

Viruses without vaccines, or valuing indigenous research? The tensions of introducing Western research assessment practices into an indigenous university

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Abstract: Over my past twenty-five years of educational practice, I have striven to develop a better understanding of indigenous ways of being and doing (in New Zealand’s case, this involves the values and knowledge of Māori). I have done this by visiting and occasionally staying on marae (Māori gathering-places); by reading relevant literature; by engaging in conversations with knowledgeable scholars and by researching the impact of Western practices on indigenous peoples.

In 2003 I managed a research team for Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, a Māori tertiary institution with branches across the country. Our Tertiary Education Commission had just introduced a variation of the English RAE, called the Performance-Based Research Fund, through which government research funds would henceforth be distributed. In collaboration with Māori colleagues, we chose to enter this process, believing that Māori research would be recognised and funded by our participation.

While this proved to be the case, there were significant examples of values clashes, such as the requirement for people to ‘boast’ of their research achievements in a context where such boasting is anathema; to claim ownership of knowledge where tradition often indicates that knowledge is not the property of individuals; and worst, at one point I found myself accused by my Māori manager of introducing ‘viruses without vaccines’. By this he meant Westernised ideas and practices which appeared to be benevolent but in fact were toxic (the idea derives from white settlers who apparently gave native Americans blankets permeated with a virus, causing thousands to die).

In this paper I will explore tensions of operating cross-culturally, and whether/how we can protect people from unintended toxic consequences of intended benevolent actions.

Introduction:

I have attempted to practise in a ‘virtuous’ way in my work over the past thirty-odd years as a way of living out my values in my practice, particularly recognising my responsibility to others. Veenstra has discussed virtue as a concept. He first provided a definition of virtue, being

...a good quality of character, more specifically a disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way” (Swanton, 2003:19, in Veenstra, 2006:15).

Further citing Swanton’s work, he explained that

...virtue is a threshold concept which means that states which are ‘less than ideal’ could also be considered virtuous. Consequently, whilst Swanton acknowledges that the virtues set a standard for responsiveness, that a virtue is a disposition to respond well, and that self-improvement towards excellence is desirable, she also acknowledges that the virtues are complex, and that virtuous agents are susceptible to constraint (Veenstra, 2006:14-15).

Veenstra’s work is encouraging to me in the way that it recognises virtue being in *dispositions* to act well, even if the end result is less than ideal. It also acknowledges the constraints that ‘virtuous agents’ can encounter. These points will become clear later in the paper.

One of my core values is that people deserve respect and support regardless of age, social status, ethnicity, religion or any other classification. For that reason for many years I was a voluntary networker for New Zealand’s Human Rights Commission, speaking of their work locally as demand required. But in the work that I undertook for my Masters in Education, I became more critically aware of ways in which Māori learners’ needs are not well met in our education system. The reasons for this are complex, and I explored them in my thesis, using Freire’s tools to assist (Ferguson, 1991). In my subsequent PhD thesis, *Developing a Research Culture in a Polytechnic* (Bruce Ferguson, 1999), I maintained this interest, looking at whether and how Māori interests were being acknowledged and/or advanced within my own institution as part of that work.

Moving into closer engagement with research, I began to recognise that the same exclusions and undervaluing of Māori knowledge and skills operated in the research area also. The systematic (and sometimes unconscious) exclusion of indigenous knowledge in countries such as New Zealand has been well described by writers such as Bishop (2003) and May (1999), drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose notion of cultural capital pertains to social class rather than ethnicity. But it can be generalised to include ethnicity, as some ethnic groups find themselves over-represented in the lower socio-economic groupings in society, for reasons such as Bourdieu advances (see, for instance, Carter, 2003, and Yosso, 2005, writing in a U.S. context). A range of New Zealand authors has investigated how standard Western approaches to education and research have devalued or ignored Māori ways of being and doing (e.g., Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Pope, 2008; Smith, 1999). I raised the issue myself in a paper to Research Intelligence in 2008, and that paper has received several formal responses by others since, the most recent being Masters (2012), indicating that Aboriginal research needs to be more formally counted by

academic institutions. But sometimes, even with good intentions, formal attempts to ‘count’ indigenous knowledge can have unintended negative consequences. An example would be New Zealand’s research assessment exercise.

The Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF)

In 2003 the New Zealand government, through its Tertiary Education Commission, decided to follow a process similar in some respects to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) then operating in the U.K. Unfortunately, where the RAE measured research output at the level of the unit, in New Zealand the PBRF’s design required individual academics to submit an evidence portfolio (EP) and be measured as highly or less productive, including on ‘quality’, through the exercise. Institutional measures such as achievement of success in thesis-based research, and the acquisition of external research funds, also formed part of the exercise but it was the individual measurement that was to prove most contentious from the point of view of many, including many Māori staff.

Prior to the introduction of the PBRF the government used to channel research funds to institutions by way of the Equivalent Full Time Students (EFTS) enrolled in degree programmes. From 2003, however, this funding would abate by a proportion per year until it ceased to exist, and the funds would be channelled, rather, via the PBRF. At the time of the first PBRF ‘round’, I was Research Manager at a Māori tertiary institution, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA), although I am not Māori myself. I had been brought in at the start of that year specifically to help to boost research interest and output. In conjunction with senior managers, most of them Māori, I helped to introduce the PBRF process to staff, and to encourage them to complete EPs. To say that this was an uphill battle was an understatement. TWOA had gained approval to offer its first degree only in 2001; most of the other institutions participating in the PBRF had had government funding for research via their degree EFTS for many years – in most cases decades and in several universities, centuries. Notwithstanding this considerable disadvantage, TWOA succeeded in ranking 16th equal with the local Waikato Polytechnic (Wintec) in the exercise. Wintec had had degree granting status since 1991, so had had time to build up a lot more expertise in research than the Wānanga.

The result of our participation in the PBRF exercise meant that the Wānanga received a good deal more government funding than it would have done had we not taken part in the research exercise. However, our participation was not unproblematic in terms of Māori practices and protocols. Firstly, staff could only get a high personal score if they ‘boasted’ about their work. The exercise required a high degree of explanation about the extent to which one’s work was high quality, had impact and had been published in high status journals; about the extent to which one was prized by one’s peers; and the extent to which one contributed to the research environment. Collaborative research tended to attract lower ranking than sole authorship; overseas publications tended to rank more highly than New Zealand ones; dissemination in ways

other than written was hard to prove or to have appropriately valued, yet is a frequent Māori way of exposing work to critical feedback.

Many authors have critiqued aspects of the PBRF process for Māori, including my research colleagues at TWoA (Tawhai, Pihera & Bruce Ferguson, 2004) and a colleague on a review body that I participated in subsequently to the first round of PBRF (Smith & Bruce Ferguson, 2006). Others include Roa, Beggs, Williams and Moller (2009) whose comprehensive paper lists no fewer than fourteen different ways in which the process is problematic for many in New Zealand. While recognising that it is problematic for others than Māori, Roa *et al.* note several ways in which the PBRF breached Māori processes, including the pressure, in a collaborative society, to show papers as solely authored – “Sole authorship is sometimes seen as *whakahihi* (prideful to the point of being cheeky)” (Roa *et al.* 2009:234); linked to this is the overall self-promotion – “something which is contrary to the values held by certain sectors of the academy, e.g., younger academics, women, Māori and Pasifika” (op.cit, 235).

This situation is one that illustrates Veenstra’s recognition that ‘virtuous action’ may have ‘less than ideal’ outcomes. If we had not participated in the PBRF process, the Wānanga faced losing even the small amount of government research funding it had so far been entitled to, in an environment where it wanted to grow research. So, from my personal values of wanting equity for all, I was a strong advocate for the Wānanga’s participation, as were many of the senior managers. But to *get* that funding, we had to require staff to engage in processes that impinged on Māori ways of being and doing. This conundrum was discussed in Tawhai, Pihera & Bruce Ferguson (2004). We were very strongly encouraged by staff from the Tertiary Education Commission to participate; in designing the Fund, they had adopted a deliberately broad definition that enabled us to ‘count’ a variety of Māori knowledge and research products such as carving, weaving and cultural performances, outputs that previously would most likely not have been accepted. This was virtuous behaviour. But the processes around individual capture, the acceptability or otherwise of various forms of evidence, and the application of weighting to different disciplinary categories demonstrate where the good intentions went awry. In the end, all three major Wānanga in the country decided not to participate any further in the PBRF (Te Wānanga o Raukawa had refused to participate from the outset, recognising that the processes were not encouraging of Māori ways of being and doing).

