

Shifting the centre

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Abstract

The authors of this paper are engaged in co-writing a book that explores art, culture and education. We come from different cultural backgrounds (Pakeha and Maori), from different art disciplines (theatre and sculpture) and from two different trainings in knowledge. As we get deeper and deeper into the project we find that the collaborative research journey is as interesting as the material that we research. This paper shares some of the insights we gained: both in our subject matter and in the way we weave our understandings together in order to be able to describe our subject matter.

In one section of the book as we describe a community project that used arts as a catalyst for cultural exploration, we explore the apparently oppositional concepts of biculturalism and multiculturalism. We find that as the centre of reference shifts, the concepts become complimentary. The process of shifting the centre is significant to a number of the issues we write about. It is also significant to the way we explore our collaboration, and to our continuously emerging understanding of the nature of participatory research and of knowledge. We began with a road map, but we are finding that the real landscape is well off the road.

We believe the challenges we describe have relevance for many countries, as well as for New Zealand. Discussion of biculturalism, multiculturalism and the location of centres of reference is significant to most countries that have a history of colonialism and immigration. The location of knowledge is significant to all of us who are involved in participatory action research.

Introduction: Writing as action, collaboration as research

Writing a book, like any other creative project, is in itself a form of action research. Vision and structure evolve with each cycle of thinking and writing. The process of writing is a journey into understanding not only one's original ideas but also the developing shape of what one wants to say. Writing a book together with someone

else presents even more challenges and offers the possibility of discoveries that may surprise both writers.

The authors of this paper are engaged in co-writing a book that explores art, culture and education. As we gradually get deeper into the work we find that the collaborative research journey is as interesting as the material that we research. We began with a road map, but we are finding that the real landscape is well off the designated road.

Our initial differences present some of the challenge. We come from different cultural backgrounds (Pakeha and Maori¹), from different art disciplines (theatre and sculpture) and from two different trainings in knowledge. How, then, do we tell the story together? What bridges in understanding and perception do we need to cross? Regularly our writing journey takes us back to the beginning, to re-interpret what we have already written now that our understanding has grown and changed. This paper shares some of the insights we have gained: both in our subject matter and in the way we weave our understandings together in order to be able to describe that subject matter. We present it at a Congress of participatory action research because we hope that sharing those insights will contribute to the wider conversation about the nature of research that is participatory and that is grounded in action. We hope also that some of the subject matter we have been exploring in our book and that we share here will be seen as relevant to other countries who also have histories of indigenous people, of colonialism and of immigration.

In this paper we share one of the themes we explore in our book: the relationship between multicultural and bicultural perspectives of social identity. As we wrote the chapter addressing this we found that the shifts in awareness that we described had parallels with our own shifts in authorial voice. We share our understanding of those shifts as well. First, however, we briefly describe the content and context of our book, and some aspects of the conceptual framework in which we are working.

Te Mauri Pakeaka: a Journey into a Third Space

Our book began with an extended community and education project, Te Mauri Pakeaka that Arnold evolved and led from the mid-70s till the late 80s (when the centralised Department of Education in New Zealand devolved into more self-managing schools). Janinka became involved as a participant, and then she researched the project for her doctoral study. Since then we have decided to re-tell the story of that project together, using significant moments in the project as a springboard for discussion of issues relating to art, culture, community and education.

The project was set up within the education system as an alternative to talking *about* Maori culture to school principals and departmental administrators. At the time New Zealand was decidedly monocultural in its social organisation as well as in its education systems. It also seemed to be hurtling into open racial conflict. The programme offered an opportunity for those in charge of schools, together with teachers and students, to come into a space that was visibly and functionally Maori,

¹ Maori, as many will know, are the indigenous people of New Zealand. Pakeha is the term commonly used for New Zealanders of colonial or immigrant origin.

to experience for themselves how Maori culture operated, and to find a place for themselves within that cultural context. The immediate objective was to create an artwork. In this way the focus was taken away from didactic and theoretical explanations about history, protocols and values, and moved to the experience of living together and of creative making. The practical experience led to encounters with history, protocols and values. The teachers involved found that they changed role. All those who were there, educators, students, artists, tribal elders, needed to share their resources and to learn together.

For many who participated the experience constituted a first journey into a previous unknown space. It offered them a chance to physically cross the threshold into a Maori world, and to confront difficult or uncomfortable issues through art forms, and so to take risks within a net of safety.

