

From Research Intelligence, No. 102, pp. 24-25, 2008.

## Increasing Inclusion in Educational Research: Reflections from New Zealand



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It is good to be able to share some reflections about developments in educational research over the twenty-five years in which I have been involved in research endeavours.

In this brief paper, I want to note the changes that have occurred in how research is carried out, funded, presented and assessed in the time I have been a practitioner-researcher, and the attempts that I have observed to include more diverse perspectives and presentation styles in research. I want to suggest that these changes are indicative of an epistemological transformation in what counts as educational knowledge. The bulk of my reflections are based on practice in New Zealand, but towards the end of the discussion I expand this to consider work done elsewhere.

When I first started working in New Zealand polytechnics in the early 1980s the research conducted was largely positivistic. Educational research was marked mostly by the gathering of institutional data by university academics using their own frameworks to develop theories which were then taught to the practitioners, rather than being developed in conjunction with them. This is obviously a sweeping generalisation, but did represent how things were done in educational research at the time.

I encountered action research in the late 1980s, when it was still considered to be a fringe approach. Bob Dick from Australia commented that in his university, action research was still considered rather suspect at that time. Bob's 'arlist' discussion group was of immense help to me in learning more about this

approach, as has been the work of Jack Whitehead and his colleagues at the University of Bath, and Jean McNiff. My PhD studies, completed in 1999, used a combination of action research and Foucauldian analysis to help with the development of a research culture in the polytechnic. In 2003 I moved on to work in a Māori university, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA), as research manager. This appointment coincided with the first occurrence of New Zealand's Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) process, an attempt to measure, assess and fund research nationwide. The PBRF was based loosely around the U.K. RAE. Along with colleagues at the Wānanga, I was involved in gathering data on research that had occurred in the institution over the past six years, a massive job given that New Zealand researchers had not been pre-warned of the need to gather data to prove research had occurred, when, where and how. All this had to be done retrospectively.

We were greatly assisted in this process by the Tertiary Education Commission's adoption of a very broad definition of research which, for the first time, counted creative and performing arts research as research, not as 'similar to' research processes. At the Wānanga, along with more traditional business and environmental research, there was a huge amount of creative and performing arts research, incorporated in such outputs as carving, flax weaving and composition of songs and plays, many of which were very innovative and contributed to the expansion of knowledge in their areas. However, despite the TEC's attempts to assess this knowledge appropriately by designating a 'Māori Knowledge and Development' (MKD) panel, other aspects of the PBRF led to staff nominating their research to the Performing Arts panel, for example, rather than MKD, in order to attract the most funding possible for their institution. There were several other ways in which Māori research and researchers were disadvantaged in the PBRF assessment process. Notwithstanding glitches of this nature, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, despite having had government funding for research for only three

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years came out sixteenth equal with the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) out of 23 full participants in the process. Wintec had had research funding for the past eleven years, so TWoA's success was no mean feat.

I was appointed to a Sector Reference Group, a small number of researchers from around the country who met to look at feedback from participants and other interested parties after the first round of the PBRF, and to make recommendations to TEC on the next round. To their credit, TEC has seemed very open to these recommendations. A partial round was held in 2006, with the results only recently released. What was obvious to me through this exercise was the contestation that still occurs over 'what counts as research', with some people having difficulty with the notion of a carving as a piece of research. Many years ago I was privileged to be at an action research conference on the marae (Māori meeting house and surrounding area) at Waiariki Polytechnic in Rotorua. A kaumatua (esteemed elder) came in to our group in the evening and spoke for two and a half hours about the history and personalities, the tribal conflicts and colonisation of the area, using only the carvings in the room as his 'notes'. That experience brought strikingly home to me how carvings can be research. The stories of his people – also their philosophies and spiritual beliefs – were all incorporated in the representations in wood that surrounded us. Given the resistance that is still evident from some contributors to the PBRF process about the inclusion of song, dance, carving and weaving as forms of research that can be critically assessed and which can bring research funding, it is to the credit of New Zealand's TEC that the definition of research they adopted permitted this inclusion, even if some of their processes subsequently made its assessment and appropriate funding difficult.

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So far, my reflections have concentrated largely on the New Zealand context. However, for some years I have been involved in discussions through a group that operates out of the University of Bath, in conjunction with Dr. Jack Whitehead, and latterly also with the British Educational Research Association's online practitioner research group. In both those groups it has been encouraging to see similar attempts to include alternative cultural perspectives into 'what counts as research'. Most recently, the discussion has considered the African concept of ubuntu.

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A just-completed thesis, that of Eden Charles from the University of Bath, gained him his doctorate and the following comments from his examiners (posted on the BERA discussion group): “We found the thesis to be an important, discerning and highly original piece of work, containing much publishable material about the new approaches necessary to address and alleviate oppressive practices of all kinds, especially those associated with colonialism and post-colonialism.”

I believe it is a really positive and healthy move in educational research when approaches such as action research, incorporating critique from an African perspective such as Charles has used, are now readily accredited by the academy.

It is also encouraging that research embodied in forms other than the purely written is also being recognised. I have been exploring this issue for some years, receiving early support and suggestions from researchers in Australia and the U.S. who cited thesis outputs including CD-ROMs and performance cafés. Recently, a colleague in New Zealand gained her Masterate using a combination of thesis and DVD to demonstrate her reflective practice in dance. It takes courage and open-mindedness for people accustomed to and trained in 'traditional' research processes to consider and even embrace alternative ways of researching, and of presenting that research. But it will validate forms of research that can convey knowledge not easily encapsulated just within pages of written text and work to overcome those whose knowledge and skills have been, in the past, inappropriately excluded.

#### References

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[Thanks to Jack Whitehead for some formative comments on this paper.](#)