

River, canoe: a metaphor

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Dr. Pauline B. Guerin,

Senior Research Fellow, Migration Research Group & Psychology Department, University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand,

Email: paulineg@waikato.ac.nz

Phone: (64-7) 856-7955 Fax: (64-7) 856-2158

*RIVER, CANOE: A METAPHOR TO INFORM COMMUNITY-BASED
RESEARCH INTO ADULT LITERACY*

Frank Sligo
Massey University

Introduction

This paper describes part of an on-going journey shared by researchers from Massey University and new researchers from the community as we came together in a longitudinal, multi-faceted study of adult literacy in Wanganui and Districts. Funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (FRST), the goal of the research programme was to investigate a series of issues surrounding adult literacy and employment in Wanganui and Districts, led by the University's Department of Communication and Journalism.

At the heart of this research programme was its exceptionally strong community links. Because in the first instance it was to be grounded wholly within Wanganui and Districts, it needed to embody collaborative research protocols, combining University researchers' skills with local people's deep contextual understanding.

We explore particular challenges associated with the use of language in the study with the aim of revealing some of the reasoning and metaphor use that occurred especially in its early stages. The paper recounts how a collective attempt to name collaborate research had unforeseen effects and failed to meet participants' needs. The major beneficial outcome was the

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insights research partners obtained into their own assumptions and research processes.

Community representation

The main community membership comprised four major stakeholder organisations (Wanganui District Library, Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), Whanganui Community Foundation, and Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui). Each was a formally designated subcontractor in the research, so contracts were negotiated separately to specify particular duties, timelines, and milestones. In each instance, therefore, the power relationship was imbalanced, with the University as contractual paymaster having a greater capability of specifying process and outcome.

Notwithstanding this, however, each organisation had an integral role in working with the Massey team to shape research design and direction. This kind of input was necessary in order to capture their experience within the Wanganui community in such a way as to ensure that the research was appropriate to the setting and needs. Yet all parties involved knew that insights such as those potentially available from the community partners could not be mandated in any contractual form, but had to emerge organically as it were, through the development of close working relationships, and the building of mutual trust and respect. In this respect the power relationship was much more balanced, the critical contribution coming from the community partners, on the grounds of their local knowledge of and commitment to local issues of adult literacy.

Roles and power balance

This duality of roles and power balance created an inherent contradiction within the programme. It was generally understood that it had the potential to fragment the research team unless we developed the skills to manage this ambiguity. It may have been considerations such as these that led the chairperson of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee to describe

this research in a public seminar as, “the most complex research programme at Massey University” (Rumball, personal communication, 13 October 2004). We have been describing “the community” as though it were a sole entity, and the local researchers would often refer to themselves as representing Wanganui. But Smith (1999) has made the point that “Defining community research is as complex as defining community” (p. 126). Some issues in defining community became clear to the research team when we were discussing within which geographical locus the research should be confined. We had to take into account differing assumptions about this. Our funding body, FRST, initially sought a national rather than local orientation, presumably on the grounds of maximising value from its investment. We successfully argued against this, from the point of view that if in-depth results were to occur, the research needed to be grounded in a given context and from the learnings in that setting, some generalisation to a wider context might be possible under specified conditions.

Then from our Māori partners’ perspective, “Wanganui and Districts” evoked the traditional rohe of the participating iwi, which were strongly associated with the Whanganui River and reached as far as Taumaranui.

Even once we had determined that for the time being we would work within the local District Council’s area plan, still the community could not be imagined as a unity in itself, as this would be to overlook important differences within it. As one example, Māori-Pākehā disputes in Wanganui have long been the subject of media attention. Yet as well as bringing together Māori and Pākehā in a common research endeavour, this programme also set out to build on the varying interests and motives of the community groups named above, among others. The hope was that by acknowledging diversity and looking for the unique contributions that might emerge, we might be able to create a multi-faceted study that acknowledged and represented key local perspectives.

