

Towards a community of common purpose in a research programme exploring the literacy and employment nexus

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Te Kūnenga
ki Pūrehuroa



The Background

- Government funded research (FRST) project.
- 3.5 year longitudinal study of adult literacy and employment in Wanganui city and surrounding districts.
- Community-based, collaborative research.
- Question: How best to capture and combine local knowledge and perspectives with university research skills?

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The Project's Community Partners & Subcontractors

- **Wanganui District Library** – initiator and main partner
- **Literacy Aotearoa** (Wanganui)
- **Whanganui Community Foundation** – a funding body with a research capacity
- **Te Puna Matauranga o Whanganui** – a Māori (indigenous people's) iwi (tribally) based educational development foundation

Other Stakeholders

- Wanganui District Council
- NZ Police
- Work and Income NZ
- Enterprise Wanganui
- Ministry of Justice
- UCOL – polytechnic
- Wanganui Hospital etc

Every organization has its own perspective – there are varying ideological positions

Priorities in Conflict

- **University** – pressured by FRST milestones and outputs. Privileging research practice and publication.
- **Community Partners** – goals of community development. Absorbed in the ways in which they define community development.

Differing aims and interests

- **Wanganui District Library** – supporting the community's economic and social wellbeing. Seeking a new role in helping local agencies work together.
- **Literacy Aotearoa** committed to fostering acceptance that adult literacy is a basic human right. Organisation based on Treaty of Waitangi and partnership with Māori.

Differing aims and interests

- **Whanganui Community Foundation** – aims of building civil society, fostering community participation, working for social inclusion.
- **Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui** – goal of improving outcomes for local iwi in education, health and employment. Importance of strengthening Māori literacy in Te Reo Māori (indigenous language). Thus broadening scope of research programme.

Differing objectives

- **FRST** (government funded programme) research oriented objectives and expectations that findings apply nationally
- **Community groups' objectives** more practical and focusing on Wanganui
- e.g. “a well-researched plan of action for 2005-2015”; “develop collaboration between agencies”; “build research capacity in Wanganui”.

The need for collaboration

- Bouwen and Taillieu (2004) say “the technical complexity and social embeddedness” of issues requires collaboration from national and local authorities, businesses, scientific experts, groups of users and NGOs.
- The goal: interdependence and “a shared common script and action strategy” (p.137).

Challenges: Post-colonial perspectives

- Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1995) "Language is a fundamental site of struggle for postcolonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language" (p.283).
- Recognition that by equating 'literacy' with 'literacy in English' we were excluding other versions of constituting reality, such as Te Reo Māori.

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 community research partners.
- Researchers knew they must ensure good access to data by all parties.
- Responsibility for University to build community researchers' capability, and to find ways in which research participants' perspectives can be taken into account when presenting findings.

Unrealistic to expect full agreement on “meaning” of findings.

Tensions

- Relationship building was undermined by different approaches.

University researchers – task orientation.

Community - focus on maintenance.

Dependence and difference

- Mutual dependence: ways must be found to work together.
- Challenge to team to build on, not play down, differences yet still succeed within constraints of structured research programme.
- Need for commonalities of seeing and action.
- For instance community partners sensitive to any use of language that implied that University people alone were “the researchers” as if community people were not.

Dynamics of the project in the light of theory

- “**Communities of practice**” enable people to share in combined activities, collectively creating shared ways of understanding the problems they face and building a sense of shared identity.
- Shared language norms signal membership of a community of practice.
- Bouwen and Taillieu (2004) talk of need for continuous negotiation to accommodate differences.
- Both university people and community need to try and access then use each others’ language.

'Community of common purpose' Kirkpatrick & Falk (1999)

- Useful for us because it embraces communities of interest that are not geographically adjacent and which cannot interact frequently. (University and community researchers are in different cities)
- 'Community of common purpose' better suited to our project if *purpose* is what is seen to drive and shape *practice*.

Common purpose ... but binary interests?

- Community of common purpose captures idea of shared goals, but does not really include binary nature of, for instance, research timelines versus local goals.
- A broader concept needed. Perhaps...
"community of common research purpose" or
community of inquiry.

The project is still evolving, so
are our ideas....

