



# The Value and Meaning of Experience in Food System Learning Spaces: Reflections from the Activist and Traditional Community Perspectives

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## Abstract

This paper explores the differing values and meanings assigned to experience in traditional and academic learning spaces as well as the value and meaning assigned to multigenerational experience in traditional cultures and in contemporary cultures. Learning is partitioned into an array of learning spaces. One major partition separates learning in *the community* from learning in *the academy*. Learning in these two spaces impacts on our understanding of the work of creating food justice and food sovereignty. For example, learning in community—in particular, in traditional cultures—depends on the oral sharing of both knowledge and wisdom from elders to younger generations, with respect and even reverence for elders. Learning in the academy, and in contemporary, technology-driven culture, depends on fast-paced innovation driven by the energy and creativity of young people, with the highest respect given to the newest research publications and “applications” attracting the largest investments and capturing global markets. This dynamic poses a significant problem for the development of equitable, just food systems, specifically local food systems intended to increase access to healthy food within vulnerable populations. The paper concludes with recommendations for bringing the benefits of learning in both spaces to the most vulnerable communities.



## Keywords

Traditional learning, contemporary learning; food access; vulnerable communities; indigenous research methods; decolonization; Native American knowledge; traditional ecological knowledge

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## Introduction

This paper will explore the differing values and meanings assigned to experience in traditional and contemporary “mainstream” learning spaces. The data for this paper is ethnographic, based on my experience as both participant and observer in university, as a student, as a researcher, as a teacher, and from over two decades as an activist in the food justice movement. I have co-created and co-managed four market gardens and three small farms in low income urban neighborhoods. The data discussed here comes from the work of building local, sustainable community food systems and experience in academic settings. The motivation for writing about these experiences comes from conversations with Kristin Reynolds at the first student-organized Yale Food Symposium in 2013 and Katie Bradley in her work with me as an intern at Dig Deep Farms and as a research associate in the Food Dignity Project. Kristin is a food justice scholar, educator and author with Nevin Cohen of *Beyond the Kale* (Reynolds and Cohen 2016). Katie and I worked together during her graduate studies and co-authored a paper on decolonizing food justice research (Bradley and Herrera 2015).

Kristin and I began to talk about the growth of “food justice” research and publication from scholars residing in the academy. There is rapid growth in the field of “food justice” research, as seen in calls for papers for meetings of the American Association of Geographers as well as in publications such as the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*. Young scholars, doctoral students and professors in tenure-track positions, when called out by activists for exploiting community work, argue in response that they must meet the requirement for publication for advancement. Katie and I recently presented an analysis of this issue within the decolonization and feminist frameworks (Bradley and Herrera 2015). In contrast, neighborhood residents, urban farmers, and activists carry out the activities that realize food justice “down on the ground,” literally working the earth and struggling to gain the resources they need to bring food justice to their communities. The people doing the work itself often have little or no time to write for academic journals. The people with the academic resources to write and publish often have little or no experience in the field. If we can use the terms “scholar” and “activist” as a starting point for this discussion, recognizing the rough, imprecise quality of the terms, we can at least say that scholars and activists occupy different phenomenological spaces. For example, I do my work in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area, in part with the activists whose direct action eventually led to

the formation of the University of California Gill Tract Community Farm. There I regularly observe the relational gaps between University of California researchers and neighborhood food justice practitioners.

A significant problem resulting from the phenomenological separation of scholars and activists is that when scholars publish their research, they have the power to define the reality of food justice work to the outside world, even if they have little or no intimate knowledge of this work gained through participation in the everyday work. Scholars, through their publication, thereby contribute significantly to the social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966) of food justice, whether or not those constructions reflect the reality of food justice work. This process necessarily extracts and often exploits the knowledge gained by the people doing the work. And by filtering and abstracting this reality, their constructions change it into something that it is not (Daftary-Steel, Herrera, and Porter 2015).

### **The Native Complication**

I identify as Ohlone-Chicano-Mestizo. Ohlone refers to my Native American ancestors who lived on the land surrounding San Francisco Bay, from the tip of the peninsula where San Francisco is now located, south as far as Carmel, and then north and east to the Carquinez Straits, including territory now occupied by Oakland, Berkeley and Richmond. Chicano refers to the family mythology that we were Mexican, a story created by many California natives for self-protection after California became a state and American colonizers carried out state-sanctioned, widespread genocide of native people (Madley 2016). Mestizo refers to my Sicilian ancestors.

