Desert Settlement Sustainability: a perspective on collaborative, community based research.

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Abstract:
This paper discusses a multi-university partnership in the context of a Cooperative Research Centre (CRC) project to study the sustainability of desert settlements in Australia. Whilst telling the research story, the paper identifies the opportunities of the research and the constraints and struggles, from the particular perspective of one team member. The opportunities for the CRC, the university, the researcher and the community are examined and strategies are discussed for managing the tensions and ensuring the region’s needs are prioritised. The constraints discussed include ethical constraints of community based research, both generally, and in terms of research involving Aboriginal People, and the challenges of meeting diverse outcomes and expectations. A particular emphasis is place on how universities can support this kind of work.

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

AUCEA (2006) identifies that “engaged communities are essential for Australia’s economic and social future” and that university – community collaboration over the production and utilisation of knowledge has benefits for university, community and wider society. Community engagement, along with research based learning and work integrated learning are increasingly part of university audit requirements, and academics are encouraged to move more into line with these activities (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Universities do not have an untarnished record of engagement with communities (Sullivan, Kone, Senturia, Chrisman, Ciske & Krieger, 2001). Researchers are likely to encounter the effects of either community cynicism because of past disappointments (Sullivan et al, 2001) or community expectations that are unrealistic about the levels of expertise that universities can bring and what can be achieved in complicated social, political, economic and cultural contexts (Flicker et al, 2008). The academic, trying to be responsive to community with all its politics and history, whilst maintaining research integrity, within a multi-layered context of institutional expectations, can feel precariously positioned.

This paper discusses a current project with a view to examining opportunities and challenges. Comments are limited to contexts where researchers engage with people in everyday settings around external agendas. This is quite distinct from research with industry partners who are familiar with the research process. Both approaches fall into the context of university-community research, both seek better utilization of knowledge via collaboration, but this paper is about the former and I call it community-based research to distinguish it from industry-based research. Combining an external agenda with intent to engage collaboratively with community members in ways that they find meaningful, poses particular challenges.

Community Based Research (CBR) according to Flicker, Savan, McGrath, Kolenda and Mildenberger (2008, p239) marries community development and knowledge generation. It holds twin aims of advancing understanding and ensuring knowledge makes a difference in the community. Rationales for choosing it include: 1) enhancing utilization through incorporating local knowledge, theory and practices 2) producing change, mobilizing groups, building capacity and opening new possibilities (partnerships, funding, employment opportunities), and 3) improving community-university relationships by building trust and through the sharing of skills, knowledge and expertise (Flicker et al 2008, 242).

Several papers report challenges or barriers to optimizing this potential. Flicker et al (2008) and Sullivan et al (2001) both identify problems with: a) partnership issues, b) methodological issues, and c) broader social, political, economic, institutional and cultural issues. Ahmed, Beck, Maura & Newton (2004) identify lack of respect for community knowledge, treating community members as research objects, fear that collaborative
research lacks rigour, misunderstandings about the benefits of collaboration, lack of mentors for such research, and lack of incentives for academics. Hoben (1995) discusses the limiting narratives of development which characterize much institutional- community engagement. De Ishtar (2005) raises an issue of particular concern to this project, which is that important research challenges exist where the research occurs between members of a colonizing society and members of the colonized society. A conscious effort has been made to address such challenges in the current project, and this is reflected upon throughout the paper.

Firstly, the research project is introduced, so as to provide the reader with enough information to make sense of examples along the way. Then, the paper discusses how theory and research are drawn on to maximise potential and minimise barriers to research with communities in everyday settings and research collaboration between non Aboriginal and Aboriginal People, within the multi-layered demands of university-community research.

The Research: Sustainable Desert Settlements

Desert Knowledge Co-operative Research Centre (CRC) has 6 Core Projects, each of which has a different research focus (http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au). The Sustainable Desert Settlements project is charged with building a knowledge base about the thresholds of sustainability and vulnerability in desert settlements of varying sizes.

Desert settlements will be examined along 5 dimensions:

- Asset stocks and resource flows,
- Mobility, economy and livelihood activity,
- Governance, functionality and aspirations,
- External factors,
- Capabilities and functional resilience,

Teams researching different communities around the central desert will come together to analyse and synthesise across these and communicate findings to a wider public.

Desert communities in Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia will be studied and researchers in this project are located in universities in all of the above states plus ACT and NSW.

Griffith University, as one of these partners, agreed to the participation of approximately 25% of a staff member’s time over 3 years to participate in the study, with a view to researching two small towns on the Queensland side of the Simpson Desert. This paper is specifically about the Griffith University component of the research.

CONSTRUCTING DESERT KNOWLEDGE: RESEARCH IN EVERYDAY SETTINGS

This section begins the account of the research project, as experienced by one research team leader and examines how some of the above barriers have been negotiated.

