“This, but not that”: Indigenist research

In her paper, “Ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing: Developing a theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous re-search and Indigenist research”, Karen Martin positions Indigenist research as existing within the academy (presumably largely within and around the discipline of Indigenous studies), aiming “to be recognised by the academy of Western research” (Martin, 2003, p. 5) and working to “decolonise existing colonial Western research practices” (Martin, 2003, p. 2). Quoting Smith (1999), Martin talks of the need to “reframe, reclaim and rename the research endeavour” (Martin 2003, p. 2). In this paper I am not trying to reframe, reclaim or rename anything. I am looking at the uses of Aboriginal knowledge through the academic lens of transdisciplinary methodology. Reframing, reclaiming and renaming characterises the important work of Indigenous academics like Rigney (1997).

“Some of this and some of that”: Transdisciplinary research

I am interested in something which happens across boundaries, and which sometimes involves Indigenous knowledge traditions and sometimes does not. I call it transdisciplinary research, following landscape environment research in northern Europe. At Charles Darwin University, as in other Australian universities, we have an increasing number of Indigenous researchers who are becoming involved in research which depends upon both Indigenous methodologies (decisions around who needs to be consulted, what counts as evidence, how truth claims should be assessed, where to start, where to go on, where to finish, and so on), and academic or bureaucratic ones.

Seldom, of course, does a research project completely or consistently satisfy the requirements of both the academy and the Indigenous knowledge-makers. It is more likely to fluctuate between the publishing and financial accountabilities of the university researcher, and the social/political agendas and responsibilities of the Indigenous knowledge-holders upon whom the success of the project depends. Such research can be both interdisciplinary (where Indigenous studies meets ecology, or anthropology etc and play by academic rules), or it could be transdisciplinary negotiating rules of engagement, evidence and validation with participants outside the university. This transdisciplinary research is worth unpacking if we are to understand what people increasingly call Indigenous methodology. Transdisciplinary research is generally theorised outside the issue of Indigenous methodologies, in terms of, for example, landscape planning, where the perspectives and agendas of the general public are crucial in the deliberations of academics (e.g., Tress, Tress & van der Velk, 2004).

Indigenous transdisciplinary research could be represented in a slightly different diagram (Figure 2). The work of Indigenous researchers in academic contexts is not as easy and uncontested as Figure 1 would imply. It more usually involves contestation, compromise and only partial agreement. It is more than simply interdisciplinary research; it transcends the culture of the academy. It is transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Intercultural research collaborations often involve the academics and the Indigenous researchers never completely seeing eye-to-eye. They may have different agendas, different criteria for truth and effectiveness, but still collaborate on the methodology or the research transfer. They may never entirely agree upon the outcomes, and yet be satisfied (if not completely impressed) by the