My personal history and experience as a Native person brings another dimension to the discussion of scholars and activists. For a number of years, I was an academic. I held teaching positions in two medical schools, eventually receiving tenure as a clinical associate professor of psychiatry. Yet I never liked to write. I always felt that I was not ready to write anything because I had not learned enough. Instead I liked to watch and to listen, as carefully as I could, learning through careful observation. For many years I thought this characteristic was some kind of personal flaw. Occasionally, my reluctance to write created conflict with my academic colleagues, who depended on written documentation in the research process. However, as I began to learn more about my Native heritage, I realized that Native people traditionally do not either acquire new knowledge or transmit knowledge and wisdom through writing. Native American people use oral traditions to transmit knowledge and wisdom. We tell stories. We transmit our histories in story and song. Sitting in a food justice workshop at UC Berkeley a year or so ago, I was stunned to hear Ron Reed, the Cultural Biologist for the Karuk Tribe of the Klamath region of Northern California, simply state that Native people use oral communication. I realized then that perhaps my reluctance to write was not at all a personal flaw but a Native traditional way of knowing and telling about the world. Being Native

complicates the scholarship process in this fundamental and profound way. We do not know the world in writing. We know it in speaking and telling stories.

Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote about the differences between Native traditional ways of knowing and Western science in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013). Kimmerer is a Native woman who earned her Ph.D. in the field of ecology. She writes about the struggles she had in the clash between the Native ways she learned as a child and the demands of the academic research. She describes Native ways of experiencing the world, about our relationship to all of our relatives—the plants, the animals, the birds, the fish, Mother Earth, Father Sun, Grandmother Moon, the sacred waters—all living beings. This view of our relations stands in stark contrast to the Western views of the world, in which the air, sea and water are inanimate resources to exploit, not living relations who give everything to us and with whose gifts we must reciprocate.

Each summer I go to the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming to attend the Northern Arapaho sacred ceremony known as Sun Dance. Families camp on the site of the Dance to support the dancers. The ceremony is organized and directed by the elders. Our family camp is organized and directed by the matriarch of the family, a revered elder. We sit around the table at meals, or sit under the shade during the hot days, or around the fire in the cool evenings, and we talk and tell stories. The elders share tribal history and customs. They teach us. They share knowledge and wisdom. We all listen. We all learn. We arise before the sun to attend the morning dance at sunrise. We attend the evening dance as the sun goes down. The ceremony from beginning to end lasts for a little more than one week. The dancing lasts for four days. We are there to honor the enormous sacrifice the dancers make during the dance. Our presence is also a sacrifice. The ceremony is prayer. We ask for continued blessings for the new year. We pray for all of our relatives. This year, as I drove back across the high plains and Great Basin, up over the Sierras and down toward the Bay Area, I felt the power of a great transition. For two weeks at Sun Dance I had been in one world. Now I was re-entering another world. Two worlds. Two cosmologies.

I struggle to fully articulate what I feel about these experiences. But I no longer struggle with trying to reconcile the two cosmologies. Both exist. I have had the privilege to experience both. I prefer my Native cosmology. I believe that the solutions for many of the problems we face in the colonized, modern rational world will come from Native ancient ways of being in the world that we must now relearn because colonization has continuously attempted to destroy traditional ways. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is enough to say that Native ways of knowing and being in the world complicate and in many ways challenge if not delegitimize the academic enterprise.

## **A Note on Research Methodology**

As I stated in the introduction, this paper is based on participant observation in the work of building local, sustainable community food systems. The data emerge from my participation in this work and in the many relationships that constitute the work. These relationships include people, of course. They also include Mother Earth, Father Sun, Grandmother Moon, the water, the plants, the rocks, the earthworms—all of the beings with whom we relate. In addition, these relationships include social-cultural units (e.g., families, villages, communities), institutions (universities, governmental agencies, funders) and other forms of social organization (churches, businesses, non-profit organizations, etc.). As a participant, I also observe the patterns, process and dynamics of these relationships. Often the experiences of empathy and intuition provide data. The number of observations grows very large very quickly. I watch, enumerate, name, categorize and catalogue these observations. I form hypotheses and test them against the continuous flow of observational data. Thus, I learn. In this way, I come to know this world. And in this way, Native people have come to know the world over millennia. This data is not usually recognized as data in the mainstream academy. The knowledge gained in this way is not considered “scientific” or research-based in the academy. Native people do not usually try to write it down and often the elders require that we do not share this knowledge. One of the best food systems assessments I have had the privilege to witness was presented by the cultural biologist from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation. When asked for the power point slides by a non-native person in the audience, the biologist said he could not share them based on the instructions of the elders. Should anyone need an example of sophisticated native engineering, I suggest learning about the design, uses and installation of the teepee. Finally, it is worth noting that the academic version of participant observation is anthropology.

