Researching with and for adult and community education practitioners

Marion Bowl, Jennifer Leahy, Liz Tully
University of Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

This paper explores the challenges of undertaking funded research with and for the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. It draws on three recent examples of research projects undertaken for ACE sector organisations to discuss these challenges which include: operationalising collaboration, dealing with conflicting expectations, and ownership and dissemination of findings. We highlight the complexity of collaboration and the importance of trust-building, sustained relationships and transparent action in establishing credibility. We also discuss how far researchers’ responsibilities should extend to ensure that research findings are acted upon.

Adult and Community Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand has witnessed a resurgence of government interest in ACE – a traditionally under-resourced and under-recognised field. Alongside this resurgence has been a desire by government and some ACE sector organisations to fund research to inform sector policy and practice. ACE covers a range of formal and informal education provision and operates in the context of the Treaty of Waitangi, taking account of the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand in which the values and cultures of the indigenous Māori and Pakeha (European settler) populations have equal standing (TEC 2001).

Researching for and with the ACE sector

The ACE Teaching Research Team at the University of Canterbury (UC) was formed in 2006. Its members are experienced adult educators. The team has developed its research profile through undertaking funded research for government and the ACE sector. Our aim has been to generate ‘useful’ knowledge which will enhance the sector’s capacity to meet the needs of learners and their communities, highlighting the value of informal and non-accredited learning.

Our research approach has been informed by a commitment to the values and practice of informal education and experiential learning (Kolb 1984; Jeffs and Smith 1999; Richardson and Wolfe 2001; Brookfield 2005).
Methodologically, we have been influenced by participatory action research (McTaggart 1989; Wadsworth 1998; Cardno 2003) and naturalistic inquiry approaches (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Erlandson et al 1993). The implication for us is that research undertaken for the ACE sector should be practice-based, action-oriented, democratic and flexible in design (Bowl and Tully 2008). However, whilst the literature on participatory research offers general principles to guide research practice, the reality of collaboration is more challenging. We explore some of these challenges in the context of three funded research projects undertaken in recent months.

Three research projects

Project one: ACE regional networks and professional development - government commissioned; government funded

In 2006, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) invited tenders to undertake research into the professional development needs of ACE practitioners. Part of the TEC’s agenda was to encourage TEC-initiated Regional Networks of ACE practitioners to coordinate professional development activities to enhance ACE sector professional development. Another aspect of its agenda was to strengthen involvement of Māori and Pasifika ACE organisations in ACE Networks. It should be noted that the ACE sector in Aotearoa New Zealand is characterised by low funding levels and high numbers of part-time, hourly-paid or voluntary practitioners, undertaking ACE work as a small part of their paid role or out of personal commitment. It is also noteworthy that many in the sector were sceptical of the TEC’s intentions, seeing this professional development initiative as a top-down attempt to impose an unwanted degree of ‘professionalization’ (Tobias 2003) on the sector and/or a way of placing more responsibilities on over-burdened and under-resourced practitioners. The research, whilst driven by government, required the cooperation of practitioners who were wary of the government agenda, concerned about their future funding and uncertain about researchers’ ability to represent their perspectives.

Project two: Evaluating Adult Learners’ Week – NGO commissioned; government funded

In 2008, ACE Aotearoa, the national organisation representing the ACE sector, commissioned research into the impact and effectiveness of Adult Learners’ Week and the extent to which the Week’s focus and activities contributed to the progress of indigenous issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Week is an annual and internationally-sponsored celebration of adult learning, in which Aotearoa New Zealand has participated for ten years.

ACE Aotearoa gained funding from the TEC to commission this research. The UC ACE Teaching and Research team was contracted to undertake it. There were others with an interest in the research, including ACE practitioners involved in organising the Week and government bodies such as the New
Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, and the TEC, which channel funding into supporting local and national activities during the Week.

