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Rural Ways of Knowing in Higher Education

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The *Texas Education Review* (2017) special issue on “Rural Students and Higher Education” catalyzed the following reflections on rural ways of knowing in higher education. Although articulated in different terms, a core theme throughout that critical issue is the need for colleges and universities to better understand the *vital sense of place* that underlies rural ways of knowing in higher education. For instance, Gillon (2017) noted that limited attention has been given to the “role of place as a challenge to accessing higher education and the ways in which place informs social systems and identities as they relate to post-secondary educational opportunity” (p. 10). Further, Moon-Longhurst (2017) drew attention to the significant influence that an “affinity for a place and affection for the particular qualities of that place” (p. 24) has on the higher education decisions of people in rural communities. Collectively, the perspectives in the *TxE*d special issue affirm a need for further attention to place-based ways of knowing in higher education systems.

For the purpose of this article, ways of knowing refers to how students perceive and understand themselves within their environments (Gurm, 2013). Combining ways of knowing with the person-place bonds of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010), I argue that place-based ways of knowing are often misunderstood in mainstream colleges and universities. In addition to considering the literature cited in this article, these reflections are informed by first-hand experiences working with rural colleges and universities in Hawaii, Iowa, and Pennsylvania, and across Western Canada. Ultimately, I suggest that the Spiral Dynamics model (Beck & Cowan, 1996) offers a useful lens to understand place-based ways of knowing in higher education. The model allows colleges and universities to better understand students who are “coming to the university” from environments where higher education is not already embedded into the everyday cultural ecosystems.

Rural Students and Higher Education

In the *TxE*d special issue, Stone (2017) broadly synthesized some of the key challenges and opportunities rural college students face, and pointed out the limited research on this critically important topic. The gap in the literature is especially apparent for research on rural students who have already entered college. In the same special issue, Gillon (2017) further demonstrated the significant research gaps pertaining to rural higher education. For example, she noted a gap in the literature stating that during a 13-year span, a leading journal in higher education and student affairs, *The Journal of Student Development*, published only two articles that solely focused on rural students in higher education. Her article offered a compelling glimpse into the college-going experiences of rural students. Noting how place is overlooked in understanding educational opportunity in rural communities, she pointed out that “the problem for rural students may not be just about specific barriers preventing them from accessing college, but whether they even consider post-secondary education as a possibility” (Gillon, p. 10). Also in that special issue, Moon Longhurst’s (2017) research demonstrated how place attachment, including family ties, closeness to nature, and community qualities, is influential in the college-going decisions of rural community college students. These findings resonated with my own research, which found that the enrollment decisions of rural and indigenous college students were strongly influenced by the practicality of place and community sentiments, often tied to family responsibilities (Almond, 2014). In short, a vital sense of place greatly shapes the higher education trajectories of many rural students.

For rural students, going to college is often challenging in large part because of an external institutional perspective that precludes place-based ways of knowing. Given the prevailing urban-centric frameworks common across higher education systems, colleges and universities often misunderstand the lived experiences of rural students. As Gillon (2017) noted, "...[l]ittle attention is given to structures and systems that have created environments in which rural people, places, and communities attempt to exist in an urban-centric society" (p. 13). Consequently, the vital sense of place commonly held by students from rural communities is sometimes grossly misplaced in the everyday cultural ecosystems of higher education. Since the person-place bonds of place attachment are often ignored in academia, it is unsurprising that rural students often experience tensions between higher education and being pulled back to their home communities (Stone, 2017). These community sentiments and place-based attachments are commonly the main factors in the college-going decisions of rural students (Pretty, Chipue, & Bramston, 2003; Almond, 2014; Moon Longhurst, 2017).

For prospective students from rural communities, this vital sense of place might firstly mean asking themselves: "How would going to college impact my family, community, and work responsibilities?" Without recognizing this vital sense of place and the importance of staying local (Moon Longhurst, 2017), higher education systems might simply misplace place-based ways of knowing as student inadequacy. To demonstrate, a college administrator may view a prospective student who is unwilling to leave her hometown because of her strong familial roots and local traditions as weakness. Similarly, a rural student who leaves college to financially support their family during harvest time or hunting season, like the college graduate who returns to his hometown for blue-collar work, may be misunderstood in academia. This disconnect between how colleges and universities often perceive rural students and the actual lived experiences of these students is supported through understanding place-based ways of knowing.