## **Learning Spaces in Food Justice Work**

We can identify that learning is partitioned into an array of learning spaces. One major partition separates learning in *the community* from learning in *the academy*. How do learning processes in these two spaces operate, in relation to building local, sustainable food systems? And how do learning processes within these spaces operate in relation to the intersection of traditional or indigenous learning and what I call mainstream or dominant learning?

Learning in community comes from experience and from doing the work itself. In my neighborhood community food security and food justice work, we built our gardens and farms based on what community members had learned from their parents and grandparents. Rarely did we have any assistance or input from the experts from the academy or the local cooperative extension. When we did interact with academics, we had to negotiate major gaps in mutual understanding. Usually we demanded that the academics manifest a clear understanding of the community’s vision, values and goals before we began to work closely with them. In addition to

doing the work, learning in community and in traditional cultures comes from the oral sharing of both knowledge and wisdom from elders to younger generations, with respect and reverence for elders.

One example comes from work in the African American community in Rochester, NY. In one garden, we planted okra. When the plants did not seem to form seed pods, a neighborhood elder told us that we needed to “whup” the plants. He then used a stick to hit the plants, possibly to aid pollination. Seed pods formed a short time later. Another example involves protocols for the taking of deer and other animals by Native American people. The Ohlone people, like many Native people, were traditionally hunter-gatherers. The elders talk about the protocols, prayer and ceremony involved with hunting, especially the respect for our four-legged relative that we must show and the gratitude we have for the sacrifice the animal makes so that we may live.

In contrast, learning in the academy, and in contemporary, technology-driven culture, depends on fast-paced innovation driven by the energy and creativity of young people, with the highest respect given to the newest research publications and “applications” attracting the largest investments and capturing global markets. Each generation defines the world for itself and pushes against and pushes aside the constructions of prior generations. In recent years venture capital has entered the food world and accelerated this trend. Farmers practicing slow-paced, low-input agro-ecological farming practices to produce healthy, affordable food find themselves competing with very expensive, technology-focused food production, manufacturing and distribution. For example, we read about controlled environment agriculture with greenhouses growing vegetables and raising fish using no soil and all controlled by high-tech devices. We read about roof-top gardens and vertical gardens. We learn that venture capitalists have invested tens of millions of dollars in technology-based applications for ordering and delivering very high-quality food. At least one of those businesses has closed because the market did not support it. But the race continues. And these modern capital-intensive initiatives do not begin to consider the principles of food justice and food sovereignty.

The rapid expansion of food justice research scholarship embodies some of these same qualities. This dynamic poses a significant problem for the development of equitable, just food systems, specifically local food systems intended to increase access to healthy food within vulnerable populations. Vulnerable neighborhoods are frequently located in low-income communities and communities of color. These communities have values and world views that significantly differ from the values and world view of mainstream academic communities. We can refer to these communities as traditional communities.

### **Traditional Communities**

I use the term “traditional communities” to signify communities of people whose ancestors were native to this continent; native to other continents but forcibly

transported to this continent by colonizers; or native to other countries but forced to emigrate by oppression, war or other intolerable conditions. Traditional communities can include African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American, Muslim American people. Independent of income or education—key elements in the categorization of class—people in traditional communities often retain at least some elements their native cosmologies. These cosmologies explain how the world works and shape all dimensions of everyday life, from planting to prayer. For example, knowing that Mother Earth, Father Sun and the sacred water provide everything we need for life and we have the obligation to reciprocate these gifts by protecting Mother Earth drives us to act radically differently than the colonizer worldview does. The colonizer worldview espouses that we can and should take whatever we can from the earth without concern about consequences.

### **Suggestions for Research in Traditional Communities**

To conduct meaningful research in traditional communities, in contrast to solely focusing on publishable research, or research that meets academic standards of dissertation advisors, the academic needs to attend to some critical issues.

