogy. Many of these conversations were informal, conversational interviews—what Hawaiians call *talk story*. However, I also conducted standardized, open-ended interviews, in which I asked the same set of questions to different individuals or groups. Besides talking to Native Hawaiians, I used my rather extensive TUI travels to dialogue with Native American and Native Alaskan peoples from throughout the continental United

States, as well as with Polynesian peoples in Sāmoa and from Aotearoa and Tahiti. I also conducted electronic research by joining discussion groups that focused on Freireian theories and quality educational reform.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ACTION RESEARCH COMPONENT

One set of data collected during this immersion phase came from a social action project that involved the implementation and evaluation of a Hawaiian Academy or school-within-a-school at Honoka'a High School on Hawai'i Island, where I had been teaching since 1991. The Hawaiian Academy was designed using informal action research data gathered during six years of Hawaiian Immersion summer camps and a decade of teaching Hawaiian language, history, and culture. The purpose of this pilot was to test previously developed and conjectured educational paradigms to justify the creation of an expanded permanent model of Hawaiian education different from presently established Western models. As in the case of heuristics, I chose action research because this methodology aligns itself with indigenous values by involving the researcher in an active way and by making immediate positive impact.

True to the nature of action research, I reviewed from an "insider's view" what teaching and learning strategies worked well with Hawaiian students and how Native Hawaiian students responded to an educational framework based on Hawaiian values and traditions (Calhoun, 1994). Implementing an action research project as part of the heuristic immersion process was probably not what Moustakas had in mind. However, because I was dealing with a phenomenon that was developing rather than one that already existed, I felt that it was crucial that the immersion phase include a practical application of my theory that could validate my contentions. Furthermore, as an indigenous research project, my research had to go beyond studying a phenomenon. It had to have immediate, positive impact on my community and initiate obvious social action. Establishing a culturally driven school-within-a-school produced this social action, by positively affecting more than 100 Hawaiian students between August 1997 and June 2000.

In an effort to showcase the Hawaiian Academy as a successful, quality educational program, I conducted extensive quantitative and qualitative research over a

three-year research period. As part of a quantitative analysis of the Hawaiian Academy, I compared, contrasted, and evaluated grade point averages and the amount of student absences and disciplinary actions prior to and after students joined the Hawaiian Academy. I also collected other quantitative data, such as standardized test performances and scores on college entrance exams. These data indicated that most students were making significant progress as a result of participating in the Hawaiian Academy. For example, among our junior pod, the amount of absences decreased by 59% once they joined our program. In addition, 34% more of our sophomores passed a standardized test, formerly required for high school graduation in Hawai'i, than the rest of Honoka'a High School sophomores.

Initially I was neither familiar nor comfortable with gathering and analyzing quantitative data, and even now I place much more importance and value on qualitative results than on quantitative data. Yet, it has primarily been the quantitative data that validated the success of the Hawaiian Academy in the Western world and made possible the procurement of hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants. Ultimately, it was also the quantitative data that initiated the granting of a charter that allowed the Hawaiian Academy to convert to Hawai'i's first native-designed and controlled public charter school. At present, this K–12 charter school, which is a distinct product of my action research, has a student population of more than 150 primarily Native Hawaiian students, a multimillion dollar budget, and a reputation as a quality, culturally driven model of education that prepares students to walk successfully in both worlds.

To expand the amount and the type of data gathered about the success of the Hawaiian Academy, I chose to utilize triangulation. Besides myself, as the primary practitioner researcher, I had two groups of co-researchers. Involving a number of groups in the research process is consistent with the philosophy of community-based action research, which defines the task of the practitioner researcher as providing “leadership and direction to other participants or stakeholders in the research process” (Stringer, 1996, p. xvii). One group of co-researchers was composed of the Hawaiian Academy teaching team, which was led by my husband Nālei, who has worked by my side for more than a decade and has been my most trusted supporter and critic at once. From 1997 to 1999, I met with this group of co-researchers formally for two to three hours on a weekly basis and every four months for immersion weekends. During these meetings, as well as countless informal conversations, we discussed educational strategies to be implemented,

past successes and failures, as well as insights and revelations gained by the team. Because the teachers were the actual implementers of the pedagogy I had developed and worked with the students on a day-to-day basis, their observations, comments, and criticisms have been of vital importance in structuring Kanu o ka 'Āina as an educational model.

