

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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### Dialogic Social Inquiry



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The invitation to write this piece took me back to an adventure in 1990, the last year of my mom's life. I returned to my parents' small town to teach piano lessons every Monday, all day and into the evening. A young adult at the time, I had hoped my car, a brown 700 dollar Plymouth Horizon, was fit for the weekly trip. Its hatchback opened at random intervals and rain and fog seemed to cause it to slowly and completely lose power. There were no cellphones and my travel was often delayed by mechanical dilemmas at the side of the road.

I dreaded the winter fog, but the most challenging Mondays involved late evening snow storms. After my last student and a tasty late supper, I'd wave goodbye to my mom's silhouette in the living room window and head off into the night. If you're not from the northern prairies you might not know that winter conditions in cities and towns often differ drastically from conditions in the open country. By the time you realize you shouldn't be driving, it might be too late to change plans. How can you turn back if you have no idea how to move forward? I remember some desperate moments, like the time I stopped the car and stepped out onto the blizzard-ridden highway to look more closely for the painted dotted line that would give some idea of my whereabouts, a hint of how to continue on.

Recently, my Kanankil Institute colleagues Cynthia Loreto Sosa Infante and Christian Israel Lizama Valladares wrote a book with me about finding our way as thesis and dissertation writers. Usually a scholarly research process is determined by a research methodology, a map outlining a step-ordered series of tasks and procedures. Methodologies automate inquiry, assuring funders and other overseers. But produced outside their sites of application, methodologies set research agendas apart from participants, as academic Shawn Wilson (2008) cautions. Made from a distance, methodologies may lack sensitivity to the political, economic, cultural, and relational complexity of each unique research context. As non-living things, methodologies cannot sense inevitable shifts such as emerging constraints or opportunities.

In a dialogic social inquiry process, it's the living changing social ecology at the center of each inquiry project that produces its own inquiry processes and practices. The process isn't mobile—something to be rolled-out anywhere—but is instead intricately connected with its community of participants. Local and familiar dialogic strategies generate understanding and possibility instead of analytic tactics produced elsewhere. The research then becomes dialogically structured instead of methodologically driven.

There's no need to denigrate efficient mechanized processes, ask any Plymouth Horizon owner! And let's not assume that dialogue is inherently benevolent or that local processes are necessarily innocent. But it matters where an inquiry process comes from and to whom it belongs. Some of the most crucial indicators of how to proceed, however subtle or fleeting, might only appear within the developing inquiry effort itself.

#### Reference

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.