Stakeholder perceptions

Differing emphases in aims and interests can be represented as follows. The Wanganui District Library saw itself as supporting the community's economic and social wellbeing via this project, however, in addition believed that not least through this research it might be able to identify a new role for public libraries in the inter-agency collaboration matrix. Several Wanganui governmental agencies, national and local, stated at various points to the University researchers their pride in the community's ability to work together, and their aversion to existing in "silo-like" isolation from one another. Despite this, formal mechanisms were still to be worked out whereby new social initiatives of mutual interest could be identified, planned and led. Therefore the Library had seen the potential whereby it could take an initiating role in further strengthening collaboration among governmental agencies within programmes of common interest.

Literacy Aotearoa states its mission as "to develop accessible quality literacy services that ensure the people of Aotearoa are critically literate" (Background Information, 2004) and states it is "a Treaty-based organisation" which "upholds the belief that literacy as a basic human right should be provided at no direct cost to the student" (Literacy Aotearoa, 2004). The references to being critically literate, the Treaty, and literacy as a basic human right signal Literacy Aotearoa's orientation towards social justice. The Whanganui Community Foundation describes itself as "involved in grant making, networking and professional development for the community sector" and as also "developing a community leadership role around facilitating informed community discussion around appropriate community issues" (Whanganui Community Foundation, 2004) and so is identified as interested in building civil society and community participation with the aim of fostering social inclusion in Wanganui.

Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui - Whanganui Iwi Education Authority was created to work towards the education aspirations of Whanganui Iwi. Its

board represents Ngati Rangī, Hinengakau, Tamaupoko, Tamahaki and Tupoho, and its goals are to:

- Increase Māori involvement in education at all levels
- Increase the number and the proficiency of Māori language speakers
- Strengthen whanau and hapu leadership on and beyond the marae
- Improve the quality of delivery to Māori at all levels of education
- Offer tribal education opportunities at all levels (Literacy & Employment - the Team, 2004).

Together these goals delineate a clear set of intentions to better achieve the aspirations of local iwi in respect of practical and well-specified educational outcomes.

Quality of research

To promote effective research practice and to foster quality relationship-building locally, the University researchers sought ways to share research data within the community with the goal of facilitating community members' own analysis and interpretation. This was in line with Said's (1983, p.7) discussion of "a politics of interpretation", exploring issues of who possesses the power to create the language in use, set parameters for enquiry, determine whose words will be privileged, and make decisions on whose needs will be met by the research.

While in general terms New Zealand's Māori-Pākehā relations are better-regarded than in some other former British colonies, Wanganui has had its share of conflict, often emanating from unresolved questions about appropriate use of land and the river's resources. To the present day, Māori social outcomes in areas such as health, employment and education, have not met iwi and hapu aspirations, as signalled in the Te Puna goals identified earlier.

All involved agreed that this study, embedded as it is in the sensitive realm of low adult literacy, had to demonstrate excellent social research that

would possess integrity in the eyes both of local and academic people. The researchers were conscious of descriptions of New Zealand as an emerging postcolonial society (Novitz, 1989) so in this context, given the sensitive nature of adult literacy and its concomitants, we needed truly collaborative research in order to direct and sustain our purpose.

Metaphors of reality

The researchers were aware of phenomenological assessments along the lines of Jaynes' (1990, p.61) comment that we cannot see "anything in its entirety" given that a full apprehension of one's own life experience in the world is not accessible in its entirety to any person. What we think we know is not, therefore, "what is" but is rather a stand-in or metaphor of reality. In addition, our own aggregation of metaphors, evoked by our own remembered realities, are unique to ourselves and so are distinct from anyone else's.

Ways such as this of comprehending the function of metaphor contrast with earlier concepts of metaphor that essentially are a form of substitution - literally, this is when a word or phrase designating something is employed to provide make an implicit comparison to something else (e.g., Black 1962). Here one literal entity is employed for another, where for example, "the pen is mightier than the sword" expresses the view that communication is more effective than force.

