

# **Indigenizing research methods: making research outcomes better for all**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the context of Indigenizing academic practices and promoting cultural inclusivity within library and information institutions, this paper explores the significance of incorporating Indigenous approaches to research within LIS research methods courses. It argues that Indigenous research methods can be adapted and applied to other contexts, especially where research is being done in Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) communities, who also have a history of being marginalized in research. This paper advocates for research methods to be transformed by incorporating Indigenous approaches into research methods education and empowering students to become culturally competent researchers. The paper will demonstrate how the use of Indigenous methodologies provides students with an understanding of alternative paradigms informed by indigenous ways of knowing.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Education of information professionals; Research Methods; Specific populations.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Diversity; Indigenous peoples; Research Methods.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Within our discipline of library and information studies (LIS), there is a strong need for the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to be built into our curriculum. As professionals, our graduates will be ethically responsible for the delivery of services and resources to communities that have historically struggled to obtain equitable access to information, often leading to social and epistemic injustice and an environment where those who do not fit into 'normative' society feel disempowered. By embracing DEI, libraries can develop inclusive spaces where the diverse needs and perspectives of individuals from all backgrounds feel valued, respected, and empowered to explore, learn, and engage with the wealth of resources available to them. The focus of this paper is how indigenous research approaches can enhance the teaching of research methods related courses, and how they can be effectively adapted and applied to other DEI communities that have traditionally been marginalised by research.

In her seminal work on decolonising research methodologies, Smith (2021) identifies research as being a dirty word in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. This statement reflects the position in which Indigenous peoples in the past have found themselves, being researched by Western researchers who studied, observed, described and interpreted Indigenous communities through a lens that did not reflect an Indigenous view of the world. Research in this context often presented a distorted impression of the community being studied which became part of the accepted narrative. These forms of misrepresentation are also evident in the research experiences of groups within the DEI spectrum; often studied by researchers who do not possess cultural and social competencies to understand or explain the significance of the experiences and viewpoints that have been collected in their data.

Within an Indigenous research context, this lack of understanding led to Indigenous knowledge, stories, customs, and values being compared to Western ways of thinking and acting, and often declared as inferior forms of knowledge. Furthermore, in conducting this research, Western researchers were more likely to benefit from the outcomes than the Indigenous community that was the subject of the research. This enabled Western academics to build their reputations and careers on the back of these scholarly works, while Indigenous peoples found that they had no control over how their knowledge was used. These studies used information extracted from Indigenous knowledge systems which was analysed, misunderstood, and presented in an altered state that affected the integrity of that knowledge. This form of disempowerment has also been experienced by other marginalised groups that do not fit into normative standards, including ethnic and cultural minorities, refugees, women, LGBTQI+ communities and people with disabilities, all of whom have struggled to have their perspectives understood and not misrepresented.

### **Development of Indigenous approaches to research**

Indigenous peoples in CANZUS countries have conducted research in the context of their knowledge systems for thousands of years. This is reflected in the stories, traditions, songs, and visual arts that define each Indigenous culture. Similarly, DEI communities have their own experiences, forms of behaviour, knowledge systems and values and some of these communities (e.g., LGBTQI+, women and people with disabilities) are members of Indigenous communities as well, thus adding an extra layer of diversity to others of the same community.

Within Western universities, Indigenous approaches to research have been gaining momentum over the last 30 years, driven by the realisation that traditional Western forms of research do not

respect or represent Indigenous ways of knowing. The failure of Western approaches to adequately recognize the importance of Indigenous worldviews, beliefs, values or aspirations in research has been severely criticized by Indigenous scholars (Battiste, 2007, Kovach, 2009, Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2001). This criticism has resulted in researchers conducting Indigenous research having a higher focus on approaches that are collaborative and provide opportunities for co-design with the community involved. This empowers communities to identify what should be researched, how data will be collected, and who needs to be involved, and ensures that the community benefits from the outcomes of the research. These approaches are all transferable to other situations involving DEI communities wishing to ensure that they have agency over how they design and participate in research.

