

## LITERACY RESEARCH IN WANGANUI

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

Early in 2004 the NZ Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST) awarded funding to the Massey University Department of Communication and Journalism for a three and a half-year longitudinal study of adult literacy and employment in Wanganui and Districts. The first instigator of the proposal to research adult literacy in Wanganui and from the start a key research partner for Massey in planning and implementing the research was the Wanganui District Library (WDL).

For a number of years Library management has had an ongoing interest in low adult literacy and its local concomitants, specifically including its correlations with low library use, low income, poor health, lesser civic participation, and a higher propensity to be convicted of crime. The Library's relationship with the University had stemmed from personal friendships and the presence at the University of researchers experienced in organisational and community-related studies.

Prior to this and via meetings organised by the WDL, advice of the planned research had been given to interested local groups, especially the Wanganui District Council, the NZ Police, Work and Income NZ, Enterprise Wanganui (a local business council) and the Ministry of Justice. Strong support for the proposed research had been received from meetings of these stakeholders chaired successively by the CEO of the District Council and the Mayor.

However the most important continuing means of integrating all stages of the research effectively into the community was by involving key Wanganui bodies such as Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), The Whanganui Community Foundation (both a funding body and an entity with some research capability that has invested significant energies into developing civil society and civic participation locally) and Te Puna Matauranga o Whanganui, a specialist educational and development foundation representing a group of local iwi.

## DUALITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

These latter bodies were to have a dual role in the research, being both subcontractors to the University (for FRST purposes) but at the same time being true research partners. The subcontracting role meant that detailed contracts had to be negotiated, formulated and signed for each, designating milestones, required outputs and timelines, based on a legal framework, including provision for mediation and arbitration etc. should disputes arise. In contrast to this but parallel with it was the second role for each, research partner. In this relationship the parties were much more equal, as each entity needed to contribute its own unique wisdom and experience to the research design and execution.

Tensions were inherent in this duality, whereby the Department was contractually obliged to measure and monitor subcontractor performance, but simultaneously was seeking the same people's insights and judgement on how best to carry out the research within this community whose characteristics they knew well from their own disparate perspectives. Therefore an essential underpinning to the University's relationship with these bodies separately and collectively had to be trust, based on relationships carefully built up with each.

## CONFLICTING PRIORITIES

The challenge for the research team as researchers and as community members was to tease out ways in which both researchers and community could define their own approaches, in an attempt to ensure that this process had as much integrity as possible. This meant that priorities were in conflict. The University people felt highly driven by the exacting schedule of FRST milestones and outputs that they had to achieve on limited resources, especially of time and personnel. They understood that goals of community development were central to the community's involvement in the first place. Yet in light of the pressures that they felt to achieve research outputs, and given the expertise of the community partners, it was difficult for them to put in first place issues of community development. In the eyes of the community partners, however, community development goals were undoubtedly to the forefront, and the University researchers' planning and the doing of research appeared to be essentially a means to an end.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has commented on the suspect place of research intentions and practices in the eyes of indigenous people: "From the vantage point of the colonized ... the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism ... The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (p. 1). Or, "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" (p.173).

The researchers accepted that significant contradictions might well exist between their carrying out conventional research (thus embodying "the whole philosophy of research") and the disparate goals of the community within which the study was being undertaken. Yet they considered this not to be an issue that could readily be resolved at the start of the research process. Perhaps to the extent this issue was ever capable of resolution, it had to be explored during the progress of this longitudinal study. In comparison, the question of how to legitimise knowledge was thought to be slightly more

amenable to discussion. The researchers knew that an element in this would be to make research results, and pathways to multiple interpretations of those results, as available as possible to all involved.

In any event, the research team agreed that it would not be acceptable to have an approach that opened itself to charges of “research colonisation.” For example, examples of poor research practice might include acquisition of local knowledge by researchers who lacked ties to local indigenous people, and who then who took insufficient steps to promote local benefits from their research. Therefore, although for the academic researchers’ sanity and survival, at least initially they had to give priority to conceptualising and operationalising the study, they knew that progressively and over time a balance between the doing of research and community outcomes would need to be negotiated.

