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Towards building a community of common purpose in a research programme exploring the Literacy and Employment nexus

The study described in this paper was instigated by a New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FRST) grant for a 3.5 year longitudinal study of adult literacy and employment in the city of Wanganui and surrounding districts. A particular feature of the study was the extent of support offered for it by a variety of Wanganui community organisations. Therefore this community-based study offered an opportunity to build a collaborative research programme, informed both by University research skills and local knowledge and perspectives. However, a key issue facing the research participants, both University- and community-based, was how to capture the best of both worlds.

The Wanganui District Library instigated the research with Massey, and was both our main research partner and a subcontractor. Other community groups were both research partners and subcontractors: Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui); The Whanganui Community Foundation (both a funding body and an entity with some research capability); and Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui, a Māori (indigenous people's) iwi- (tribally)-based educational development foundation.

Other community stakeholders included the Wanganui District Council; the NZ Police; Work and Income NZ (who administer social benefits such as the national unemployment benefit); Enterprise Wanganui (the local Chamber of Commerce); the Ministry of Justice (responsible for prisons); and another tertiary education provider, UCOL. Each of these organisations had its own particular interest in issues surrounding literacy and employment, and diverse points of view were evident, reflecting varying ideological positions and historical engagement with questions to do with adult literacy.

Duality in relationships

Clearly there was substantial duality in that this was a joint programme between the University and a series of community organisations. Therefore inherent within this binary framework were some tensions. In particular, the University was contractually obliged to measure and monitor subcontractor performance. Yet simultaneously it had to seek 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. Because all parties were new to the challenge of researching literacy and employment in Wanganui in a collaborative fashion, we noted the relevance of Gray's (1989) comment that in such a context, one of the biggest challenges is to invent reciprocal means of research development, yet in a context where there is an absence of formal rules to govern how relationships should be formed and maintained.

Priorities in conflict

The University people felt driven by the exacting schedule of FRST milestones and outputs that they had to achieve on limited resources (especially time and personnel). Yet the community partners had goals of community development as central to their involvement. For reasons of their contractual obligations plus already busy lives attending to their other duties, the University people needed to privilege research practice and outputs. On the other hand, the community partners tended to be absorbed by the ways in which they defined community development. This was reflected by differing emphases in aims and interests.

For example, the Wanganui District Library saw itself as supporting the community's economic and social wellbeing, plus it aimed to identify a new role for public libraries in the interagency collaboration matrix within Wanganui and Districts. Literacy Aotearoa defined itself as an organisation based on the New Zealand Treaty of Waitangi (1840), a Treaty signed by the British Government of the time and many New Zealand Māori iwi (tribes). Literacy Aotearoa is strongly committed to fostering acceptance that adult literacy is a basic human right to be provided at no direct cost to the student.

The Whanganui Community Foundation had such aims as the building of civil society, fostering community participation, and working for social inclusion, especially for the most marginalised of Wanganui citizens.

Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui was an iwi (tribally-based) organisation with the goal of improving outcomes for the indigenous Māori people, particularly in education, though also in health and employment. Its goals relevant to education aspirations were to improve access for tribal members to tribal knowledge and skills, to facilitate education options for Māori people, and to advance Māori educational achievement and retention rates within formal education. This demonstrates the importance for Te Puna of strengthening Māori literacy in Te Reo Māori (the indigenous language) and thus, in their view, broadening the scope of the research programme from literacy in English alone, to literacy both in English and in Te Reo.

There were also differing objectives in respect of University and community goals. The FRST research objectives had been agreed as follows:

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.

After substantial discussion of these, community groups came together to construct their own objectives, which they eventually designated as:

1. To achieve positive, practical outcomes for Wanganui, with a well-researched plan of action for 2005-2015, and to address identified issues relating to literacy
2. To 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. To develop collaboration between agencies within the Wanganui region; strengthen the community and social infrastructure for future work and projects
4. To build research capacity within Wanganui.

It should be noted that while the FRST objectives were research-oriented and general in their orientation, the community goals were more practical and geographically limited. FRST expectations were that research findings from Wanganui should find fuller application on a New Zealand-wide basis. Beyond this, it was also important to FRST that close attention should be paid to best practice internationally, so that the research programme could learn from exemplary work overseas, and so that it could be shown that this research was making a contribution on the world stage.