Research is Political

Sullivan et al (2001) report that respondents across a number of research projects saw the researchers as holding a negative construction of the community. Community members said that researchers misread the context, especially the cultural and socio economic context, and interpreted data through biased frames. Conventional paradigms of research as apolitical and objective can produce such barriers. If researchers do not take account of the politics, both the framing of the question, and the research processes, are likely to reinforce dominant asymmetrical relations and perspectives.

At the beginning of this project, a significant amount of intellectual work had already been done to develop a conceptual framework for the analysis of desert settlement sustainability, and the resulting frame located the research sensitively with regard to contemporary politics.

Given recent media coverage, it would be easy for Australia’s urban populations to imagine that their taxes are supporting non-viable, dysfunctional desert settlements with government funded income security, health, housing
and education services. Research conducted within such a frame, would see only deficit, and would be likely to inform a call for generic policies which treat remote desert populations the same as any other population (Hughes & Warin, 2005, Hughes, 2005). Desert Knowledge CRC research to date has identified that desert settlements must be differently valued and responded to (Pleshet, 2006; Wand & Stafford Smith, 2005). Not only do desert settlements exist in marginally productive country, long distances from markets, with highly variable conditions, but also, much of their productive activity is not valued by, or even visible to, mainstream Australia. This has less to do with intrinsic worth and everything to do with larger populations valuing (and supporting government investment in) those things that are pertinent to their own livelihoods and lifestyles. Looking through a different frame Desert Knowledge CRC research to date contends: “Desert science is demonstrating with increasing clarity that the desert contributes far beyond the scale of its population to national wellbeing” (Desert Knowledge CRC, 2008). Indeed a large percentage of the income and resources generated through desert activities (pastoralism, tourism, art and culture, conservation) flow into state, national and global economies.

This raises the question of how to recognize, make visible, measure and promote value in the desert and how to frame it so that it adds to the livelihoods of desert people as well as inviting helpful policy and investment responses. This is not to ignore that there will be problems within any community, but a research focus on the problems is debilitating for communities. Proactive engagement will focus strengths and opportunities and address problems along the way.

Gibbons et al (1994) identify that a shift is occurring from traditional forms of academic research to more engaged forms. The former, which they call Mode 1, are assumed to be independent, objective and apolitical undertaken in ways which control for the chaotic influences of the real world. The latter, which they call Mode 2, is undertaken within those chaotic real world influences, in close association with users or subjects of the research, via complex chains of inquiry that include community, academic, government, and which have a much closer loop between knowledge production and utilization. Mode 2 inquiry requires a set of skills that are not conventionally part of the research repertoire. Entering the complex dynamics of community, a researcher is likely to feel as disempowered as any community member. One research response is to assert the authority of discipline, method and analysis, and impose order, where order does not exist. Another possible response is to stay with the uncertainty and see how the community makes sense of it. The former can re-open old wounds for those communities who have been negatively framed by research in the past, the latter can produce learning for everyone. Each new occasion for research then is a new opportunity to redress the harms and build trustworthy, reciprocal modes of inquiry.

Alvesson & Skjoldberg (2000) propose that research reflexivity is crucial to inquiry in community settings. Reflexivity is the skill of seeing one’s own positioning and all of the research decisions made (question, methods, interpretive frames), as situated in and contributing to, a broader field of relations which are politically and discursively organized. It is difficult to imagine successful Mode 2 research without reflexivity.

Desert Knowledge CRC, for research purposes, separated settlement and community, with settlement as physical space and infrastructure, and community as an enduring set of relationships. How communities use settlements and move between them, the resource patterns established in these processes and the ways in which aspirations change as a result of exposure and contact with urban centers and mainstream consumerism, could all be viewed with the settlement as the focus, not the community. This means the people (communities) of the settlement can be invited to engage as co-researchers, agents and subjects, rather than objects or focus of the research. This is a significant shift away from the gaze of the researcher being focused on the community, or the anthropological focus on “researching down”. It opens a space for community and researcher together to research out and up. It facilitates mutual capacity building of co-researchers, as people identify settlement issues of significance to them.

“Community” is often misrepresented as singular, rather than as comprised of many groups with different interests, histories and political relations (Guerin & Guerin, 2007). Community narratives permit and discourage certain kinds of inquiry. Defenses against change can be colluded with, or insensitively disturbed, by researchers (Maru & Woodford, 2007). Stakeholders will be watching to see where the research positions itself in relation to these existing patterns. Universities often welcome partnerships with powerful agencies, and ethics processes rarely unpack what this means in terms of power and respect in engagement with less powerful community
members. Yet, as Foucault (1982,1984) would argue, what we are prepared to do to ourselves and others in order to achieve outcomes is precisely an issue of ethics.

