

## Chapter 2

### **To act or not to act?**

That is the question!<sup>1</sup>

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#### Introduction

The year was 2003. I was a new Research Manager working in a Māori tertiary institution that had a history of inequitable treatment by government, through not receiving establishment funding that had gone unproblematically to non-Māori institutions. Repeating a common pattern in New Zealand, our government had decided to implement a research funding scheme derived from the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE as it then was). Ours was to be called the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) but, unlike in the UK RAE, ours was to be measured at the level of the individual academic, not at unit level.

My first job at Te Wānanga<sup>2</sup> o Aotearoa (TWOA) had been to compile a research register. This was at the request of the deputy Tumuaki (CEO), who was concerned that only eight pieces of research had been declared in 1999, and only 15 in 2000. He, like myself, could see that a lot more research than that was occurring in the institution, but that staff were not counting legitimate work as research, particularly in the area of creative arts. He could see that with the forthcoming PBRF, government research funding that had previously been received via student enrolments would be abated and eventually disappear. In this new PBRF environment, we had to know who was doing research, at what level, and get it recorded and counted. Accordingly, I travelled around the many campuses of TWOA seeking to identify work that could be counted as research, and asking permission from the authors to list their work in the Wānanga's first-ever Research Register. It covered the years 2001 and 2002. That Register, produced in 2003, listed 97 pieces of work in 2001, and 131 in 2002, plus other scholarly activity.

The PBRF's first assessment exercise was due to be conducted in June, 2003. We had strong support from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), part of the Education function of government, to participate. There were three wānanga of suitable size in New Zealand at the time, and government officials were particularly keen to ensure that the PBRF covered a broad cross-section of tertiary providers, including universities, polytechnics, Private Training

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Establishments (PTEs) and wānanga. It helped that the definition of research the TEC had settled on was very broad, and enabled us to count all kinds of creative research. However, TWoA's decision to participate in the PBRF was not without its difficulties, and it is here that the ethics of participation become problematic.

### **Whose values and interests? Promoted by whom?**

The Wānanga had been established as a pan-tribal, multicultural institution, but one that was based on sound Māori values and processes. Our staff and student cohorts were welcoming to all who wished to join in the work, so my appointment as Research Manager, given that I am not Māori, attracted little negative comment. We had established a Research Committee that considered funding and ethics applications for staff research, and we were also represented (through my line manager, the deputy Tumuaki) at senior management meetings.

The PBRF raised issues that needed careful consideration. There is a Māori proverb that translates, 'The kumara [a sweet potato] does not speak of its own sweetness', and this is deemed to mean that one does not praise one's own work. But to achieve the highest scores in the PBRF, researchers had to engage in a blatant self-promotion process, claiming ownership of work at the highest level possible in order to maximise personal grades, and hence payment of research funds to the institution. We knew that this would make many feel extremely uncomfortable. There is also a sense for many Māori that knowledge is not the possession of an individual, but is developed through group processes, and often is the result of work by those who have gone before, such as ancestors or elders. So to claim ownership of research work at an individual level was problematic (Smith and Bruce Ferguson 2006; Tawhai, Pihera and Bruce Ferguson 2004). These issues were later noted in an evaluation of the first round of PBRF by Web Research (2004) and summarised in a PBRF Sector Reference Group report (Tertiary Education Commission, 2009), which noted:

- concerns that the PBRF design 'does not take account of Māori epistemology, or the stage of development of wānanga'
- difficulties in preparing evidence relating to indigenous research because of a number of factors: lack of appropriate world class journals, significance of oral traditions, 'peer review' being conducted in the wider community not academia, the need for research to be of use to the community, differences in research methodologies, 'rediscovering' knowledge from community members, cultural barriers to self-promotion, ethical barriers, and
- the perception that Māori research was undervalued because it was not regarded as world class due to its national or regional focus (see Web Research 2004).