While the community research partners were not opposed to an international orientation, nor even indifferent to it, their highest priority was clearly to achieve meaningful goals locally. Differing perceptions of this nature illustrated the varying perspectives intrinsic within the research team and indicated the need for all concerned to be able to take diverse needs into account.

In respect of other community-based research, Bouwen and Taillieu (2004, p. 137) have noted that “the technical complexity and social embeddedness” of issues (in the current research surrounding the literacy and employment nexus) require national and local authorities, private business, scientific experts, groups of users and social interest groups and non-governmental organisations to collaborate. The goal in projects such as the current research is “an interdependent involvement of stakeholders, the development of a shared problem definition, coordination of different actions on all levels and orientation towards a shared common script and action strategy” (p. 137).

The researchers were aware that relevant fields from which learning may come will include human communication, and social and organisational psychology. On the basis of these disciplines it might then be possible to build on theories of inter-organisational collaboration and social and organisational development for further progress. We understood that all relevant stakeholders would need to engage in joint practices, working together to acknowledge and develop viable interdependencies with one another.

One significant strength of the research was its longitudinal character, reducing prospects of faulty, one-shot studies that could not capture complex interdependent relationships among issues within the community. A longitudinal study offered the possibilities of “small wins” that would build mutual confidence among the research team and the experience of successfully working together.

By means of understanding those interdependencies we considered that participants could build 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 would find ways to collectively construct a social learning process in an emerging community of practice.

Post-colonial discourse and literacy/ literacies research

Perspectives offered by post-colonial scholars were seen as potentially helpful within this research. For example, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin say:

> Language is a fundamental site of struggle for postcolonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre - whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a 'standard' against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities', or by planting the language of empire in a new place - remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted …. (p. 283).

Implied from this perspective, if the current research equates 'literacy' with 'literacy in English', it takes into account only the English-language version of reality, which is necessarily different from other possible versions, such as Te Reo Māori. Therefore researchers within the programme were starting to come to the viewpoint that the language they employed needed to be integrated within that framework. This would mean, for example, that researchers should not say 'literacy' if they meant 'literacy in English,' or not say 'low literacy' if they mean 'low English literacy'. The goal of this kind of precision would be to show awareness of the variety of points of view inherent among stakeholders and research participants.

Implications arising from this perspective need to be teased out by researchers in this study, perhaps not least by Māori researchers. Yet contributing to the rich texture of this subject are observations such as by Rutherford (2000). In the context of the Biak people of Irian Jaya, he has noted ways in which, although the Biak have apparently valorised foreign texts and terminology, nevertheless they have simultaneously created a boundary between local and foreign. In this way they make use of foreign concepts and wording to derive from them authority and power, but also keep such structures of meaning at a distance as a means of preserving their own cognitive-linguistic autonomy. Studies such as this draw attention to the possibility of agency within peoples exposed to apparently overwhelming cultural impact. They may also deepen understanding of the subtle social and linguistic uses to which literacy in English or any other colonial language may be put.

Ambivalent attitudes to research have been expressed by commentators on colonisation and its aftermath, for example:

> 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 (Smith, 1999, p. 173).

Similar ambivalence may have been felt by other community research partners as well, none of which had any substantial experience with major research programmes. The researchers knew that they had to ensure good access to data by all parties involved in the programme. In recent times it has been an emerging responsibility for the University to build community researchers' capability to analyse and interpret research data, and to find ways in which research participants' perspectives were to be taken into account in the presentation of findings, in line with observations of the importance of this such as those of Brulin (2001). The website dedicated to this research programme http://literacy.massey.ac.nz was considered to have a role in this. Yet we knew it was not realistic to expect full agreement on the "meaning" of findings, given the differing perspectives involved.

Confidentiality, transparency and trust

Tensions existed between confidentiality and transparency in the research process. The protocols of research confidentiality, such as mediated by ethics committees, of course 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 was evident, but relationship-building had to be central.

Nevertheless, serving to undermine relationship-building was the contrast between the necessarily focused approach of the University researchers (e.g., on account of FRST timelines and output pressures), representing an orientation towards task (University staff focus on achievement), in comparison to maintenance (the community awareness of the importance of building and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships prior to action).