*Project three: Advocacy for new migrants and refugees - NGO commissioned; NGO funded*

Also in 2008, ESOL Home Tutors, a national NGO, commissioned our team to undertake a small-scale project exploring the organisation’s role in advocating for new migrants and refugees. The project involved a document search and semi-structured interviews with a small number of paid and voluntary workers within the organisation. The aim was to suggest how the organisation might develop a consistent approach to advocacy. The project’s terms of reference, research design and selection of participants for interview were agreed jointly by the research team leader and the organisation’s chief executive. The research was funded from the organisation’s resources and the resulting report, prepared for the chief executive and management board, aimed to identify ways in which the organisation might work towards more clearly defining, profiling and managing its advocacy activities.

**Participation and collaboration: a picture of complexity**

The three projects involved the development of research relationships with the commissioners and funders of the research, but also with ACE practitioners and others, whose perspectives were essential to understanding the research issues.

In the ACE professional development project (project one), the research commissioner, the TEC, appointed a national steering group of experienced ACE practitioners to comment on the progress of the research. The collaboration of local ACE practitioners was also required. These practitioners met in regional ACE Networks created by the TEC. The research team needed to respond to the research commissioner’s desire to identify how local ACE Networks could meet the sector’s professional development needs, whilst gaining the collaboration of locally-based practitioners who had a more sceptical view of the TEC and the notion of professional development. Indeed, the term ‘professional development’ was alien to many working in the sector. There was a sense of grievance that ACE Networks were expected to take on a role for which they did not feel equipped.

Collaboration had to be negotiated against a commitment on our part to represent practitioners’ views. We were assisted by the fact that members of the research team were well-known in the sector and familiar with the issues faced by local ACE practitioners. We adopted data collection methods which offered participants some assurance that their expression of views was protected by the anonymity of the group: data were mainly collected through group interviews and workshop sessions. Where individual interviews were conducted, we negotiated our interpretation of emerging findings with interviewees. In our final report, where we cited case studies of professional
development activity, we invited those who had provided information to specify how it was presented or to write the case studies themselves. Participation was achieved through careful negotiation and adopting approaches which, as far as possible, shared the power in the process.

In the Adult Learners’ Week project (project two) there were fewer difficulties gaining participation of practitioners; some had been involved in commissioning the research on behalf of ACE Aotearoa and they were invited to act as advisors to the project, commenting on our research approach and findings. The participation of adult learners was more problematic. We expected that learners who had won awards in Adult Learners’ Week would be keen to discuss the impact of the Week. This was not the case. Some learners had not understood why they had been given awards or how the Week’s activities were meant to connect with them as learners. This obviously told us something about the public impact of Adult Learners’ Week. However, it was problematic for the data collection as a number of learners we approached were unable to answer the questions we posed about their perspectives on the Week.

Collaboration in the advocacy research project (project three) was more straightforward. The research was commissioned by, and carried out within, the organisation. The researchers worked closely with the organisation’s chief executive to design the project. Participation of volunteers and paid staff was gained through the chief executive who set up interviews with an agreed number of participants. The researchers simply collected and analysed the data, having ensured that all parties were clear about the purposes of the research and the questions to be asked. There was a close, collaborative relationship between the researcher and the research commissioner and uncomplicated access to research participants.

These three projects highlight the complexity of notions of collaboration in research. Wadsworth (1998) suggests that, apart from the researchers, there are typically three ‘parties’ involved in participatory research:

- The research commissioners, who identify the research issue and call for the research
- The researched (or ‘research participants’) from whom information is sought and data collected
- The ‘researched for’ (or ‘stakeholders’) who may be interested in or affected by the research but who may, or may not, be concerned in the research process.

In practice, categorising collaboration is more complex than Wadsworth suggests. First, categories may overlap: in the Adult Learners’ Week project, the research commissioners were also the researched; the researched were also the researched for; some stakeholders (principally learners) were not aware that the research was being carried out or that they were stakeholders. This was also the case for migrants and refugees in the advocacy project.
Within each category, individuals and groups had differing attitudes towards cooperation. Indeed, in the ACE professional development project, some research participants were antithetical to the research.

