

# 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....