Dependence and difference

Given our mutual dependence, means had to be found to work together successfully. The challenge for the team was to build on, not play down, the differences of needs, goals and experience, yet still to succeed within a highly structured research programme with precise timelines and outputs. This suggested that commonalities of seeing and action were needed.

The need to determine exemplary practice in research collaboration

In discussions it was notable that one partner liked and tended to use the expression "co-determined research," yet our collective problem was to determine whether this was possible in the short term when most community partners lack practical research experience. We did note that community partners were very sensitive to any use of language that implies that the University people alone were "the researchers" as if the community people were not. University people were surprised by this initially, as they had not previously suspected that such use of language or implications thereof would be interpreted as an attempt to assert hegemony over the terminology.

Implications for postgraduate thesis students in the research programme

FRST requirements in relation to building research capacity mean that the programme is expected to initiate and support a number of postgraduate thesis projects. The aim of the University team is to recruit some students from the community who might not otherwise have the opportunity to study in this way. Powers (2000) has commented on how postgraduate thesis students in a research programme such as this might successfully explore the theory-practice nexus. In this context, developmental stages for postgraduate students whom we are engaging in this programme are currently considered to include the following as a minimum, though we expect this framework to evolve as thesis students progressively enter the research:

1. Students first recognise basic linkages between context and theory
2. They apply appropriate theoretical concepts, interpretive frameworks and analytical tools to real world problems
3. They are encouraged to offer explanations that extend their own thinking
4. They undertake the gathering of data by which means they can test those explanations. This begins the process of providing the tools for a culture of inquiry and evidence.
5. By all these means students demonstrate how they can use theory for greater effectiveness and improvement of literacy and employment outcomes.

Community of practice

The concept of community of practice as it has been emerging in recent years includes the aim of converting individual knowledge into organisational or collective knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are seen as enabling people to share in combined activities, in this way collectively creating shared ways of understanding the problems and issues they face, and building a sense of shared identity. It can be seen that the potential for communities of practice will apply in many different contexts. One example is its use in school settings 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 learning approaches. Also included may be shared language norms that signal membership of this community of practice. Bouwen and Taillieu (2004) point out the need for continuous negotiation, so that:

> a wide variety of stakeholders can learn the strategies towards social inclusion, integrating different communities of practices with different mental frames, different means and desired outcomes, and accommodating these differences in a sustainable project. Learning for interdependence among the parties is therefore a central aim of multi-party collaboration (p. 148).

A sociocultural view of learning proposes that learning involves becoming acculturated into a community of practice. 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. We understood that this required both University and community people to try to access then use the others' terminology.

The term "community of common purpose" has been proposed by Kilpatrick and Falk at the University of Tasmania (e.g., Kilpatrick & Falk, 1999), and for the purposes of the present research this expression appears to be more inclusive than community of practice. Further, community of common purpose appears useful in how it appears to embrace communities of interest that are not necessarily geographically adjacent, such as in instances where people are not able to interact on a frequent basis. In the context of the present study, the university and community researchers were located in different cities. Therefore with lesser than desirable face to face interaction, they found it challenging to build both conscious and unconscious familiarity with the others' frames of reference and language in use. As such, this impeded their attempts to create strong community of practice. For this reason the term community of common purpose appears usefully broader and thus potentially better suited to our research if *purpose* is seen as what is likely to drive and shape *practice*.

However, while "community of common purpose" captures the idea of shared goals in this programme, it has a unitary flavour to it and so does not really include the binary nature of those interests, which we have represented here as research timelines vs local goals. Therefore we understood that what was needed was a broader concept, perhaps such as community of common research purpose, or community of inquiry (also known as culture of inquiry). Also potentially implied here is action research, which within a pragmatist epistemology has sometimes been based on a culture of inquiry based on collaborative norms and reciprocity of theory and practice (Hoshmand & O'Byrne, 1996).

The Literacy and Employment programme is still new and has not yet taken full shape. However, in this paper, we have explored some of the dynamics that accompany University-community collaboration in research in the hope that it may be of potential value to other researchers.

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