Jaynes' (1990) phenomenological perspective on metaphor goes beyond the word as such, and alerts us to the manner in which metaphor influences human consciousness. Here awareness of lived experience is understood as a metaphor of that experience, described by Morgan (1996) as metaphorisation or the development of meanings formed within a socially constituted framework.

The individual within community

Awareness of the social constitution of meaning directs attention to the place of the collective in shaping individual understanding and helps to shape a realisation that research participants' views of adult literacy were probably not peculiar to themselves. Rather, such views tend to emerge from what in most cases would probably be a mainly tacit agreement formed by people within their own groups and subcultures on the meaning of terms and ideas pertaining to adult literacy, as modified by the exigencies and conditions particular to Wanganui and districts.

Depending on their nature, subgroups in their turn may generally be open to a greater or lesser extent to influences beyond the local, possibly national or international. Depending on the significance or centrality of terms used, that is, their connectedness to values and constructs that are important to the individual and their reference groups, the language in use within the subgroup will be reinforced to a greater or lesser extent. Repetition of shared words, verbal imagery and metaphor also reinforces collective understanding of the meaning of words. This results in an embedding of assumptions about language use, or, as expressed by Mignot (2004), views become "culturally sedimented over time" (p. 455).

Gonçalves (1995) has noted the importance of activity, that is, assessing people within their life worlds as they pursue activities or projects, rather than seeing them just as somehow static entities within a given context. This perspective was helpful within the current research, given the centrality of shared and overlapping contractor and subcontractor activities within it. Gonçalves (1995) explored the incessant connectivity of knowing and doing; both changing our contexts and being changed by it, as we interact with others.

This focus on doing or activity reinforced for the research team the desirability of engaging the community contractors in the research practice as potentially a more successful means of helping them to enter the University

researchers' world of research planning and protocols, rather than just assuming that use of words will explain. By the same token, the interaction inherent in shared research behaviours implied that the University researchers could start to make a transition into comprehending perspectives held by community people.

Gonçalves' (1995) viewpoint was also helpful in its location of the individual within community, rather than focusing on individual alone. This linkage of personal and social seemed especially appropriate in terms of the Māori dimension to the study. Relevant here was that the University researchers could be generalised as members of individualistic Pākehā society, who were undertaking to recognise the more collectivist Māori world of the Te Puna partners and subcontractors.

Community and University researchers shared the view that because of the complexity of our shared process, the desirability of an appropriately reflexive approach to our programme, and the need to capture local forms of knowing, some shared means of understanding our journey was needed. Where we differed was on how this understanding should be formed, and the division between the University and the community people that would emerge on this issue seemed very characteristic of our differing assumptions, as will be explained later in this paper.

A governing metaphor?

Given the variety of human considerations informing the research, the thinking of the research team turned to the possibility of a predominant governing metaphor to shape the early development of the study. The University researchers had had substantial research experience within both community and organisational contexts, so were quite familiar with many of the issues of doing research in a variety of situations, and had some acquaintance with problems of so-called research colonisation already mentioned.

Less typical of our previous experience, though, were the very close linkages in the current study required between University and community groups, their common reliance on one another in planning the research, and the centrality of the community in data-gathering. We knew that the variety of experience within the research team fostered possibilities of accessing others' perceptions and the creation of better personal and professional insights. Yet our challenge was to utilise that diversity of experience within a research programme working within the constraints of precise milestones and outputs.

In light of diverse perspectives among community partners and between the University and the community, our first perceived need was for a metaphor that would help to guide collective reflection on the planning and conduct of the research, then shape action to achieve the research goals. Our instinct was to seek a metaphor that would provide a central focus that all concerned could relate to. Essentially, its role would be to help those involved to acknowledge the ambiguities inherent in our situation, yet still serve to move us forward in providing a means of resolution to the collective challenges facing the community and University research team.

