River, canoe: metaphors to inform the Literacy and Employment Research

Towards building a research community of common purpose

Frank Sligo, Department of Communication & Journalism, Wellington & Palmerston North

Massey University

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

FRST grant to Dept of C&J for a 3.5 year study based in Wanganui & Districts

This community-based research into literacy and employment in Wanganui and Districts is attempting to embody collaborative research practice, marrying the skills of University researchers and the deep cultural knowledge possessed by local people.

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

The **Wanganui District Library** originally inspired the research. It is both our main research partner and a subcontractor

Other partners and subcontractors are:

- **Literacy Aotearoa** (Wanganui)

- The **Whanganui Community Foundation** (both a funding body and an entity with some research capability) and

- **Te Puna Matauranga o Whanganui,** an iwi-based educational development foundation.

Other community stakeholders include:

- Wanganui District Council
- NZ Police
- Work and Income NZ
- Enterprise Wanganui (Chamber of Commerce)
- Ministry of Justice
- UCOL.

Duality in relationships

Tensions are inherent in this duality. The Department is contractually obliged to measure and monitor subcontractor performance.

Yet simultaneously it seeks the same people's insights and judgement on how best to carry out the research in this community that they know well, from their own varying perspectives.

Priorities in conflict

- The University people feel driven by the exacting schedule of FRST milestones and outputs that we have to achieve on limited resources (especially time and personnel)

- Yet the community partners have goals of community development as central to their involvement

- The University people are privileging research practice and outputs, while the community partners are absorbed by the ways in which they define community development.

Differing emphases in aims and interests:

- Wanganui District Library: adult literacy and civic participation, plus family literacy

- Literacy Aotearoa, adult literacy and social justice

- Whanganui Community Foundation: building civil society, community participation, social inclusion

- Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui: improving outcomes for iwi in areas such as education, health and employment.

Ambivalent attitudes to research:

"Research is an important part of the colonization process because it is concerned with defining legitimate knowledge. In Māori communities today, there is a deep distrust and suspicion of research. This suspicion is not just of non-indigenous researchers, but of the whole philosophy of research and the different sets of beliefs which underlie the research process".

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 173)

Similar ambivalence may have been felt by other partners as well:

- Differing perspectives between the University and the community
- PN – Wanganui
- Wellington – Wanganui
- The community's lack of familiarity with research protocols
- The researchers' lack of familiarity with the community context
- Subcontractors' unfamiliarity with one another.

The politics of interpretation

- One element in attempting to avoid concerns about "research colonisation" is to foster means by which disaggregation of data may be achieved

- That is, the researchers are seeking for ways to ensure that data collected can be shared with the individuals and groups surveyed

- This could permit these groups (perhaps with appropriate support if needed), to analyse and interpret this information in ways they consider most appropriate for their needs, and with a view to achieving positive outcomes as they define them.

Confidentiality, transparency and trust

- The protocols of research **confidentiality** serve to build trust by reducing risk in the eyes of local participants

- Yet, held in tension against this, **transparency** of **goals**, **process**, and **research practice** with the aim of information-sharing to the greatest extent possible, should also be a means of creating **trust** by drawing community members into the research

- No obvious formula for determining the relative balance of confidentiality and transparency is evident, but relationship-building had to be central.

Working against relationship-building are:

- The necessarily focused approach of the University researchers (e.g., on account of FRST timelines and output pressures)

- **Task** (University staff focus on achievement) versus **maintenance** (the community awareness of the importance of building and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships prior to action).

This seemed to run counter to the usual stereotype, e.g.,

"The difference between a practical person and a university person is that:

- The practical person acts first, then thinks (if they think), while

- The university person thinks first, then acts (if they act)."

Our lived experience of the research relationship was far from embodying such "dreaming spires" stereotypical views.

Dependence and difference

- Given our mutual dependence, means had to be found to work together successfully
- The challenge for us is to build on, not play down, our differences of needs, goals and experience, yet still succeed within a highly structured research programme with precise timelines and outputs
- This suggested that commonalities of seeing and action were needed.

The need for a metaphor to inform our research collaboration

- We assumed that that no-one is capable of "seeing anything in its entirety" (Jaynes 1990, p. 61)
- Our knowing is not therefore a compendium of "what is" but is rather an analogue or metaphor of reality
- We also understood that participants' perceptions of literacy and employment were probably not idiosyncratic
- Rather, they would have been formed by a (largely tacit) consensus shaped within their own subgroups, on the signification of these terms within their various contexts, cultural, professional, etc.

Metaphor, stage one:
Nga awa e rua

- Despite contractor-subcontractor relationships, we wanted to avoid imagery that reinforced senior and junior partner thinking

- Each knew we had to learn from all others involved, with each party having things to give and get

- The metaphor of a river was discussed at a meeting:

Nga awa e rua – two rivers, separate, at points coming together into a shared confluence, then separating again for a period. Through separation each would retain its integrity, but neither would be disconnected for very long from the other.

Metaphor, stage two: challenge to *Nga awa e rua*

- This metaphor was discussed at one meeting then referred to again at others. It appeared to be serving a function as a means by which we could build some commonality of perspective

- The main objection to it that started to emerge, however, was that by some it was being taken to contradict the reality of "the river," the Whanganui

- The risk was that the "two rivers" model (especially as promulgated mainly by outsiders, the University team) would be seen as an attempt to impose a nonsensical perspective on the local reality.

Metaphor, stage three: *Nga waka e rua*

- At the date of writing we are moving away from the *Nga awa e rua* metaphor, and some mention has been made of *Nga waka e rua* – two canoes

- However, and perhaps more importantly, we are also starting to question whether we should initiate a metaphor that makes any use of Māori language

- If such is needed or desirable, possibly it should be as a result of Māori research practitioners or participants taking the initiative.

Stage four:
Initiate discussion about place and purpose of possible metaphors

- This paper signals a direction for our study and tries to reveal its challenges and limitations

- We are now reflecting on our assumptions and have more questions than answers as to what truly constitutes exemplary practice. At this point we are still unsure whether a strong metaphor is desirable

- Genuinely community-based research programmes are uncommon in NZ and lack well-accepted models of research practice

- As such our experience may be of value for others who wish to foster similar research.

References

Jaynes, J. (1990). *The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.