The term *Pakeaka* relates to that stage of the conflict when the two war parties have encountered each other and they stop and take each other's measure before they enter into combat. The situation is still intrinsically confrontational: the opposition is there and has to be taken seriously. However, the backing off period allows an opportunity to think again before taking action. There is the possibility of a completely different outcome. *Mauri* might be translated as life force, or as an individuated quality of being. Thus it is the space pregnant with possibility that gave the project its name: Te Mauri Pakeaka.

We found a parallel in Bhabha's use of the term: the *third space* (Bhabha 1990). Bhabha talks about the development of cross-cultural territory that is experiential and evolutionary, and that cannot be defined in advance by any simple collage of components of the previously existing cultures. Bhabha's theorisation comes out of contemporary Britain in which a colonising culture has been forced to become, relatively rapidly, postcolonial, and in which migrant Asians, who have been the colonised, are now in their turn are partially colonising some of the larger cities of England. The New Zealand context is somewhat different: here it is the colonising culture that is immigrant. What resonates for us in Bhabha's description is the identification of a dynamic and evolving space.

A conceptual framework that tries to reach across two worlds

Our use of these two terms immediately forces us to position ourselves in terms of two legacies of scholarship. We have referenced the *third space*. We did not reference *te mauri pakeaka*. It would have been possible to cite a book in which that second term (or its components) appears. That, however, would potentially betray both traditions of scholarship. In a Maori tradition, it is the mana of the speaker - where he or she is known to stand in terms of the traditions of knowledge - that authenticates the idea. In a Western tradition, academic referencing is expected, but it is the authoritative explication of a concept that is usually cited. To cite a book as a source of the term *pakeaka* would imply that it had no currency until it was legitimated in written documentation. It would position a Maori tradition of knowledge into dependency on Western accreditation.

The dual legacy has a number of other implications that are significant for our writing and relevant to this paper.

Sometimes we find interesting correspondences. One is the process of action research. At its base action research is an integrative approach that allows people to investigate their reality at the same time as they effect change (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998, for instance). The degree to which is participatory depends on its participants' consciousness of underlying assumptions, its collectivist nature, its action consequences and its driving values (Wadsworth 1998). Its emancipatory intention consists in large part in increasing practitioners' understanding and self-development and their potential for changing the system itself (Zuber-Skerritt 1996). These are also the operational principles that characterise the practice what happened on a marae² in a Maori context. It is on the marae that the community investigates and debates issues that concern its well being and its future action. Discussion may begin with oppositional viewpoints, but participants work to consensus as they hear and reflect on the experiences others bring to the debate. Cycles of action, reflection and re-conceptualisation are involved. Later, as the issue is taken out to other groups, new and overlaying cycles of exploration are created.

Sometimes we find concepts that overlap to a considerable degree, but have significantly different emphases according to the perspective from which the discussion is viewed. Decolonisation and capacity building are such concepts. Decolonisation in broad terms refers to the deconstructing of the external systems and internalised mental maps that came through colonisation (Smith 1999; Tau 2000). Decolonisation becomes linked with capacity building as analysis of problems moves to the development of skills, knowledge and resources within the community so that it can become increasingly autonomous in determining its well being. In a Maori context the term *tino rangatiratanga*³ is often used to describe the result of decolonisation and the capacity of Maori to determine the resources and the decision-making that affect them. What is different is that the emphasis is on Maori right to hold and exercise that capacity.

Sometimes we find the two legacies emphasise different qualities. A Maori perspective seeks out the holistic framework and values the emotionally engaged subjective voice. It works openly with feeling, not just ideas. It looks for the spirituality inherent in a situation, and expects it to be operative. A western academic perspective is still somewhat uncomfortable with some of these elements. Yes, feminist and emancipatory approaches to research have questioned the validity of separating researcher from researched and of eliminating either party's subjective engagement (Klein 1982) and have placed knowledge (say, about teaching) within the process of doing (Giroux 1988). And yes, very, very occasionally concepts of spirituality make their appearance in a scholarly paper (for example, Passfield 1997). However, for the most part western scholarship still expects verification and pragmatism, shies away from feelings and is hesitant to base its arguments on the potency of a spiritual dimension.