My second group of co-researchers was composed of more than 100 students who participated in our pilot Hawaiian Academy since its initial implementation in September 1997. Besides casual conversations with these students regarding their perception of the process they were involved in and their perceived changes in themselves and their fellow students, I also collected samples of their written thoughts. These included journal entries and essays such as “What Education Means to Me,” which won them schoolwide and statewide recognition. In addition, I used observation as a qualitative technique to gauge the impact of the Academy on Hawaiian student performance, attitude, and behavior. In that capacity I not only relied on my personal observations, which I garnered as a result of continuous contact with the students throughout the three-year period, but also incorporated the observations of the teaching team, the students themselves, their parents and extended family members, as well as those of community members. Most of these observations were shared with me verbally, in very informal and unstructured ways. However, sometimes I would receive them in writing, as part of a thank you note, email, or letter from a parent, student, or visitor.

As part of an in-depth qualitative analysis of the Hawaiian Academy, I also asked both groups of co-researchers to submit emails evaluating their performance and the impact of the Hawaiian Academy on their lives. These structured email interviews, which had to be completed once per academic quarter, asked how my co-researchers had changed as a result of being part of the Hawaiian Academy, what they liked or disliked about the present model, and how our pilot program could be improved. These qualitative data were then analyzed for salient threads. Using email to attain qualitative data was something I had read worked well with native people, because the aspect of “face” is eliminated when questions are posed over email. Already after the first-quarter data were analyzed, it seemed apparent that the student responses to standardized open-ended email questions seemed more honest than taped oral interviews would have been, in which the relationship of the interviewer and the interviewee significantly affects the results. This occurred because when students answered the questions via email, they felt that they were not really responding to me as their program director or to their teachers. As a

result, they felt much more comfortable about sharing how the Hawaiian Academy had affected them and how they felt about their educational experiences. At this point, it should be said that indigenous peoples generally refrain from elevating themselves and others, and at the same time they often also do not like to openly criticize other people or their work (Reyner, 1992). In addition, there are strict rules that govern the things a younger person can communicate to an older person or a person of authority, as well as how these things can be presented. Therefore, using email questions ended up being an excellent method for me to get both honest praise and valid criticism from students, who probably would have responded quite differently if I had personally conducted a formal oral interview with them. Incidentally, having students send in their opinions electronically also saved me countless hours of transcribing.

Throughout the project period and then again at the end of the action research period, the qualitative data gathered were analyzed for salient threads. As in the case of the quantitative analysis of the Hawaiian Academy, the qualitative research revealed that all of the student participants experienced positive changes in one area or another, and although not all remained with the program, all those affected acknowledged academic, cultural, and personal growth. Another aspect revealed by the qualitative analysis was the fact that the defining factor, which seemed to make the difference between the Hawaiian Academy and the Western process of education that the students had been involved in previously, was that teachers cared. According to the data collected, it was this caring, this aloha, that stimulated Hawaiian students to try, to believe in themselves, and to begin to strive to reach their highest level. Another important salient thread was the fact that students really enjoyed and preferred a more culturally congruent, hands-on learning approach that required active involvement and participation in the educational process.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIGENOUS HEURISTIC ACTION RESEARCH

According to the theory of heuristics, the immersion phase must be followed by a period of incubation. During this period, “the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28) and “allows the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend

understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness” (p. 29). Moustakas believes that once the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition, then illumination will occur. One reason that attracted me to heuristics early on was that I discovered that Paulo Freire, whom I greatly admire as a social activist, underwent a similar process when he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. After immersing himself day and night in his project, he was advised by a friend to lock away his work and allow it to “marinate.” When rereading it two months later, Freire discovered that his book needed one more chapter in order to be complete (Freire, 1994).

Initially I was not altogether convinced of the value and the necessity of this period of incubation. After nearly two years of immersing myself into the phenomenon of Hawaiian liberatory education, I thought I had all the significant answers. I thought I was ready to write. Then, rather unexpectedly, I got sidetracked for several months completing other areas of learning required by TUI and setting up our charter school. When I returned to my work, a series of major revelations regarding essential matters followed. I had entered a period of illumination, just as predicted by Moustakas. Essential phenomena that seem totally logical now, and in some way must have always existed, were suddenly revealed. This process also validated Moustakas’s notion that the heuristic method requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered, regardless of the time involved.

While I had initially hoped to complete my doctorate within three years, by the end of 1999 it became clear that my question was not yet illuminated, at least not all parts of the question. It took another year of indwelling and reflecting, a phase Moustakas (1990) called the explication phase, until I could see not only the big picture but also many intricate details. During this period of reflection, I examined “what has awakened in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). I focused on all that I had learned so far, and I tried to figure out what I had yet to understand. I allowed myself to receive many new insights. I fine-tuned many aspects of my philosophy. I developed what Moustakas called a comprehensive depiction of the core or dominant themes.

