



Massey University

Walking the Talk in Communication Research

Lessons from the
Literacy &
Employment
Research
Programme,
Wanganui

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Te Kūnenga
ki Pūrehuroa





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Early research origins

The desirability of researching literacy in Wanganui and Districts was sold to the Dept of Communication & Journalism by the Wanganui District Library Head Librarian Sally Patrick who has long had a strong interest in researching adult literacy,

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- Sally's wish we should research adult literacy coincided with the tradition in the Dept of C&J of researching access to information & knowledge gaps. From this research area to the study of literacy was a natural progression
- Our early instinct was to draw in other Massey researchers who were specialists in children's literacy
- We were interested to note the extent to which they saw a separation between adults' and children's literacy.

A timely focus on literacy

In 1997 the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) revealed the worrying state of NZ adult literacy. Most people had thought that “almost all” adult NZers were literate. Thereafter, NZ policymakers and businesses tried to come to terms with the finding that over 40 percent of people at work had literacy described as not functional in the modern workplace

In response, the Government’s Adult Literacy and Employment Strategies sought to address low adult literacy, with some increased funding for literacy services and research.

But how adequate is IALS?

A major criticism of IALS is that it actually measures ability to score well on literacy tests (rather than assessing “ability in literacy”)

Workplace questions we wanted to address:

- Are NZ workers really as deficient as the IALS proposes?
- If so, how do small to medium size enterprises (SMEs) survive (and even flourish) though many of their workers allegedly are of very low literacy in English?

So how come IALS is driving literacy policy?

- On the other hand, is the IALS really as irrelevant to workplace realities as its critics suggest?
- If so, why are governments internationally using it as a key driver of adult literacy policy?
- One major element in our study is the exploration of IALS outcomes in relation to what people in organisations understand to be effective work practices.

Research, but beyond research

- The programme needs to comprise international high quality research
- Yet it also must also be fully grounded in this community and meet real local needs
- We are also aware of a growing interest in this research at a national policy level – thus there is an expectation the research will model positive national outcomes.

Research objective one:

- Describes issues connecting and around literacy and employment
- Clarifies the extent to which growth in employment depends on adult literacy, numeracy and analytical thinking skills (ATS)

In this objective we describe the state of adult literacy in the Wanganui region and explore its relationship to the rest of New Zealand.

Research objective two:

Identifies barriers to literacy at all levels to better focus adult literacy programmes and help policy makers identify real needs. Employment-disadvantaged adults will be enabled to overcome barriers and engage more readily with literacy programmes and resources

A second outcome will be greater co-ordination of adult literacy activities in Wanganui and Districts, then with recommendations for nationwide solutions

A better understanding of barriers to literacy and their impact on social outcomes will permit recommendations of well-targeted initiatives.

Research objective three:

Tracks learners' progress through adult literacy programmes to assess their consequent experiences in the labour market

This objective seeks to identify factors leading to both successful and unsuccessful completion of adult literacy programmes and aims to show how successful these programmes are in helping individuals find employment.

Research objective four:

Explains adult learning processes with the aim of developing individual learning programmes to maximise people's learning capabilities

The tangible outcome is detailed evaluations of individual adult learning programmes and the learning processes in which adult literacy participants and practitioners engage.

Among the community researchers there is a:

- Plurality of voices and perspectives
- Focus on process then outcome
- Privileging of community needs
- View that timelines and milestones are secondary
- View that research outputs are secondary.

But among the University researchers there is a:

- Unitary ethic of research
- Focus on outcome then process
- Privileging of research needs
- View that timelines and milestones are primary
- View that research outputs are primary.

In part our journey is how to define “integrity”

- “Integrity” has been often-used in University-community discussions, frequently repeated during meetings as we sought to understand our own role in the research
- Many expectations surrounded this Wanganui study, whose most influential stakeholders were highly supportive
- A strong need exists to ensure supporters would not be disappointed. All involved wanted the research to represent the best available practice, hence a focus on integrity.

Differing strengths?

- The University researchers' primary orientation was to international research expectations. However, none was experienced in research genuinely founded within the community in the sense of working with community groups as full participants in research design and implementation
- Similarly, the four community research subcontractors were highly engaged with and knowledgeable about their own subsections of the community, but none had had research experience as the University people would define it.

So what is integrity?

- For the community people integrity was linked to building community consensus on what constituted exemplary research practice. This meant engaging many relevant local stakeholders to secure their buy-in
- This next implied action, e.g., informing stakeholders of research progress, then engaging them with it in some form. Through local knowledge and participation the good of the community was sought and expressed
- Therefore integrity was linked with the question – is the research important to key reference groups and serving their needs in obtaining beneficial community outcomes?

Input and output aspects of integrity for the University team: Input included

- Is this study measuring up well against internationally-accepted norms of high quality research?
- Is it occurring within an appropriate research tradition, contributing to knowledge as portrayed in the refereed literature, and conducted according to ethical protocols?
- Is the methodology congruent with the research objectives and are the data being appropriately gathered and analysed?
- Is the interpretation of the results consistent with the rest of the study and well-grounded in the local context?

Output measures of academic research integrity include:

- Acceptance of findings in the international scholarly literature, via double-blind refereeing in international journals and conferences. Here gatekeepers, e.g., journal editors plus referees and members of editorial boards, permit or disallow acceptance within the academic literature
- So integrity partly derives from acceptability for members of an invisible college, determined by colloquy, first among research team members, then mediated via standardised double-blind protocols.

Different worlds mean different meanings

- Yet in the community, research integrity is also sought via dialogue, but more typically in face to face mode, to shape consensus in the eyes of those present
- Therefore the term integrity formed a contested site of meaning and interpretation. For example, statements made in meetings such as “we’ve got to get this research right,” or “we need to make sure this is done well,” or “this study must result in good outcomes” might seem to have self-evident meanings, but in fact could well possess very different connotations for those present, depending on their assumptions and experience.

The linking factor: a shared passion for the research

- Despite these differing perspectives, what the research team especially has in common is a shared belief that the research is potentially important for the region, and ultimately for the country and beyond
- This shared view encouraged us to understand our varying perspectives as complementary rather than contradictory
- In turn this inclined team members to make efforts to understand then take into account other points of view with the aim of enlarging our own view of integrity
- We are still early in our journey but are attempting to walk the talk!

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