Sometimes the navigating of the similarities and differences between the two legacies is like walking on eggshells. One of the challenges has been to work out when our conceptual bases match, and when they are different. A further challenge

² Marae is the ground that is the focal meeting place of a tribal community.

³ Might be translated as effective sovereignty.

is to keep probing with the questions such as the following: whose voice is speaking here? Whose community of reference is implied? We have by no means finished dealing with these challenges in our practice, but we have perhaps said enough to suggest the complexity of the ground.

In the next few pages we turn to describe a workshop that features in one section of our book. The way we describe the situation and we disentangle the themes that arise illustrates our navigation through the legacies of our two cultures.

Porirua: a suburb at the fringes, with fragmented stories

In one section of the book, we look back at a workshop in Porirua, a suburb of the capital city. At that time Porirua was largely a state-housing district with minimally paid factory workers and large numbers of unemployed. Pacific Islanders and Maori made up most of the population.

Five schools (one high school, an intermediate school, and three primaries) came together to live for three days at Maraeroa, a bare-walled marae on the edge of town. With them came some of the elders and the artists of their various communities. The majority of the group were Pacific Islanders - from different islands and representing very different cultures. There were also Maori and Pakeha. Each of these groups had to be involved, and in a way that they themselves would see as relevant. (An outside eye might have artificially homogenised the Polynesian cultures, and in doing so would ignore their personal identifications of difference.)

A shared commonality did exist in a history of displacement and a bleakness of economic opportunity. Like other large cities, Wellington depended on an imported labour force to work its factories and its utilities. The least paid workers and the social casualties were housed in the fringes, cared for in one way by a state that provided housing, abandoned in terms of the need for respect, belonging and social mobility. Where they lived became undesirable suburbs, clusterings of different peoples who did not belong to each other, or to the areas in which they lived. A particular future seemed written for the children of Porirua and their wider community. It predicted low academic achievement, adolescent trouble, and a long-term option of either casual low paid employment or no job at all. If there were to be alternatives they needed to be actively made.

When the schools and the communities met at Maraeroa, they had to look to each other for direction. There were no elders who related to that tribal area to hand things down to them. "We are all rito," one of the community leaders acknowledged. Rito is the vulnerable centre of the flax plant. In its natural state it is protected by generations of older blades. It is soft and vulnerable, but it is also where growth happens.

The schools came with stories they had already begun to explore in their classrooms. For them the workshop was a chance to work more intensely than they could at school, to make connections between mythic stories that came from books and their own lives, to struggle with form in movement, music, poetry and visual images, and to share the emerging work with families and communities. They worked with scrap ends of stories. There were legends that had been collected as curiosities, translated

into a foreign language and dehydrated as they lay on the printed page. There were also the participants' personal experiences that were felt with rawness and passion but that did not readily find their way into classroom words.

The buses arrived. The rituals of welcome unfolded. A few ground rules were given. Trestles were set up, boards laid out, chalk lines marked. Jigsaws cut boards decisively into segments. Students from the intermediate and primaries balanced out the action of mallet and chisel. The high school set up a screen, taped a golden cellophane sun to its back across one corner, cut outlines of birds, tree ferns, insects, and the figures of creation gods. Light from the back threw coloured shadows on the screen. The angers of the neighbourhood and the city streets found a metaphor in the figure of Tawhirimatea, god of wind and storm, the toughness in the figure of Tumatauenga, god of warriors and war.

The rapid rhythms of Cook Island drums pulsed in a corner. Eight-year-old boys in sneakers and jeans shuffled up shyly, raising their arms, stamping their legs. The beats grew louder. The boys lifted their heads, straightened their backs, punctuating the rhythm with the thrust of their bodies.

Chisels sliced into wood. Out came the flat surfaced forms of the Islands with their sharp-angled surface decoration, mingled with more curvilinear Maori forms. Cut free from the wood, Sina- moe-aitu danced with her tuna lover. Behind them swayed the tall coconut trees that would be given to the land after the flood by Tuna because of his love for Sina. Raffia was woven into the tukutuku⁴, bringing the hot pinks of Island hibiscus, frangipani and tiale. Ukulele and drum teased the guitar into new rhythms, different resonances.

The community arrived in mass on the second evening for the concert. The workshops participants performed their stories, and the community groups performed back to them. Hips swayed and feet stamped in the rhythms of the tamure and the siva. Thick white skirts of pandanus fibre with hot red tassels swished as hands drew flowers and birds in the air to the racing beat of wooden drums.