The final phase of my heuristic process was the creative synthesis of my learning, which I worked on for more than a year. Specifically, this creative synthesis presents a framework—or the essential components—of a quality K–12 liberatory 21st-century model of Hawaiian education. However, rather than presenting this

synthesis only in an abstract way, which would be consistent with the heuristic method, as well as with common Western research practices, I chose to begin the explication of my research results using a distinctly indigenous method. Because research by indigenous researchers must be first and foremost accountable to our indigenous community, I felt it was important that an indigenous research methodology included a synthesis congruent with native ways (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As a result, I decided to present my primary synthesis in story format—a distinctly indigenous form of sharing insight and knowledge. While I feel very strongly that presenting my synthesis as a story would have been sufficient to meet research requirements, I decided to also include an abstract explication of my model. This was done because I believe that including both indigenous and Western methods of research presentation can be identified as a distinct contemporary indigenous research feature, because at the present time indigenous scholars like myself have to justify ourselves in two worlds.

Another important aspect that, in my opinion, defines my methodology as indigenous is the fact that throughout the multiple research processes, I was able to adhere to Hawaiian protocol in terms of dealing with the various research participants. This meant that I established personal relations with all of my research participants and utilized primarily Hawaiian ways of communications and data collection such as observation and talk story. In addition, I conducted my research in a Hawaiian community, for the benefit of this Hawaiian community, and with the help of this Hawaiian community. This has empowered not just that particular community but indigenous communities throughout Hawai‘i, who view us as a model of what indigenous peoples can accomplish.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) stated that when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, “the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently; people participate on different terms” (p. 193). This results in the development of new, indigenous methodologies that call for concrete positive outcomes attained by using culturally congruent methods. When I first started my research, I had no plan of developing my own methodology, and it has only been a short time since I have actually been aware of the fact that my research is unique and that I have “invented” a new methodology. I have chosen to call this

methodology indigenous heuristic action research. Consisting of a mix of established methodologies, aligned with native epistemology, and enhanced with distinctively indigenous features, indigenous heuristic action research has the following characteristics:

- The research question centers on an indigenous plight and attempts to bring about positive change for an indigenous people.
- The research is conducted by an indigenous person, in an indigenous community, for the immediate benefit of this community and with help from this community.
- The research personally includes and affects the researcher and his or her family and community.
- The research includes a practical application of the theory via an ongoing social action project that directly benefits an indigenous community and includes both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the action research.
- The research process utilizes indigenous data collection methods such as observation and participation, talk story, dream learning, and so on.
- The research method utilizes triangulation and involves at least two distinct groups of co-researchers in data collection and analysis.
- The research process follows a six-phase phenomenological process developed by Moustakas, called heuristics.
- The findings of the research are presented both in a format that is understood and preferred by the indigenous community involved and as a format accepted by academia.

SUMMARY

When I first started my doctoral research, I did not know what process I would use to conduct my research or what the end result would be. I certainly did not anticipate developing my own research methodology or creating an innovative model of education that would serve hundreds of Hawaiian students by the time I graduated. While the creation of a new model of education was something I had hoped for, the development of an indigenous research methodology occurred completely inadvertently, sort of as a by-product. Yet, just as my educational model has already had significant impact in Hawai'i, it is my sincere hope that the development and explication of my methodology will also result in positive social impact. Particularly, I hope that the indigenous heuristic action research methodology will assist other indigenous graduate students and researchers as they look for ways to conduct quality research for the benefit of their communities and their nations. More specifically, I hope that my experiences encourage those who have to validate their research at Western universities, to modify accepted Western methodologies and align them with native perspectives. In this context, I urge indigenous scholars to not be afraid to tweak existing methodologies, like heuristics or action research, until mixed methodologies, like the one I inadvertently developed, emerge. At the same time, I also hope that my process inspires the development of truly indigenous methodologies frameworked from a native perspective.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kū Kahakalau, PhD, is director of Kanu o ka ‘Āina New Century Public Charter School in Waimea, Hawai‘i Island. She is a member of Nā Lei Na‘auao Native Hawaiian Charter School Alliance, Hālau Wānana Center for Higher Learning, and Kauhale ‘Ōiwi o Pu‘ukapu Hawaiian Community Learning Center.