The river

Therefore our felt need was for a metaphor grounded in local reality. Perhaps inevitably, then, our focus came to be on the river. The Whanganui is New Zealand's longest navigable river. Its source is on one of the country's highest volcanoes, Mt Tongariro, from which it wends its way via the Tongariro and Whanganui National Parks to its outlet in the Tasman Sea at the city of Wanganui. This river is at the heart of the history and lived experience of the human settlements located alongside its banks. Its physical presence is massive and imposing, and for perhaps 1000 years this great river has had primary economic importance as a food source and as a means of facilitating trade among the Māori iwi and hapu who have lived there.

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Likewise for Pākehā, from the 1840s with the arrival of the first missionaries until the mid 20th century, the river served as a key transport route and economic base. Today, though its economic significance has diminished, the river still delineates the essence of the region and occupies a central place in the lives of those living near it: *Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au* - I am the river, the river is me.

The challenges of complexity

However, we were aware of the dangers of being too simplistic in our search for a unifying metaphor or construct. Smith (1999) has stated:

‘the community’ is regarded as being a rather different space, in a research sense, to ‘the field’. ‘Community’ conveys a much more intimate, human and self-defined space, whereas ‘field’ assumes a space ‘out there’ where people may or may not be present. What community research relies upon and validates is that the community itself makes its own definitions (pp. 126-127).

One of our collective problems, then, was to marry the “own definitions” from the community with the set of specified outputs and milestones to which we had contracted with FRST. An early task was to seek a strong mandate from key and respected liaison persons in the community who possessed mana sufficient to embed the study well into the community and to generate support for it. A key insight was provided by Dr Brendon Puketapu of Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui in early discussions with one of the University researchers, who had expressed a pessimistic view that appropriate funding for the research would not be found. To this Brendon replied, if the cause is right, the money will come. As well as being literally correct, this observation helped to maintain a focus on the integrity of the research that was needed, and on the outcomes that could result for the community from excellent research, if it could be done.

Smith (1999) sounds a further warning about research within Māoridom that is related to low achievement. Although the primary focus of the research was on low attainment of literacy in English within the community gener-

ally, rather than among Māori alone, her caveat was nevertheless relevant as we set about implementing this study:

The social settings of the non-indigenous world into which Māori people were compelled to move - such as the school, the health system, the welfare system, the justice system - have at the same time provided researchers with a point of entry into Māori society. Essentially, this has been crisis research, directed at explaining the causes of Māori failure and supposedly solving Māori problems (p. 174).

She goes on to say that "... the history that underpins the relationship between indigenous Māori and non-indigenous Pākehā, has made it extremely difficult for Māori forms of knowledge or learning to be accepted as legitimate" (pp. 174-175).

With these considerations in mind, the University and community researchers started to explore ways of drawing together a community-based perspective that was still compatible with the contracted FRST milestones and outputs.

Ngā awa e rua - Two rivers

As already noted, given the predominance of the Whanganui River in the region, and its particular significance for local iwi, imagery associated with Te Awa started to come to the fore. In a meeting with members of Te Puna, discussions were centring on partnership, with those present agreeing that both the University and Te Puna had to learn from the other. Clearly each had knowledge to give and get. The phrase was used, "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."

People warmed to this simile, then noted its relevance to other relationships in the research - first to the University and the community as a whole, then to each of the subcontractor-partners with one another. It was agreed that the rivers of research practice had to embody their own values, yet while still being open to knowledge from elsewhere. Mention was made of two rivers, Māori and Pākehā, which, though mainly separate, at times

would come into a shared confluence, then would necessarily separate for a period. Separation would permit each to keep its uniqueness, but for the sake of collaboration neither would seek to disconnect for too long. The sensemaking applied to this was that while separate, each could be grounded in its own setting until such time as its own identity had once again been confirmed and re-charged, permitting it to become open again to the influence of the other.