A further report evaluating the 2006 partial round of PBRF also noted that Māori values were likely to be breached by the process. White and Grice (2008) commented that:

...the production of an EP [Evidence Portfolio] does not fit with Māori values such as humility, whakahihi [arrogance, bigheadedness] and whakaiti [to belittle, in this context probably meaning to minimise the contribution of others] (quoted on p.13 of Tertiary Education Commission, 2009, original paper no longer available).

So why would we at TWoA even think about participating in a process which had such inherent difficulties, regardless of TEC's warm encouragement of our participation? Prior to discussing this thorny question, I wish to present some research on the ethics of participation (or not).

### Virtuous behaviour?

In my investigation of this work in a paper presented at the Value and Virtue in Practice-Based Research Conference (Bruce Ferguson 2012) I considered work by Veenstra (2006). Veenstra was discussing the notion of virtue, and whether it is an ideal or a constrained situation, drawing on the work of Swanton (2005) to do so. He wrote:

... 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).

I claim as part of my own educational and life values that I seek to act in ways that minimise social injustice, and that promote equity. For this reason I was, for many years, a voluntary networker for New Zealand's Human Rights Commission. I have almost always sought to take action to rectify injustice where I see it happening, when it is within my power to do so. In the case of the Wānanga, both the deputy Tumuaki and I could see that research funding previously received through student enrolments would be permanently lost unless we participated in PBRF, and did as well as we could in that exercise. From my point of view, this meant that taxes paid by Māori taxpayers would go to support research done in monocultural institutions, but not be available to an institution such as ours, which operates on Māori values and processes. This seemed inherently unfair.

But the situation was not straightforward. Describing the notion of constraint in virtues, Veenstra stated that

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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).

Was it more morally objectionable to introduce into the Wānanga a process that we recognised might be flawed and would operate using values that could be antithetical to Māori values? Or should we ‘take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them’ – in other words participate fully in the process in the hopes of gaining much-needed research funds and boosting the Wānanga’s reputation? The notion of constraint in virtuous behaviour suggests that we should not have taken action. However, in consultation with the Research Committee, senior management (most of whom were Māori) and with the blessing of the Tumuaki, we decided to engage in the process.

The TEC staff were as helpful as they could possibly have been, providing training for my junior researcher before she went around the country helping staff to put together their Evidence Portfolios. When the assessment exercise happened, TWoA came out sixteenth equal with the local polytechnic, which had received substantially more research funding than we had in the past, and which should, therefore, have had a much sounder base for participation. This result guaranteed increased research funding for TWoA for the next nine years, until the 2012 full PBRF exercise.

So, what’s the problem? Well, I was subsequently taken to task by my then line-manager, not the person with whom I had, in consultation with senior TWoA staff, introduced and promoted the PBRF. This manager accused me of introducing ‘viruses without vaccines’, in other words that I had done similar destructive work to that of British soldiers who had evidently given American Indian tribes pox-ridden blankets, resulting in the deaths of thousands. I wrote about this in the paper I delivered at the Second International Value and Virtue conference (Bruce Ferguson 2012), so I do not propose to discuss this accusation further here, except to note that from the manager’s perspective, my ‘virtuous’ action in seeking to ensure that TWoA got its fair share of the research ‘cake’ had had negative consequences beyond what I had envisaged.

The situation is a clear example of Veenstra’s caution about constraint, mentioned above. Veenstra subsequently noted (2006: 38), that ‘That which constitutes “best” possible action in a given situation can be a contentious issue when more than one agent is involved’. This was exacerbated, in my situation, by the fact that I am not Māori. Although I had done my best to consult, and the decision to participate in the PBRF was taken by the senior management group, most of whom were Māori, I was still operating in a context in which I may not have perceived nuances that a Māori Research Manager might have picked up. It is, perhaps, illustrative that of the other two major wānanga in the country, Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiarangi (probably the most prominent

in terms of its level of teaching, and of its research) chose not to engage at all. Te Wānanga o Raukawa, which specialises in indigenous research, chose to participate only in terms of declaring its external research income, not in the quality measure that required individual assessment. Its reasoning was that:

Our kaupapa [way of operating] is Māori, it's indigenous. When you get caught up into global criteria, you kind of generalise everything, and we don't want to. We want to be very specific about where we're at (Greenwood and Te Aika, 2008: 69).

