Massey University

Towards building a research community of common purpose

The Wanganui Literacy and Employment Programme

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Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

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FRST grant for a 3.5 year study of literacy & employment

This community-based study offered an opportunity to build a collaborative research programme, informed both by University research skills and local knowledge and perspectives.

One issue: how to capture the best of both worlds?

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

The **Wanganui District Library** instigated the research with Massey, and 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
- GoodHealth Wanganui (Hospital Board).

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: supporting the community's economic and social wellbeing; plus identifying a new role for public libraries in the interagency collaboration matrix
- Literacy Aotearoa: Treaty-based, sees adult literacy as a basic human right to be provided at no direct cost to the student
- Whanganui Community Foundation: aiming to build civil society, community participation, social inclusion
- Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui: improving outcomes for iwi in areas such as education, health and employment.

Varying objectives - The FRST goals:

1. To establish adult literacy **needs** of both employed and unemployed in Wanganui and Districts region

2. To identify the social, attitudinal and economic **barriers** to adult literacy, numeracy and analytical thinking skills of employed and unemployed in Wanganui and Districts

3. To evaluate how effectively adult literacy **programmes** secure **employment** outcomes

4. To examine adult literacy **learning processes** and their relationship to **employment**.

Varying objectives - The community goals:

1. Achieve positive, **practical outcomes** for Wanganui, with a well-researched **plan of action** for 2005-2015 to address identified issues relating to literacy

2. Establish a **database** of relevant information relating to the **links** between **literacy** and **employment** in Wanganui, identifying links to **other social issues** e.g., crime, health, and housing; and benchmarks to measure progress

3. Develop **collaboration** between **agencies** within the Wanganui region; **strengthen** the community and social **infrastructure** for future work and projects

4. Build **research capacity** within Wanganui.

Because of the complexity of the issues …

- The technical complexity and social embeddedness of issues surrounding L&E require national and local authorities, private business, scientific experts, groups of users and social interest groups and non-governmental organisations to collaborate
- The goal is an interdependent involvement of stakeholders, the development of a shared problem definition, coordination of the different actions on all levels and orientation towards a shared common script and action strategy.

Theory into practice

- Relevant fields from which learning may come will probably include human communication, and social and organisational psychology, then building on theories of interorganisational collaboration and social and organisational development

- Stakeholders engage in joint practices, needing to acknowledge and develop viable interdependencies

- Understanding those interdependencies creates process and form within this multi-party project. Through sharing problem perspectives and working with different kinds of knowledge and competencies, multiple actors or stakeholder parties co-construct a social learning process in an emerging community of practice (adapted from Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004).

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

- Differing perspectives between the University and the community
- Palmerston North – Wanganui history of rivalry
- Wellington – Wanganui disparateness
- 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

- It's important to ensure good access to data by all parties involved in the programme
- Part of the University responsibility is to build community researchers' capability to analyse and interpret the data – scholarships are available, plus informal mechanisms such as coaching and mentoring
- It's necessary to ensure that participants' perspectives are taken into account in presentation of findings – the website http://literacy.massey.ac.nz has a role in this
- It's not realistic to expect full agreement on "meaning" of findings, given the differing perspectives involved.

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.

Undermining 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.

Step one: community of practice

- Includes idea of converting individual knowledge into organisational or collective knowledge
- Has been used in schools where teachers and children co-develop approaches to learning, often with teachers establishing norms and practices, then children building on this to develop their own approaches to learning
- May include "activity systems" or systematic behaviour over time
- May include shared language norms that signal membership of this CoP.

Learning and community of practice

- A sociocultural view of learning proposes that learning involves becoming enculturated into a community of practice (e.g., Chernobilsky, DaCosta, Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p. 319).

- One step in this is learning to use the specialised language of such a community, as "language is a crucial tool that regulates participation, mediates cognition and plays a central role in the development of thought"

- This requires both University and community people to try to access the others' terminology.

Stage two: Community of common purpose

- The term *community of common purpose* proposed (Ian Falk et al., Univ of Tasmania) is potentially more inclusive. It appears to describe a context not unlike ours, with different interest groups and differing needs. In our context we are not geographically adjacent, and so find it community of practice difficult given little face to face contact

- This concept may be better suited to our research if **purpose** is seen as what is likely to drive and shape **practice**.

Stage three:
Community of common research purpose?
Community of inquiry?

- However, while "community of common purpose" captures the idea of shared goals in this programme, it does not really include the binary nature of those interests: **research timelines** vs **local goals**

- Therefore needed is a concept such as community of **common research purpose**, or **community of inquiry** (also known as culture of inquiry)

- Action research within a pragmatist epistemology has sometimes been based on a **culture of inquiry** based on collaborative norms and the reciprocity of theory and practice.

Expectations of the theory-practice nexus for postgraduate thesis students

Developmental stages for PG students:

1. Recognise basic linkages between context and theory
2. Apply appropriate theoretical concepts, interpretive frameworks and analytical tools to real world problems
3. Offer explanations that extend their own thinking
4. Gather data testing those explanations (providing the tools for a culture of inquiry and evidence)
5. Demonstrate how theory can be used for greater effectiveness and improvement of literacy and employment outcomes (adapted from Powers, 2000).

References

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