Place-Based Ways of Knowing

Colleges and universities would benefit to shift from the institutional perspective of "coming to the university" to the student's perspective of "going to the university" (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). This shift would support higher education institutions to recognize and respect place-based ways of knowing. Shaped by a vital sense of place, rural students often experience "going to the university" in very different ways compared to students from environments where higher education is already embedded into the everyday cultural ecosystems—that is, where going to college is normal (Almond, 2014).

I can personally and professionally relate to this experience. Growing up near a small town in Saskatchewan on the Canadian prairies, I noticed that townspeople and country folk alike simply did not talk about college; higher education was not part of our day-to-day conversations. Later, when I started working at small town colleges and universities in Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon, I started to formulate ideas about rural ways of knowing in higher education. One assignment was especially influential in this formulation. At the time, I was a faculty member tasked with building learning communities in an oil camp in a remote region of Northern Canada. I quickly realized that the educational aspirations of most camp residents reflected the very concrete ways of knowing of industrial age societies, which starkly contrasted the highly subtle information age ways of knowing that anchor mainstream colleges and universities. Drawing on the Spiral Dynamics model (Beck & Cowan, 1996), the trajectory from hunter-gatherer, to agricultural, to industrial age, to information age societies and beyond point to increasingly subtle ways of knowing that are less attached to a vital sense of place.

Reflecting on these observations, I also recognized differences between the ways of knowing held within mainstream colleges and universities and the place-based ways of knowing found in many indigenous communities across North America. For example, in his ethnographical study of indigenous people of the Dene Tha nation in Northern Canada, Goulet (1998) contended that power in indigenous communities comes from multiple sources, including interactions with animals and through dreams. Clearly these place-based and metaphysical sources stand in stark contrast to the empirical ways of knowing that anchor conventional higher education systems. It is important to build common ground between western scientific knowledge systems and the holistic orientation of indigenous knowledge systems (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). These authors noted that “[t]he depth of indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist” (p. 9). Similarly, it is useful to build common ground between rural, place-based ways of knowing and mainstream higher education systems—common ground that is rooted in mutual understanding.

The parallels with rural ways of knowing and indigenous ways of knowing are rooted in place. Drawing further on indigenous knowledge systems, Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) called for colleges and universities to relate to indigenous students firstly in human terms. This is important because impersonal, institutional knowledge systems that view the underrepresentation of indigenous students in higher education in terms of inadequacy—e.g. low achievement, weak persistence, poor retention, high attrition, etc.—means the onus for adjustment is on students, not colleges and universities (Barnhardt & Kirkness). In building common ground across multiple ways of knowing, these authors called for higher education systems to *respect* indigenous students for who they are; to ensure education is *relevant* for how indigenous students view the world; to offer *reciprocity* in their relationships; and to help indigenous students exercise *responsibility* over their lives. The authors asserted that:

The most compelling problem that First Nations students face when they go to the university is a lack of respect, not just as individuals, but more fundamentally as people. To them, the university represents an impersonal, intimidating and often hostile environment, in which little of what they bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions, and core values is recognized, much less respected. (p. 8)

As I visited campus after campus across North America, it seemed to me that these “four R’s” also applied to students from rural communities, whose ways of knowing, like students from indigenous communities, were often not grounded firstly in the western scientific values held within mainstream higher education systems, but in a vital sense of place. By respecting rural and indigenous students’ existing ways of knowing, colleges and universities can ensure that education is relevant to students’ worldviews and the life conditions of a particular place. As stated by Native Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer, “[w]e communicate through our worldview shaped within knowledge systems prioritized by the needs of people and the lessons of place” (2013, p. 1). Reciprocity in relationships can be demonstrated through comprehensive educational models that embrace relationships tied to this vital sense of place (e.g. community-based learning). By including place-based ways of knowing in mainstream colleges and universities, students might actively participate in exercising responsibility in their lives.