#### ***Relationships***

Working in a traditional community requires first and primarily time to build strong, collaborative relationships (Wilson 2008). The amount of time to build these relationships may take years and will always remain fragile. Even when the academic is from the community, the fact that the academic has reached a certain level of educational achievement may cause distrust. The time required for relationship building usually exceeds and does not match the cycles of the academic calendar, research proposal development, grant submission and reporting. Trying to fit the traditional community's life and work cycles into academic cycles is almost an impossible task. In addition, based on centuries of exploitation and extraction, traditional community people do not easily trust academic researchers. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment is one of the most widely cited examples of unethical research conducted on people without their consent (Jones 1993).

#### ***Listening***

In his seminal work, Paulo Freire emphasized the importance of the listening when entering an oppressed community (Freire 1970). From the perspective of adult education, Freire talked about how the teacher must first learn from the people she or he expects to teach, because those people have a rich knowledge of their world. The teacher becomes learner, and the learners become teachers. Eventually in telling their stories, the people of the community will reach a problem they cannot solve. Then they might ask the teacher for help and will be ready to learn. The same dynamic applies to the academic researcher. First she must be the learner, willing to listen and learn from the community. When the time is right, the community will be ready to fully engage and participate in the research.

### ***Respect for Elders***

In traditional communities, elders hold a place of great respect. For academic research to have meaning, the researcher must strive to show that same level of respect to community elders. The myriad demands on the academic might compel her to push past any considerations suggested by the elders of the community. But that compulsion will lead only to a breakdown of the relationship. The academic will need to modify, adjust or even abandon those academic demands in order to continue building a strong relationship with the community.

### ***Learn traditional cosmology***

Learning traditional cosmology will take time and study. One cannot begin to understand the native world view without witnessing native ways of being, both everyday conduct and sacred ceremony, and then confronting one's own lack of understanding. It is a process that takes years. But native people will notice and appreciate the effort. Beyond spending time working in community, building strong relationships, listening deeply and respecting the lessons the elders provide, the academic learner can read seminal works like *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013) and *The Unlikely Peace at Chuchumaquic* (Prechtel 2012) to gain appreciation of the depth and the nuances of traditional cosmologies.

### ***Learn about and resist colonization***

Colonization has wreaked severe harm to the people of traditional communities on the North American continent for more than six hundred years since first contact with Europeans in the fifteenth century. This harm has extended through every succeeding generation of indigenous people resulting in the phenomenon of historical trauma (Brave Heart 2004). People in traditional communities have an acute awareness of overtures for collaboration that hold the potential for further exploitation and extraction—the continuing process of colonization. Linda Tuwiwai Smith has provided an approach for decolonizing research in her book, *Decolonizing Methodology* (Smith 2012).

### ***Learning with the community***

Usually in contemporary mainstream culture we feel compelled to act fast, to be nimble and quick, to get things done right away. This culture affects academics in mainstream institutions as well. The rapid growth of food justice research in part reflects this compulsion: Communities, specifically vulnerable, traditional communities, have struggled to achieve food security and food justice for decades.



But the term “food justice” only appeared in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.<sup>1</sup> The academic world notices, descends upon those communities because they represent new, interesting research opportunities, and the struggle for food justice legitimately appeals to researchers who do participatory action research, food science, nutrition, agronomy, etc. And so suddenly books, papers and conference presentations appear focused on food justice—all from the academic learning space, privileging academic knowledge production and social construction.

I have argued in this essay that we can and ought to privilege learning from within the traditional community space, even though the pace and approach to learning varies so greatly from learning within the academic space. We can find examples of how this research can proceed in relational and collaborative ways that respect the values and world view of the traditional community (Sarna-Wojcicki 2014), even though the relationships between the community and the controlling institutions can break down.

Finding ways to bring the benefits of mutual learning using approaches from both of these spaces can provide benefits of both to the most vulnerable communities, fully acknowledging, honoring and respecting traditional knowledge and also expanding that knowledge with resources the academy can bring.

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<sup>1</sup> I first became aware of the term when I read an article, The “Food Justice” Movement: Trying to Break the Food Chains, by Mark Winston Griffith, published on December 18, 2003 in the Gotham Gazette, in preparation for a presentation to a small funders group convened by Kolu Zigby of the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation. The co-presenter was activist Bryant Terry, now a noted chef and author.

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