A personal challenge: ‘you have introduced viruses without vaccines!’

Bearing the above information in mind, and recognising the ‘constraints’ that Veenstra’s analysis of virtuous behaviour noted, I was still shocked and hurt to face an accusation by one of the senior managers who was by then my line manager. The background to this accusation is that, as Research Manager, I was on a committee that considered research proposals put forward by staff wishing to access funding to complete their research, or gain institutional sanction to proceed.

The senior manager, a Māori man whom I'll call Andrew, had submitted a proposal along with a Pākehā (non-Māori) researcher. I had provided some change feedback that the committee deemed necessary before the proposal was approved. The Pākehā researcher took this in his stride but the Māori manager got very upset and accused me of 'introducing viruses without vaccines'. This allusion was to a process that apparently occurred in the early colonial years in the U.S., where British troops had provided pox-ridden blankets to Indian tribes. The result was the death of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. There is still debate in the literature about whether this action was intentional, but that is outside the scope of this paper.

My reaction to Andrew's allegation was initially to feel completely betrayed and disillusioned. When I mentioned the allegation to the then-Tumuaki (CEO) he dismissed it outright. He recognised that the decision to participate in the PBRF, which turned out to be the irritant that caused Andrew's comment, had been jointly taken, and that Māori senior managerial participation had been important in the engagement with PBRF. I felt that my values of equity and fair support for all had been worked out in a virtuous way, and that Andrew's charge was unfair, possibly proceeding from his annoyance at his proposal not going through smoothly. Later, however, with the benefit of time passing and also reading a little in the post-colonial literature, I came to see that from Andrew's perspective the research work that was being promoted (by both Māori and non-Māori including me) in the Wānanga might have been better taken forward by Māori alone. As Bishop and Glynn (2009:106) expressed it,

This challenge [to traditional Western ways of researching] is focused on the impositional tendencies of all research processes that embody artificial and hegemonic power relationships (distances) between the researchers and researched. This challenge is directed at the domination of agenda-setting by researchers.

From Andrew's point of view, immersed as he was in kaupapa Māori¹ ways of living and researching, whatever pragmatic financial reasons had caused us to engage with PBRF, the process was antithetical to Māori ways of researching and of valuing indigenous knowledge. I know this was Andrew's motivation, as he later engaged my research colleagues (both Māori) and myself in some training on kaupapa Māori ways of researching.

What lessons did I learn from this experience?

Undoubtedly, as described above, this experience was painful for me. It brought home very potently the realisation that even when one strives to practise virtuously, in accordance with one's values, one can still give offence. One can still produce results that are less 'ideal' than one would have wished. But is this sufficient cause not to engage? I would argue that it is not.

¹ Smith (1999:125) describes this as 'bringing to the centre and privileging indigenous values, attitudes and practices rather than disguising them within Westernized labels such as 'collaborative research'.

Whitehead's Living Educational Theory encourages practitioners to work out their values in their practice. As described on his website, www.actionresearch.net, Whitehead states that

In a living educational theory approach to action research, individuals hold their lives to account by producing explanations of their educational influences in their own learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How am I improving what I am doing?' They do this in contexts where they are seeking to live the values they use to give life meaning and purpose as fully as they can (front page of website).

What I am attempting to do in this paper, therefore, is to declare my values; to show how I have attempted to live these out in my practice, and to argue that it is incumbent on educators to do so, even when they risk not 'getting it right' in every respect. Describing the notion of constraint in virtues, Veenstra stated that

Constraint would then have us believe that it is morally preferable not to take action even if the resulting inaction brings about a result which itself is morally objectionable or undesirable (2006:24).