Spiral Dynamics

The Spiral Dynamics model (Beck & Cowan, 1996) offers a useful framework for higher education systems to shift from an institutional perspective to a more personal perspective that dignifies place-based ways of knowing. Don Beck, a native Texan and former professor at Northern Texas University, is at the forefront of this human development model based on the pioneering research of psychologist Clare Graves. The Spiral Dynamics model is concerned with the cultural memes that shape multiple worlds. In clearly identifying how multiple ways of knowing, values, and worldviews spiral together, this stage-based model “describes and makes sense of the enormous complexity of human existence, and then shows how to craft elegant, systemic problem-solutions that meet people and address situations where they are” (World Business Academy, n.d.).

In the Spiral Dynamics model, the progression of values from traditional to modern to post-modern and beyond are represented by different colors (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Often applied in racially-charged cultural ecosystems, the colors—beige (i.e. instinctive self), purple (i.e. magical self), red (i.e. impulsive self), blue (i.e. rule/role self), orange (i.e. achiever self), green (i.e. sensitive self), and so on—emphasize the color of cultural memes, rather than the color of people’s skin (Wilber, 2000). Whereas many human development models emphasize the more exterior characteristics of people (e.g. fixed demographics, socioeconomic class, race, etc.), the Spiral Dynamics model focuses on the more interior qualities of people (e.g. malleable psychographics, values, worldviews, etc.) that shape motivations and actions. Consequently, each color points to distinct interior qualities in people, which when recognized, can be respected and dignified amidst multiple ways of knowing. In addition to its utility in overhauling education systems, the Spiral Dynamics model was successfully applied in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa (Wilber).

To illustrate the utility of the Spiral Dynamics model, I close with further details on its application in South Africa. During the 1980s, Beck made more than 60 trips to South Africa to consult with leaders, including President Nelson Mandela (Butters, 2015). The Spiral Dynamics model removed attention from conflict between races to emphasize different value systems: “In a particular situation, it is no longer “black versus white,” but perhaps blue versus purple, and orange versus green, and so on” (Wilber, 2000, p. 8). Recognizing and respecting these interior qualities was a first step towards mutual understanding. The next step involved concrete actions to build common ground between these different value systems. As portrayed in the movie *Invictus* (Eastwood, 2009), supporting a shared athletics team—in this case, the 1995 South African rugby team—was used to bridge different ways of knowing, values, and worldviews, and to begin to mend racial divisions.

Conclusion

Rural, place-based ways of knowing are often misunderstood in mainstream colleges and universities. Indeed, a vital sense of place greatly shapes the higher education trajectories of many rural people. The person-place bonds of place attachment, coupled with the reality that higher education is often not embedded into the everyday cultural ecosystems of rural communities, creates a lived experience for rural students that is often misplaced in academia. In Gillon’s (2017) words:

... the physical ways in which college manifests itself via large buildings, campus signs, athletic facilities, and students walking to and from class are often absent from rural peoples’ everyday lived experiences. In other words, rural students do not grow up seeing and

experiencing college in their own towns. College is something that happens elsewhere, possibly in a place they have never visited. (p. 17)

The Spiral Dynamics model offers a lens for colleges and universities to better understand students who are “coming to the university” from environments where higher education is not already embedded into the everyday cultural ecosystems. Using this model might help these institutions to better *respect* rural students for who they are; ensure that education is *relevant* for how rural students view the world; offer *reciprocity* in their relationships; and help rural students exercise *responsibility* over their lives.

DEVON ALMOND has worked with various rural and remote-serving colleges and universities across North America, spanning from the Yukon Territory to Hawaii Island. He has also visited hundreds of small town colleges across Canada and USA. Devon's guiding purpose—to facilitate a sense of purpose in education, a sense of place in life, and a sense of meaning in work—is influenced by his professional background in conventional and alternative higher education.

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