Therefore our initial attempt to build the metaphor had the goal of collectively producing a strong visual image of collaborative but separate Māori and Pākehā research practice. The intended second phase was to explore the possibilities of the metaphor to inform the relationship between the University and each of its other community subcontractors/ partners. Given that each partner had its own culture, tradition, and shared language, the hope was that a shared metaphor might serve as an initial step as we sought to develop our collaborative activity. 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 first assumption of the University people was that some kind of systematic datagathering would be needed to record participants' varying viewpoints, so in the following week the author wrote the first version of the following:

Ngā Awa E Rua - Two Rivers Questionnaire

One image that has been used to describe the literacy and employment research is “two rivers.” Sometimes they flow side by side but sometimes they are intertwined, then separate again.

Thinking about your own organisation (_____) and the
Massey University researchers whom you have met so far
(or _____) (another stakeholder)

1. What do you think Massey may be able to learn from you in this research?
2. Originally, what did you expect from this research programme?
3. Originally, what did you think the research relationship might have been for you?
4. Originally, what did you see your role might be?
5. What do you think you and your organisation may potentially get from its research relationship with the Massey research team?
6. Do you think that this project is “making space” for your own knowledge, expectations, and ways of doing things?
7. If not, are there other ways of doing things?
8. Are there any risks in this relationship for you?
9. How much connection and how much separation are needed to make this research relationship work well, do you think?
10. What benefits do you see other community stakeholders or participants in this research potentially deriving from this research relationship?
11. Are there risks for these stakeholders or participants other than the ones you have identified already?

These eleven questions signalled areas of interest that seemed relevant to the issues discussed earlier, and a sheet displaying them was given to community partners at a meeting in Wanganui in June. No especial comment was made by the partners at this meeting, but none was expected either, as the questions were shown just as a means of indicating current work rather than anything well-defined or completed. The community people did not articulate any opposition to the possibility of survey work of this kind, but nor was there any overt support.

However on reflection back in the University, the questions seemed wordy and not well-organised, so they were collapsed into the six in version two:

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1. Originally, what did you expect or hope for from this research programme?
2. What do you now think you or other community people or organisations may potentially gain or lose from your research relationship with the Massey team?
3. What do you think the Massey team may be able to learn from you in this research?
4. Do you think that this project is “making space” for your own knowledge, expectations, and ways of doing things?
5. If not, are there other ways of doing things, such as ...?
6. In your view, how much connection and how much separation between you and the Massey team are needed to make this research relationship work well?

At a second subcontractors' meeting on 4 August, one partner raised the issue of different ways of working evident between University and community. She intimated that she was intrigued by the cultural difference in working styles, but the time available did not permit those present to explore any mechanisms for addressing it.

This was an opportunity for the author to table the revised version above and suggest that people have a look at it. Doing so sparked discussion in which the community people agreed that they would not have sought differing views in this way. Instead, they stated, the normal approach for them would be to call a meeting and talk about the issues with the intention of defining them properly and working towards a solution.

By this stage it was becoming apparent that the data-gathering assumptions of the University people contravened the consensual preferences of the community people, and that for the time being, at least, we could forget the possibility of using this questionnaire.

So two issues had emerged as a result of our collective thought about the most effective ways of working together. The first was the appropriateness of this particular metaphor, two rivers, Ngā awa e rua, and whether it could be ratified by all involved. Second was the question of differing viewpoints about how we should address the variations in our preferred working styles. There was also some intimation that people had in their minds a third question, for the time being implicit rather than spoken, about the appropriateness of using the Māori terminology, Ngā awa e rua, given that the expression had been invented by Pākehā not from the area, thus not being a true local definition.

Challenge to Ngā awa e rua

Nevertheless, the possibility of using this metaphor was discussed at one meeting then referred to again at others. At least it appeared to be serving to some extent as a means by which we could draw attention to differences in working style and leverage off it a little as a means of building further commonality of perspective.