My (shared) intervention in introducing the PBRF to the Wānanga was posited on the recognition that *not* taking action could lead to a morally objectionable situation – the use of Māori taxpayer funding to benefit an already privileged, mainly non-Māori, research population located within polytechnics and universities. The intervention was successful in some respects – the Wānanga got a lot of money that would not have been received had we not participated. But it was toxic in other respects - Māori ways of having their research presented and valued were overlooked in the practical processes of the fund. However, as I argued in a recent paper (Ferguson & Ferguson, 2010:7), “there is little point in being overwhelmed with guilt and shame for well-intentioned but unhelpful practice. Guilt and shame are positive emotions only to the point that they prompt us to consider better ways of practising with those negatively affected by our actions”. And, as Veenstra concluded (op.cit, 38), “That which constitutes ‘best’ possible action in a given situation can be a contentious issue when more than one agent is involved”. My situation with the senior managers at TWoA exactly illustrates this point.

For me, despite the clash of values apparent through my actions, failure to act was not an option. Two prominent Māori writers have argued against Pākehā disengaging from working with Māori, even if we get things wrong. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her seminal *Decolonising Methodologies*, argued that the strategy of avoidance “may not be helpful to anyone” (1999:177), while Russell Bishop (1996) noted that Pākehā, as beneficiaries of the education system in ways that Māori traditionally were not, owed it to Māori to share skills and to mentor Māori educators and researchers. This point was recently reinforced at a seminar I attended on Māori research

ethics, where the point was debated, but attendees reinforced the need for non-Māori to contribute their support to research projects that are initiated by Māori, when welcomed to do so, rather than to avoid for fear of getting it wrong.

Tuhiwai Smith later described four models that her husband Graham had developed, too complex to explain here but methods that sought to redress the exclusion of Māori skills and knowledge in research. A good example of a Pākehā researcher using these principles and getting it right, was reported in a recent book edited by Paul Whitinui. In chapter five, Hunt (Pākehā) and MacFarlane (Māori) recounted how Hunt “thought carefully about the appropriateness of a non-Māori researching an issue that was of interest to and affected Māori” and described the processes that she used to optimise the safety of all (Hunt & MacFarlane, in Whitinui 2011:66). Through staying on marae (traditional Māori gathering places) and engaging in consciousness-raising education ‘of the kind described by Freire (1998) leading to self-empowerment’ the teachers in Hunt’s work realised that they needed to ‘change the self before changing society’ (2011:72). This is important work for teachers in a country where government strategy now encourages that “Māori achieve success as Māori” rather than having to set aside the strengths of their own cultural backgrounds to achieve using Pākehā methods. As Hunt and MacFarlane concluded, “non-Maori need to work in partnership with Māori so that all teachers can be empowered to connect to culture and thereby (hopefully) meet the needs of their Māori learners” (op.cit, 75). This does, of course, raise issues about how well equipped teachers are to work in this way. Russell Bishop and colleagues’ Te Kotahitanga programme (<http://tekotahitanga.tki.org.nz/>) is a good example of how this kind of equipping is now happening in New Zealand schools.

Conclusion:

McNiff (2010:7) states that action researchers’ work ‘is always linked with their values, and they make judgements about their work in relation to how well they realise these values in practice’. My work in this paper has sought to demonstrate why I intervened in a specific situation in ways that demonstrate my values of equity and social justice, and the strengths and weaknesses of this particular situation. The weaknesses demonstrate another principle that McNiff articulated in her book:

Ideas about ‘the good’ always need to be problematised and located within their historical, social, political and economic contexts, and the understanding that one person’s ‘good’ is not necessarily another’s (op. cit, 84).

It took me some time, and recovery from initial pain, to recognise that my ‘good’ had had at least some adverse effects for Andrew and some of his colleagues. I got there in the end, but the insight required me to hold myself accountable for consequences that I had not envisaged or intended.

If we, as educators, are to hold ourselves accountable for our values as articulated in our speech and lives, we will not necessarily have peaceful, safe lives. In our attempts to live out our practice and to be 'virtuous educators', we may give offence, cause dissension or expose ourselves to abuse even when our best intention is to rectify injustice. But if we exercise constraint in our practice in order to protect ourselves from these possibilities, we run the risk of perpetuating structural privilege; of operating hypocritically when we know we should do better; of preaching messages of social change that we are not prepared to practise ourselves. It may be dangerous, but can we ethically do otherwise?

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