Whilst in theory the language of collaboration and participation signals: ‘A political commitment, collaborative processes and participatory world view’ (Kindon et al 2007) this cannot be taken for granted. In the projects described here, there were different levels of collaboration between parties to the research, and these varied over time. Drawing on Pretty (1995), we identified the following relationships of collaboration:

- Contractual – where the nature and extent of collaboration is specified in the contract between commissioner and researcher;
- Partnership – where collaborative relationships extend beyond contractual issues, indicating trust and shared purpose;
- Consultative – where views are sought by the researcher on emerging analysis, whilst not necessarily being incorporated into research findings;
- Informative – where responses are sought to research questions, which are analysed by the researcher without reference back to the research participants.

An analysis of each project in terms of relationships with the parties to the research reveals the complexity of collaboration:

**TABLE 1: THE COMPLEXITY OF RESEARCH COLLABORATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATIONSHIPS</th>
<th>PROJECTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.Research commissioners</td>
<td>ACE Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funders</td>
<td>contractual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioning organisation</td>
<td>contractual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Expert’ steering group’</td>
<td>consultative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.The researched (participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>consultative/partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>not researched</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Funders contractual contractual contractual
Commissioning contractual consultative partnership
‘Expert’ steering group consultative consultative none
Practitioners consultative/partnership consultative Informative
Learners not researched informative not
3. The researched for (stakeholders) | researched

| Policy makers | contractual | informative | not addressed |
| Learners | not addressed | informative | implied but not addressed |
| External organisations | informative | not addressed | not addressed |

In research of this nature, collaboration is not just influenced by the will of the researcher, but by the relationships between the parties to the research.

**Working with conflicting expectations**

Equally complex is how researchers work with the expectations of the parties to research. In the advocacy project, expectations were tightly defined from the outset and limited by the small scale nature of the project. The research was concerned with definition and clarification, rather than policy change. The ‘researched for’ – migrants, refugees and external organisations - were not included in the research process and therefore there was no requirement to manage their expectations.

In contrast, in the ACE Professional Development project there were conflicting expectations. The research brief was vaguely expressed: ‘…..to explore a range of approaches that ACE Networks could take to meeting sector and individual professional development needs’. This left room for interpretation. It was clear that the TEC and some ACE sector practitioners had differing expectations. For some practitioners wanted to air grievances about lack of TEC support. The TEC had an agenda around increasing involvement among Māori and Pasifika organisations in ACE regional networks - an item not high on the agenda of many ACE Networks. Aware of these conflicting perspectives, the research team had to ensure that ACE practitioners felt their views were being faithfully recorded, whilst reassuring the TEC that the research brief was being adhered to.

Conflicting expectations in the Adult Learners’ Week project emerged at the reporting stage. First, there were those who wanted the research to be a celebratory history of the Week. Whilst this seemed important, it was not the whole story. Second, different understandings of the aims of Adult Learners’ Week emerged as we interviewed key informants. Some felt it should be a vehicle for promoting social justice through adult education; others felt that it
should be a celebration of learners’ achievements. Some felt that the links between the national aims of the Week and its local organisers should be stronger; others felt that the local organisers should be free to interpret the Week in their own way. A further issue was around the involvement of Māori and Pasifika ACE practitioners and learners: some felt they achieved this. However, Māori practitioners we interviewed felt that more could be done to make the Week meaningful for Māori.

There were different viewpoints about the extent to which Adult Learners’ Week impacted on learners and the general public. In particular, there was disagreement about the value of presenting awards to ‘outstanding learners’. Whilst some learners we interviewed felt encouraged by having their efforts recognised, others were only vaguely aware of the reason for receiving an award. This finding was unlikely to be welcomed by the research commissioners, particularly considering the energy and resources expended in organising presentation events across the country.

Those commissioning research are likely to have expectations of its outcomes. However, in collaborative research participants are also entitled to expect that their concerns will be reflected. In projects where there are multiple perspectives, research findings may be contested. We had an obligation to report what one of our research team called ‘the hard stuff’ (see Fine et al 2000:124). In reflecting views that some would disagree with we were vulnerable to charges of selectivity and bias. Ensuring the validity of our findings was a challenge, particularly when they went against the grain of research commissioners’ expectations. Whilst Hammersley (1990: 57) defines validity as ‘truth’, the reality is more complex; ‘truth’ is not a constant; it does not take into account differences in world view (House 1980). Validity in the research described here was about credibility, rather than ‘truth’.