The momentum for change in the research approaches has been occurring in an environment where Indigenous peoples have become more assertive about their rights, helped by the development of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and official approaches to reconciliation between governments and Indigenous populations occurring in each of the CANZUS countries. In a wider DEI context, the rights that UNDRIP contributes to Indigenous peoples have parallels in other international agreements, for instance the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the 1951 Refugee Convention, or in more general terms the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

### **Literature review**

There is very little written about Indigenous research methods and their application in LIS literature or their place in the LIS curriculum. Notable exceptions are Lilley (2018), who focuses on the use of Māori research methods in New Zealand and Nessel et. al. (2024), who identify the value of participatory action research (PAR). They believe that the focus PAR places on building trust between researchers and community members can make a valuable contribution to LIS scholarship, and that Indigenous and decolonising methodologies are successful examples of how PAR methods can be employed to provide community-focused outcomes.

The literature about including DEI principles as part of the research methods curriculum is more abundant. The article by Subramaniam and Jaeger (2011) argues that LIS students need a higher exposure to diversity in their courses to prepare them for providing services and resources in an ever-more diverse society, and that content related to diversity needs to be across all MLIS courses and not just elective courses. A similar point is made by Colón-Aguirre and Bright (2022), who argue that LIS educators need to identify how they can guide students through research that incorporates diversity, including the elimination of biases, and makes them conscious of the need for self-awareness and relational positionality. They also see a need for LIS educators to normalize DEI research topics by requiring students to focus on DEI-related topics and methodologies or demonstrate the importance of acknowledging DEI in their findings.

In addressing the teaching of research methods, Kumasi and Manlove (2015), identify that a higher level of diversity could be built into courses by using specific theoretical and methodological standpoints. They also believe that LIS academics need to encourage students to develop research topics focused on social inequities or designing projects using critical methodological frameworks, and to critically analyze their research data by using the lens of the community involved in the research.

Luo (2017) provides an overview of the approach to research methods by San Jose State University's LIS program, noting that students enter the MLIS program from diverse backgrounds and interests; student feedback revealed their desire for hands-on practice, and less focus on the scholarly and more emphasis on applied aspects of research. This is a critical issue in research methods education as the aim of research should be to solve problems, and this includes understanding that the traditional 'one size fits all' approach will not always meet the needs of diverse communities that differ from those representing 'mainstream' society. In an earlier article, Luo (2011) indicates that Library practitioners feel taking a research methods course in the LIS program not only increases students' interest in research but also helps them in many aspects of their jobs, including assisting patrons, conducting research, and writing papers for publication, and grant writing. In both her articles, Luo (2011, 2017) acknowledges that teaching research methods can be challenging, especially when trying to cover the complexity of how research methods might differ by discipline. This complexity, I would argue, is equally applicable when applied to Indigenous and DEI research.

Mandel (2017) outlines the UNclassroom approach used in the program at the University of Rhode Island. This involves students, the instructor and an outside client working together to produce something that could not be done alone. Mandel's approach appeals as it presents opportunities for students to conduct research with Indigenous or DEI clients, which can assist them in learning how to co-design research and understand the validity of the knowledge, values and worldview of the community when viewed from their perspective.

Matusiak and Bright (2020) examine the current state of research methods training in MLIS education in the United States and investigate how future library professionals are being prepared to be consumers of research and research practitioners. They argue that the current educational model in LIS prepares library professionals to be competent consumers of research but is limited in training researcher-practitioners on how to conduct academic research, or applied research related to emerging areas of practice. They find that students often lack a research background and were apprehensive about doing research methods courses.

Jaeger and Franklin (2007) in their article posit what they call "a virtuous circle of inclusiveness": recruiting doctoral students from diverse backgrounds, who then become diverse faculty members, who then develop culturally aware Master's students, who become culturally-aware library staff, who will be better prepared to deliver inclusive services to diverse users. Jaeger, Bertot, and Franklin (2010) argue that there is a strong need for diversity to be addressed in LIS curriculums so that students become aware of the range of issues related to diversity, inclusion and underrepresentation faced by marginalised communities, and can deliver services that meet the needs and expectations of the diverse populations they will encounter in their professional practice.