Potential for disaggregation of data was considered necessary in the project planning. This meant that the researchers sought for ways to ensure that data collected could be shared with the individuals and groups surveyed so that they too, with appropriate support if needed, could analyse and interpret this information in ways they considered most appropriate for their needs, and with a view to achieving positive outcomes as they defined them. This meant that they had to pay attention to what Said (1983) has called “a politics of interpretation” (p. 7), attending to questions of who has the power to define the terms and frame the enquiry, whose words are to be used, and for whose benefit the research findings are to be interpreted,

In general Māori-Pakeha relations in NZ have been regarded as more successful than in many other former European colonies. Nevertheless, an element in the history of Wanganui, with its early origins in the NZ Wars of the 1860s, has been conflict, with divergent points of view and disputes surfacing from time to time, often centring upon issues of rightful possession of land.

In addition, significant economic disparities still exist in respect of lesser Māori attainment in areas like education, health and employment. Therefore it was not difficult to see that this research, exploring as it does the situation of persons with low literacy in the community, a proportion of whom are Māori, had to be an example of high quality

social research that would be above reproach in the eyes of local and national stakeholders.

The researchers saw their study as grounded in a country that is currently reinventing itself as a postcolonial society (Novitz, 1989). Important elements in this are steps taken by successive NZ governments to redress historical wrongs perpetrated against the indigenous people by means of providing both financial settlements (such as for land confiscated illegally since the NZ Wars) and formal governmental apology. In this context, and given the sensitivity of the issues surrounding adult literacy and its economic and social correlates, true collaborative research was needed in order to promote the greatest chance of success.

## CONFIDENTIALITY AND TRANSPARENCY

The researchers knew they had to be mindful of the tension between confidentiality and transparency inherent when research is conducted in a relatively small city (population 45,000) and surrounding districts. Trust and mutual confidence had to be built, particularly given that the University researchers were not from Wanganui, but were from the two University campuses based in Palmerston North, a city of about an hour's drive away, and Wellington, something over two hours' drive, and thus were seen as not fully attuned to local issues.

The community and University researchers discussed the interplay between confidentiality and transparency, both of which, in appropriate balance, were needed to build trust. They understood that rules of research confidentiality served to build trust by means of reducing risk in the eyes of local stakeholders and 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, would also be a means of creating trust as members of the local community started to feel genuinely drawn into the process. No obvious formula for determining the relative balance of confidentiality and transparency was possible, of course, but relationship-building was seen to be central to the process.

## THE NEED FOR A METAPHOR

These were some of the major human issues underpinning the research, and the research team felt a need for a strong governing metaphor to inform their thinking, planning and research practice. The University researchers were becoming increasingly aware of the challenge for practising researchers of co-researching with community groups in the roles of partners and contractors. As experienced researchers within organisational and community environments they considered themselves as reasonably familiar with many of the issues of doing research, including those of avoiding research colonisation already referred to.

What was novel, however, was the closeness of the associations between University and community groups, the extent of mutual reliance on this collaboration in research design, and the community's key role in data-gathering. The extent of internal differences within the research team created for all parties, opportunities to contact worlds different from their own in immediate and vicarious ways. However, the challenge was to honour that difference of experience at the same time as being able to capture it within a highly structured research programme with well-defined timelines and outputs.

#### VARIETIES OF METAPHOR

Issues such as these led the research team to be mindful of phenomenological views such as Jaynes' (1990) that no-one is capable of "seeing anything in its entirety" (p. 61) because the experience of being in the world is not fully knowable or accessible to any individual. Our knowing is not therefore a compendium of "what is" but is rather an analogue or metaphor of reality. Further, the researchers' own collections of personal metaphors that in some way represented reality for them, are unique and therefore necessarily differ from others' to a greater or lesser extent depending on the extent of difference among people, on grounds such as age, gender, ethnicity or culture, education, work experience etc.

This way of seeing metaphor is in contrast to what might be called the traditional or substitution view of metaphor that many of us would have learned in high school. Here a metaphor is when a word or phrase that usually designates one thing is used to designate and make an implicit comparison to another (e.g., Black 1962). Typically one literal event or entity substitutes for another, so that "the pen is mightier than the sword"

denotes metaphorically the idea that the power of communication or persuasion is greater than force.