One way credibility was established was through using multiple methods and data sources, data recycling, member checks, and so on (Erlandson et al 1993). We ‘checked back’ with participants that we had correctly drawn our interpretations from the data. We offered ongoing feedback about emergent findings to ensure that there were no unwelcome surprises in the final report. In the ACE Professional Development and Adult Learners’ Week projects we reported our initial findings to relevant ACE sector conferences and incorporated feedback from these into our analysis. Publicly reporting tentative findings made differences of view transparent. This prepared the way for findings which might not be accepted by all. It enabled the research team to undertake further data collection to investigate emerging differences of view.

But credibility is not just about research technique. It rests on the relationship between researchers and those with whom they research (House 1980). Credibility entails a sense that researchers understand the field within which
they research; that they respect those with whom they research. The researchers themselves, and not just their research tools, need to be ‘trustworthy’ – demonstrating openness and credibility through sustained commitment to the issues under exploration. This requires not only skilled researchers, but also skilled facilitators and negotiators.

**Sharing findings: who is collaborative research for?**
The issue of ownership in contracted research is pertinent in the current research climate. Whilst there may be contracts covering ownership of research data and outcomes, other issues are at stake when data have been collected through a participatory process. We would argue that participants who ‘give’ their data during the course of a research inquiry, and who verify its analysis, should also have some entitlements over its dissemination.

Problems around dissemination arose in relation to two of the projects. In the advocacy project, collaboration was principally with the organisation’s chief executive. Transcripts were returned for correction to those who had been interviewed, but the draft report was shared only with the chief executive. She controlled the dissemination process and the research team was happy that its findings would be shared throughout the organisation.

However, in the ACE professional development and Adult Learners’ Week projects problems arose in relation to dissemination. The research team wanted to share its findings with those who had collaborated with the research. In both projects, the commissioners chose not to disseminate the full research report beyond the small groups involved in commissioning. We sent copies to all those who had collaborated in the research, in contravention of the strict ‘letter’ of our contracts, and felt justified in doing so. However, as a team committed to producing ‘useful’ research for the ACE sector, our experience suggests that undertaking research aimed at making recommendations for change in policy or practice is problematic when we are contractually blocked from disseminating findings. It raises a question: who owns the outcomes of collaborative research?

In the projects described above, there were three potential audiences for the findings – the funders, the research community and the ACE sector. It is important for contracted researchers to meet their obligations to funders. However, they have little control over how the funder decides to disseminate the findings. There is also an expectation on us, as academics, to publish and be credited for research activities – usually through peer reviewed papers; the extent to which we are able to do this may be limited by contractual agreements over the use of data.

As ACE practitioners, we felt an imperative to serve the ACE sector and honour commitments to research participants. We felt a responsibility to go beyond the usual methods of dissemination, utilising workshops, training
events, meetings and conferences, and more accessible publications such as newsletters and web postings. Research participants, as well as research commissioners have an interest in ensuring that research findings are acted on. There is a dilemma here. Our solution has been to go direct to the ACE sector with our findings; to claim our right to contribute to debates in the sector. This entails ‘engagement’ (Erlandson et al 1993) beyond the period of data collection, analysis and report writing. Researching to produce ‘useful knowledge’ requires our continuing commitment as practitioners – as well as our skills as researchers.

**Conclusion**

Undertaking contract research within a participatory and naturalistic inquiry framework raises challenges about what ‘collaboration’ means in practice and about managing conflicting expectations. A strong collaborative research team, a flexible approach to research design and the deliberate building of relationships of trust through good communication and transparent action help in this process. However, the final challenge for researchers keen to contribute to change through collaborative research is whether they are able to resolve the issue of who collaborative research is for and to establish the extent of their responsibilities for acting on research findings. These are issues on which we continue to reflect, as we navigate the intersections of practitioner participation, contracted research and academia.

**References**


*This document was added to the Education-line database on 24 June 2009*