Semiotics, identity and the marae's participatory process

Like language, art is communication. It uses particular forms that carry layers of meaning that come from all the associations of previous usage. To read the forms you need to be familiar with their resonances. In Maraeroa the situation offered teachers and students opportunity to use codes that their wider cultural communities would recognise, understand, and use to talk back. In itself that created an important communication between community and school. It promised that the community could talk to the school about its aspirations for its children, and be heard.

But something else happened as well. The participants stretched existing cultural patterns to accommodate elements from other cultures. The mural-making concept that Pakeaka repeatedly used in workshops around the country had developed as an innovation from Maori arts that are traditionally found in the meeting house: carving, weaving and rafter painting. This time taro leaves and coconut palms sprouted

⁴ Tututuku is a traditional form of Maori wall weaving. Raffia is a material often used in the Pacific Islands.

beside figures carved in not only in Maori but also in a variety of other Polynesian styles. Weaving patterns and colours from different Islands' traditions were also assimilated. On the day the finished murals were offered to the marae to clothe its walls, they came covered with tapa cloth and tivaevae. Leis, flowers, shells and seeds, pandanus fibre, raffia, bright printed fabrics adorned the speakers and the dancers. What was taking place was a borrowing of forms and symbols, an accommodation of other cultures' semiotics into one's own.

In the Maori world, the marae is a place that records identity. That identity is presented in the visual arts that clothe the walls and ceiling. It is also presented in the words that are spoken, the songs that are sung, and in the many performative acts that take place. The meeting house is an art gallery, library and museum all in one. The ridgepole of the house is the backbone of the ancestor; its ribs reach down to the walls and make the relationship between Ranginui, sky father, and Papatuanuku, earth mother, all the ancestors between, and us today. Everything in the house has a reason and a meaning for the people it belongs to.

Much of what is done inside the house is open to innovation. The art is communal because it expresses the identity of the group, but there is room for individual styles of expression. The inclusion on the walls of Maraeroa of Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island, Niue, Tokelau and other Island stories and motifs expressed the particular identity of the Porirua community. It told of whom the people of Porirua are, their histories, and their feelings for their environment. Particularly it told of a community that is explicitly multicultural.

Fitting the *multi* - with the *bi*:- A shift of the centre

At the time of workshop we report, New Zealand wrestled - as it still does now - with the apparent clash between multiculturalism and biculturalism. On the one hand, it was argued that there are many different kinds of people in the country and they all need to be acknowledged. A bicultural focus, according to this argument, ignores the needs of the immigrant groups.

Biculturalism, it would be said on the other side, has to come before multiculturalism. First New Zealand has to do justice to its indigenous people. Only then are we able to consider ways of recognising the values and cultural practices of immigrant groups. Replacement of biculturalism with multiculturalism, says the argument, is a way of preserving the economic and political power of Pakeha as definers of the mainstream.

In the Maraeroa workshop the two perspectives, the multicultural and the bicultural, stopped being oppositional concepts; they actively complemented each other.

On a New Zealand –wide scale post-colonial settlers, or Pakeha, are firmly placed at what Spivak (1996) calls the centre and everyone else at the margins. However, in the workshop at Maraeroa the centre that each culture related to was that of the marae. Multiculturalism was being expressed in terms of a Maori centre, and within the terms of a Maori way of seeing relationship and belonging. The notion of New Zealand as a multicultural society was being re-inscribed from within a Maori perspective.

The impact of the workshop at Maraeroa was limited, and tacit claim of Pakeha to the centre continued in the education system and in society. However, for the participants the shift disrupted the apparently unified fabric of consciousness. It invited deconstruction of power and of socialisation. Implicitly it asked each immigrant group to take a place not only in relation to the usual mainstream culture but also in relationship to two distinctive and different cultures. Simple assimilation was no longer possible. Something more complex was called for.

That the schools were instruments in supporting these explorations was a vital element in the overall process. It made possible the role of the school as a facilitator of learning, even within the process of deconstructing colonisation. It recognised the leadership of the cultures that expressed difference within the school. It linked schools to their communities, marae and elders. It offered Pakeha teachers a role in supporting the expression of cultural identity instead of dominating it.