A phenomenological view of the functions of metaphor such as Jaynes' (1990) builds on the traditional standpoint in that it goes beyond the spoken or written word alone, and directs awareness to human consciousness, and the ways in which metaphor shapes that consciousness. In this view a person's awareness of their lived experience itself can be described as a metaphor of that experience, which Morgan (1996) describes as metaphorisation or the growth of socially constituted meanings.

In seeking for shared metaphorical understanding of our shared enterprise, the researchers were aware that participants' current perceptions of adult literacy and its connection to 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 the contexts of Wanganui, their profession, their ethnicity and through repetition of the words and images that they shared. Through each subgroup's tradition of language use, their own worldviews surrounding adult literacy and employment become embedded, or in the term used by Mignot (2004), their views become "culturally sedimented over time" (p. 455).

Also relevant to our thinking about how best to understand interrelationships among the various parties comprising the research team was the work of Gonçalves (1995) who considered it productive to see human beings in their contexts as engaged in projects or activities. He called attention to the consequent interplay between understanding and existence as people go about their lives and engage with others in their cultural milieu, pointing out that we both change our world, and are changed by it.

If, then, it is the doing that shapes a person's understanding and world view, then it was clear to the research team that the community contractors needed to be as engaged as possible in the University world of research protocols (such as the highly detailed human ethics proposals required for each of the multiple methods to be used in the study). Likewise, the University people needed to find mechanisms for their own engagement in the varied and rich worlds of community experience.

Gonçalves' focus on understanding the self as project or activity necessarily goes beyond the individual alone and into a consideration of the individual in their community, within which context their activities are undertaken. As such this represented a bringing together of both personal and social, a perspective that the researchers considered helpful especially in interactions with Māoridom as the researchers, who could be generalised as members of Pakeha individualistic society, sought to enter the more collectivist Māori world of our Te Puna partners.

At a meeting with Te Puna Matauranga o Whanganui on 23 June 2004, discussion was centring around how to capture insights from all research partners that honoured and reflected their own worldview but which would still meet the contracted requirements of milestones and outputs as agreed with FRST.

The Whanganui river is always to the forefront of people's awareness locally, so it is difficult for any human enterprise in the vicinity to ignore its predominance, central as it is to people's experience. Frank was groping for words: it's not like we (the University) are the senior partner, and you (Te Puna) are the junior one. Each of has to learn from the other. We've both got things to give and get. But we don't want this research to be like two rivers running alongside each other and never connecting. Somehow we need to see how each can share with the other.

Discussion continued along these lines and the metaphor started to take shape. We agreed that for the sake of integrity the rivers of research practice need to have their own existence, but somehow each needed to absorb elements from the other. We envisioned first, two rivers, Māori and Pakeha, close to each other, separate for most of the time, 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. Yet the separate existence of each would proceed long enough to confirm its own identity, and permit it to relocate itself in its landscape to the point that it was time once more to share in the experience of the other.

If the first stage in the development of the metaphor was this attempt of ours to picture shared but separate Māori and Pakeha research practice, stage two was to see how well the metaphor might apply to the relationship between the University and the community

subcontractors, each of which had its own culture, tradition, and modus operandi. This would assist collaboration of the University with its other research partners to be understood in a similar way, and the relationship of all partners with the others involved in the research could likewise be described. Third, the two rivers image seemed also to capture something essential in the relationship between the University and the community generally, conveying the notion that each would be informed in different ways by the other.

The purpose of this paper, written at a very early point in our research, is to signal a direction for the study, and to reveal the kind of thinking that went into its planning. The writing of this paper has also created an opportunity for us to reflect on our assumptions and processes, and at this stage we probably have more questions than answers as to what truly constitutes exemplary practice. However, genuinely community-based research programmes, such as this major longitudinal one initiated by the Wanganui District Library, funded by FRST, and where the primary contractor is a university department, are sufficiently uncommon in New Zealand to lack well-accepted models of research practice. As such our experience may be of some value for libraries and other institutions with an interest in fostering research in areas of importance to them.

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