In summary, the literature reviewed demonstrates that there is a range of innovative approaches to research that LIS educators can draw on to ensure that students can understand that there is no one methodology that works for all participant communities, and that when working with Indigenous or DEI groups co-design and collaboration is likely to yield the best outcomes for those communities.

## **Contextualizing Indigenous methods**

This paper has so far outlined the similarities that Indigenous peoples and other DEI communities experience when engaging with research and researchers. As stated earlier, we believe that Indigenous-focused research can, with some adjustments, be applied to meet the needs of other groups within the DEI spectrum. The next part of the paper outlines what Indigenous research principles are and why they are important.

In conducting research in an Indigenous context, several principles can be applied, including those of the 4 Rs, (Respect, Relationality, Reciprocity and Responsibility). Indigenous approaches to research focus principally on the relationships between the researcher and the participant community as it requires a level of trust reciprocal to both parties, and this serves as the foundation for the conduct of the methodology and the analysis that ensues. In this context, the methodology is a point of negotiation that empowers the participant community to be strongly involved in the co-design or acknowledged as collaborators. This cooperation prioritizes the perspectives, knowledge systems and needs of the community, and provides a level of assurance that their community will benefit from the research outcomes. The data-gathering process itself is guided by the values, beliefs and customary practices of the community. This ensures that the research process is respectful, promotes reciprocity and is more likely to lead to outcomes that meet the needs of the community. The 4Rs principles are just as applicable to other DEI communities as they are in Indigenous contexts, as they are more likely to result in research practices that are ethical, inclusive, and respectful of the diverse communities involved and more representative of their perspectives related to the topic being researched.

### **What is involved?**

When conducting research in an Indigenous context, the construction of the methodology and research design remains unique to that project. Although similarities might exist from one project to the next, no one general model can be applied. For instance, methods used in a Māori context use customary practices that would not be appropriate in a First Nations or Native American research environment. Similarly, in other DEI contexts, the methods used should be guided by the participant community, as they will all have customs that shape their diversity, so what might be appropriate for a section of the LGBTQI+ group will not necessarily apply for all sections of this community, and probably would not be suitable for a refugee or migrant community. Following this approach to research design provides the participant community with more control and further builds trust between the researchers and the community.

Although Indigenous communities are likely to prefer research conducted by Indigenous researchers, this does not preclude non-Indigenous people from being involved as part of a team of researchers, but not normally in a sole leadership capacity. Similar considerations should be made when doing DEI related research, as the project is more likely to be successful if led by a researcher who identifies with the DEI community involved. In Indigenous contexts, the method should be guided by the values shared by the Indigenous community, as these ensure that the process is culturally safe for the community to participate. Using Māori as an example, research is conducted using tikanga Māori (Māori customs) which involves rituals and cultural behaviors expected when people engage with each other and legitimizes their knowledge system and worldview. In this sense, tikanga Māori guides the relationship between the research team and

the participant community. Within Māori society, this is the principle of *kanohi kitea* (the face seen); that is, members of the research team when appropriate are active participants within the community, with an expectation that it is an ongoing relationship and not only for conducting research. How this same level of trust is built in a DEI context will depend on the community involved and will require the researcher to be capable of working within the cultural framework defined by their participants, while also convincing the community that they can deliver research that is truly representative and provides it with beneficial outcomes.

### Concluding comments

Research methods courses remain a core component of the LIS curriculum, and it is obvious from the literature review that there needs to be more consideration of the role Indigenous and DEI methods have in preparing students for their future careers as practitioners or academics. This will ensure that increased expectations from these communities that research, or decisions made using research, will be representative and inclusive of their differing approaches to knowledge. This article has used Indigenous methods as an example of how research can be collaborative, guided by Indigenous principles, and deliver beneficial outcomes for the participating community. They provide researchers intending to work in a DEI context with an example of how their research can be tailored to be more inclusive. The word limit restricts the author from elaborating further on the benefits of the 4 Rs and how they can be represented in Indigenous and DEI contexts; however, readers are referred to previously published articles (Lilley, 2012, 2018) to gain an understanding of how research can be conducted in a Māori context.

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