The main objection to it that began to emerge, however, was that by some it was now being taken as a bizarre contradiction of the reality of “the river,” the Whanganui. That is, the predominance of Te Awa in the minds of the locals appeared to foster a rebuke to the imported notion of two rivers. We started to realise that the risk was that the two rivers model (especially given that it had been initiated in the first instance by outsiders, the University team) could be seen as an attempt to impose a nonsensical perspective on the local reality.

At this point all further mention of two rivers was quickly abandoned as probably counterproductive, if not potentially offensive to some. However this did not obviate the need to accurately capture the dimensions of the differing preferred means of working on this programme.

One of the community people proposed Ngā waka e rua, two canoes, encapsulating the sense that travelling on the same route might be done in different ways and might involve differing perspectives of the landscape. While this view had its merits, to some this did not quite embody the richness of the abandoned metaphor, two rivers, that sometimes merged and sometimes ran separately, and so its power to engage the imagination seemed relatively limited.

However at the date of writing, and perhaps more importantly, we are questioning whether we should initiate a metaphor that makes any use of Māori language. If such is needed or desirable, possibly it should be as a result of Māori research practitioners or participants taking the initiative. Therefore the appropriate way forward seems to be to keep discussing the place and purpose of possible metaphors. Team members are now reflecting on their assumptions and at this point are still unsure whether a strong metaphor is desirable.

This paper has taken particular account of the Pākehā and Māori dimensions of collaboration in this research programme, but it could just have readily have examined the inter-relationships between any two of the partners involved. In any of these instances interesting stories could be told about parties seeking and to a greater or lesser extent finding ways of sharing their research direction.

Conclusion

In this paper, prepared early in the research, we have aimed to reveal some of the challenging processes in the study, and to explore the thinking inherent in its planning and early stages. It is not a success story of some putative achievement but instead is essentially a story of a failure, recounting how attempts to name a collaborative activity and to record its unfolding seemed, with the benefit of hindsight, to be misguided and were rejected by those participating. Still, its writing has enabled us to meditate on our assumptions and processes, and at this stage we probably have more ques-

tions than answers as to what truly constitutes exemplary community research practice.

Community-based research programmes, such as this complex, longitudinal one instigated from within the community, where the primary contractor is a University department, and where there is a high level of interaction among community partners and the University, are still uncommon in New Zealand. This means that well-understood relevant research protocols are still emergent. We hope that these experiences may have some value for University or regional entities who seek to instigate meaningful research of local significance.

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Glossary of Māori terms

hapu	<i>clan</i>
iwi	<i>tribe</i>
marae	<i>meeting house</i>
pākehā	<i>New Zealander of European descent</i>
rohe	<i>domain of a tribe</i>
whānau	<i>family</i>

**SAMPLING COMMUNITY DISCOURSES AS A METHOD
FOR ASSESSING “PUBLIC OPINION”**

Bernard Guerin
University of Waikato

Abstract

In working with the topics of racial discrimination and household energy reductions it is clear that just measuring attitudes is no longer sufficient. We need a fuller social context to understand what is said about these topics, as the same words can be used for many reasons. I am working with four new methods for “sampling community discourses” on topics such as racial prejudice, to replace or supplement the measurement of attitudes. The initial analysis is whether the talk functions to get someone to do something directly, to get someone to believe the ‘facts’, or whether the talk functions for the establishment or maintenance of social relationships. Many problems remain, especially the representativeness of the sampling and keeping as much of the context of the talk as possible.

Introduction

We are researching in two areas which have traditionally been measured by “public opinions” or “public attitudes”: racial discrimination, and reducing household energy use. In both cases the traditional focus of research has been to measure attitudes and develop interventions that change people’s attitudes towards these issues. While there are certainly other methods used to study these areas, attitude measurement has been fundamental to the approaches taken (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Sjöberg, 2002; Paraskevopoulos, Korfiatis & Pantis, 2003).