TWoa itself has subsequently been cautious about its engagement with PBRF. In 2010, continuing my warm connections with the institution from which I had by then departed, I received a copy of their 2009 Research Register *He Pataka Tangata, He Pataka Kai*. In this, Te Kapua Hohepa-Watene reflects on research development at the Wānanga, using the metaphor of a canoe to do so.

As the flag was being raised [on the canoe] a bird called 'PBRF' landed on it and asked if it could change the shape and colour of the flag. The kaiarahi [leaders] were not happy with the proposed changes and said, 'Kaore [no]. If we changed the flag it wouldn't look, feel or fly right,' so the bird flew away (Hohepa-Watene, Te K. 2009: 7, cited in Ferguson and Ferguson 2010: 7).

Subsequently, a separate funding stream has now been suggested to provide research funding to all wānanga, recognising the deficiencies already mentioned (and quite a few others that I have not traversed in this chapter) for Māori researchers.

## So, should we act or shouldn't we act?

As Shakespeare (and Hamlet) said (although speaking of 'being' rather than 'acting'), that is the question. This book is about values, how our work-based research demonstrates our values, whether and how these are virtuous, and how we can explain our work in light of these values and virtues. I have explained that prime among my particular values are that I seek to ensure that equity and social justice prevail in the contexts in which I live and work, and I would claim that my actions towards these ends are virtuous behaviour.

My work-based practice has been supported, in later years, by the work of theorists such as Paulo Freire (Ferguson 1991, my Masters thesis) and Foucault (Bruce Ferguson 1999, my PhD thesis). Both of these authors are men who argued for positive action to change one's context for the better. Freire was such a living proponent of this approach that he was exiled from his home country for doing so, whilst Foucault experienced persecution for his sexual orientation. Neither, however, resiled from action because of personally disturbing consequences, and I believe that such failure to engage is not an option for me either. Local researchers from my own University have argued

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for the continued engagement with Māori by non-Māori, as the quotation below indicates.

Māori calls for self-determination are often misunderstood by non-Māori people. It is not a call for separatism or non-interference, nor is it a call for non-Māori people to stand back and leave Māori alone, in effect to relinquish all responsibility for the ongoing relationship between the peoples of New Zealand. Rather it is a call for all those involved in education in New Zealand to reposition themselves in relation to these emerging aspirations of Māori people for an autonomous voice (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh and Teddy 2007: 8).

So, a first task for any educators, in whatever country we might be positioned, is to seek to know ourselves in order to ‘reposition’ ourselves. We need to understand and to articulate our own values, so that we might hold ourselves (and be held) to account for our behaviour. Is our behaviour virtuous? Is it compatible with our espoused values? How do we *know* that this is the case? What evidence can we seek in order to demonstrate that our espoused theory matches our theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1974)? And what are we doing to understand better the values of those with whom we work? If we don’t understand *their* values, and are not articulate about our own, then the possibility of transgression is much increased. These groups may be different ethnically, or in terms of beliefs or behaviours, and caution is required in any such work with ‘others’ than ourselves.

When we are operating in cross-cultural contexts, the very least we can do is to ensure that we work alongside – and perhaps are mentored by – someone who is born into the cultures represented in those contexts. Even then, as was evident in my case at TWoA, it is still possible to get things wrong, inadvertently to cause harm when our intentions are the opposite. However, lest this chapter appear one-sided, I have had successes when working in cross-cultural contexts. The photograph below in Figure 2.1 illustrates a research situation where I was working in a bicultural team, alongside a Māori colleague whose knowledge of appropriate protocols such as how to enter a Māori environment sensitively and to provide feedback in ways that made sense to the respondents, no doubt saved me from inadvertent damage to the participants or to the project.