Sewing together a sense of New Zealand

So why do we write about this workshop now? One of the reasons is that New Zealand is still struggling with a sense of its identity, and its understanding of community. New Zealand-ness is something that has to be made. It could be prescribed by the blind assumption of homogeneity such as that which characterised the 60s, or by a militant assertion of separateness. Or it could be made by discovery, through getting better at recognising who we are and how we relate to the world (spiritual and physical), through sharing these understandings with each other, and finding ways of fitting our separate and shared cultural realities together, supporting and loving each other in our difference.

Tivaevae is a fabric art from the Cook Islands. Separate pieces of fabric are pieced together to make a sheet that is larger and richly patterned. Originally it was beaten mulberry bark that was used in the process of making cloth. When the missionaries brought European fabrics, the process was extended to incorporate the imported materials. But the patterns were Cook Island patterns. The colonial influence was re-inscribed as something that belonged to the indigenous culture and to the place itself. It offers an interesting metaphor of how New Zealand-ness might evolve.

Today's racial problems are sometimes played out in violence, even murder, in our streets. Even more often they smoulder beneath the surface of apparent stability. The immigrant groups are increasingly more diverse: white farmers from Zimbabwe, black labourers from Zimbabwe; entrepreneurs from Korea and Japan, refugees from Vietnam and Afghanistan; Bosnians, Somalis, Iraqis fleeing from war zones, Germans, Swiss and Americans searching for simpler life styles. New Zealanders are aware that not all immigrant students' needs are being met in our schools, and that their numbers and their needs are changing the dynamics of our classrooms.

As a country we are dimly aware that the shared sense of history we have arrived at over the last twenty years, however small, is fraying under the impact of immigration and the numbers of new people who have not been taught that history. We are also at least dimly aware that certain groups live in particular districts and that they do not socialise with others outside their cultural group. When we hear about beatings,

killings, we become afraid that open conflict does exist and that there is potential for it to grow.

We have a need to make bigger quilts for today's challenges.

Landscape beyond the map

As we sifted through the records (photographic, written and remembered) of the Maraeroa workshop and as we came to each other with different drafts and different points of focus, several things began to stand out for us.

One is the shift of centre that we have already described. That had particularly strong implications for our own practice of co-authoring. It challenged us to continually re-evaluate the perspectives we wrote from. We believe it also has strong links to effective practice of participatory action research. The tension we noted between two legacies of knowledge is also basic to the concept of participatory action research. Action research is grounded in the community group that is trying to effect change. First and foremost it needs to talk to this community, and in terms this community sees as relevant to its purposes (Kemmis & Carr 1986, Wadsworth 1998). It often also seeks to talk to the academic community of research (Grundy 1998), in terms, which that community respects. Often the ground community understands, and trusts, one discourse and the academic community another. The difference can span language, concepts of validity, and even decisions about what is significant and what is not (Gee 1992). Cultural difference highlights a polarity of perspectives that is to some extent latent in all social interactions. Consequently the challenge is there in all participatory social research to explore the locations of knowledge and the way the location affects not only the perspective but the content of what is known. At the same time we see it as vitally important to not underestimate the power of the differences that come with culture.

Another thing that stood out for us was the open-ended nature of the participatory investigation that took place during the workshop. There was definitely a plan, but the essence of the plan was to leave a lot of things open so that what had been set up (bringing the community together with a project and with the time and supportive environment in which to do the project) could find its own fruition. Problems in the education system and in the Porirua Township existed, and they were not being solved by answers that were already within reach. The dynamic for change resided within the communities who were brought together: within their own cultural resources and within their decision to take up the marae's invitation to celebrate their identity. What they did and how they did it emerged creatively, through repeated cycles of negotiation, trial, refinement and re-consideration. In the end it broke new ground for all involved. We have taken that example to heart in our writing.

Thirdly, we are very much aware that there is still a need in our country to stitch people together. Despite the fact that we come from different cultural histories and that our race and our learning position us in different locations, we share an investment in making the future. We have learned from experience and from our reading (Friere 1972; Mitcalfe & Harper 1969 for instance) that oppression and exclusion have no real beneficiaries, only victims. We believe the future has to be made collaboratively, and by walking adventurously into the third space. We think

that by writing this book together and by working to find a form that satisfies both of us we are contributing to piecing together the fabric in the quilt.

Writing together takes a lot of talking and negotiation. Sometimes it is difficult. But often it is joyful and celebratory. And, like the social dynamic we are writing about, it is work in progress.

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