Andrea’s advice to both Eileen and me, as we put the project funding application in, steered the proposal through Unitec’s ethics committee, sought entry to, carried out and then disseminated the results of the research to schools and the Ministry of Education, was absolutely invaluable and I learned a lot from working with her. That particular project sought to distil the learning from a Ministry-funded initiative in order to ensure that teachers of Māori students in mainstream classes were exposed to pedagogical approaches that better supported their students’ learning, and maximised their chances



Figure 2.1. Andrea Elliott-Hohepa, Eileen Piggot-Irvine and Pip working together on the evaluation of the Te Kauhua professional development programme for teachers of Māori students in mainstream classes

of educational success. It was a project close to all our hearts, and another demonstration of how our values permeate our practice. There is still no guarantee of safe practice, however. In the TWoA situation, I was working closely with, supported by and accountable to Māori staff and managers, and still found myself charged with unsafe practice.

## Lessons learned?

This chapter is about our ability to articulate our values, to show how we work these out in our practice, and how we are accountable to ourselves and others for that practice. Would I, with the benefit of hindsight, have encouraged TWoA to enter the PBRF again? Perhaps some guidelines could be helpful here.

1. Engagement in educational practice with groups that differ from one's own should require us to ensure that we are, as far as possible when we come from a different background, cognisant of the values of those groups. I thought I was sufficiently cognisant of the values of TWoA; to some extent I was, but the caution of the other two wānanga around participation perhaps showed that there were aspects of the scheme that a more thoroughly informed Research Manager might have anticipated.
2. Initiatives that are going to require a major step that will affect the future direction of an institution may more safely be undertaken by

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those who are fully immersed in the environment, rather than by those who may be construed as ‘outsiders’.

3. Notwithstanding the above, if we are beneficiaries of social systems (such as in education), we owe it to those not so benefited by those systems to work for their inclusion. This entails risk, as the situation I described in this chapter revealed, but to fail to engage in this kind of work is to continue the injustice. This is, therefore a paradox that may not easily be resolvable (see Whitehead 1993).
4. If it transpires that we have erred, however ‘pure’ our motives, we need to acknowledge the situation and work to ensure that we do not repeat the error in similar contexts in the future.

So yes, I probably still would have opted to support TWoA’s participation in the PBRE. I believe that this action resulted in issues being brought to the fore that would not have seen the light of day had our Wānanga not chosen to participate. They are issues of colonialism; of the imposition of values that were at variance with many Māori ways of being and doing; of the continuance of practices and funding mechanisms that have disadvantaged Māori over many decades. That our government is now looking at alternative funding mechanisms which operate in more equitable and appropriate ways is an indication that good has come out of the situation. There may not be a direct causative effect – government may have developed more appropriate funding mechanisms without the wānangas’ participation (or otherwise) in the PBRE, and the resultant research that has shown the problems of aspects of the scheme – but at the time we felt we had to take action to prevent further funding disparity. As the quotation (attributed to Edward Burke) goes, ‘In order for evil to triumph, it is necessary only that good men do nothing’. Those of us working at TWoA at the time saw the abatement of research funding if we did not participate as ‘evil’ and felt it important to show that Māori were just as capable of producing great research as anybody else. Ultimately, TWoA continues to receive government research funding that would not have been provided had we not participated. But were the costs too high? Was the trade-off of values of whakaiti and the acceptance that a degree of whakahihi would be needed appropriate? Only time will tell.

I wish to conclude this chapter with the words that concluded my paper at York St John University in 2012 (see Bruce Ferguson, 2012: 8).

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?

## Notes:

1. Derived from W. Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, p. 1145 in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Collins Clear-type Press, London and Glasgow. Undated and no editor acknowledged.
2. A wānanga is a Māori tertiary learning institution

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