**Holding the Research Lightly**

A moment should be given here to discussing the pressure community based researchers are under to produce, upfront, an articulation of the research methodology, methods and frames of analysis which are to be used. Whilst confusion about methods could waste the community’s time and fail to deliver anything meaningful, the same could be said about clear methods and frames which are too narrow to capture the diverse factors impacting on, and within, the various groups of the community.

Sullivan et al (2001) said respondents often found research to be inflexible and rigid, designed before the community was engaged and non-inclusive of community expertise.

Taking seriously our brief to engage in ways that are reciprocal and useful, we needed to enter the settlement both well prepared and informed yet open in mind, heart and method. It sounds trite to say ‘no assumptions’, but by the time one has fully engaged the external funding body’s research brief, submitted an ethics proposal, done the secondary research, and contacted some community leaders and members to make appointments, it is no easy task to empty the mind and enter the community with an openness to hear and see from the perspectives, and within the frames of reference, of the people for whom it is home, and respond accordingly.

We introduced the study, invited participation, offered to work with groups (as part of the study) on things of interest to them, and used a very simple tool of prompts (your history with the town, what you like and don’t like, its achievements and challenges, where you think it sustainable or not, who is or should be doing what). We acknowledged and appreciated achievements, registered the tensions and challenges, and checked out the emerging picture. We used a conventional informed consent process for the first stages.

Significant here, is that rather than invite people as co-researchers to the external agenda, we invited them to add their aspirations for their settlement to the research agenda. This enlivened the research significantly, and whilst it could have produced unrealistic expectations, this has not been the case to date.

Community based researchers are best served by a familiarity with many tools and strategies and the flexibility to employ them as required. Some would disparage this as too eclectic, others would give it the more legitimising title of ‘bricolage’. Bricolage refers to a “handy man or handywoman who makes use of the tools available to complete a task” (Kincheloe, 2001, p680).

Finally, as Sullivan et al (2001) point out, communities can feel judged and misjudged by researchers using preconceived frames of reference. The determinates for the research project already existed, as outlined above, and these could be construed as scalar indicators or a toolkit for assessing viability and sustainability (Fisher, 2004). Their use will be significant to cross-site comparison. Our preliminary desktop research organised material according to these categories, however, entering the community, we hold lightly such analysis, for it may turn out that sustainability turns on quite different determinates. To enter a community intent on measuring sustainability via preconceived indicators may privilege the research aims above the collaborative aims and produce a distorted picture.

Conversation was our most important research tool, and we learned as much from conversations resident to resident, and residents to institutions, as we did from our own conversations with residents. We encouraged dialogue as a form of engagement where people open themselves to listening to each other and hearing in new ways, beyond the usual patterns of communication. At best, dialogue facilitates listening in a way which allows listeners to be affected by what they hear (Freire, 2004).

**Cross Cultural Research**

This section discusses one of the ways in which contemporary theory informed the research. Thirty per cent of the population in the two towns is Aboriginal. For the critically aware researcher colonialism has produced a crisis of signification and representation (Bhabha, 1994). Sensitised white researchers are wary of representing or
speaking for Aboriginal People (Brewster and Probey-Rapsey, 2007). We could not anticipate how the legacy of colonialism affects lived experience, cultural expression or relations with settler society in a particular setting, yet, the project could create a space for this to emerge. Coming to the encounter informed by literature of Indigenous people (Tuhuwai Smith, 1999, Moreton Robertson, 2001), we wanted to invite Aboriginal People to speak of their settlement and engage in knowledge construction processes about its sustainability, on their own terms. This was an opportunity for the research team to redress rather than repeat past colonial transgressions (de Ishtar, 2005). As a white female academic with a critical theory and deconstructive bent, I was alerted to what Spivak (1992) calls “the politics of translation”, for there is more than language being translated between cultures.

My assumption was that an Aboriginal researcher would engage differently from me, produce different outcomes, add value to the community in ways that I could not. Working with an Aboriginal team member was a way of ensuring both that Aboriginal People felt invited to fully participate on their own terms and that issues of translation would be made visible in the project (and perhaps in the community). There was not an Aboriginal academic at Griffith University who was free to participate (Aboriginal People are too thin on the ground and much in demand in Universities). Fortunately, another Aboriginal colleague indicated interest in the project. She and I became the team that would do all field visits together.

Engaging together with Aboriginal and Non Aboriginal communities, my colleague and I found that the relationships, dialogue, and contributions were richer for having an Aboriginal researcher involved. It increased the potential for recognition of two quite distinct symbolic systems which share a difficult history and politics, and it puts the issue of translation between the two onto the agenda. Her account of entering the community and engaging around sustainability is quite different from mine, begins with introductions to each other as Aboriginal people from different kinship systems, with different totems, but linked by a shared affinity to, and responsibility for, land (Wall, 2008). Her research tools were different from mine and, in this instance, at the request of community members, included engagement around cultural heritage and the painting of cultural stories as a medium for exchange. This established quite different conversations and produced different research outcomes.

**Relationships, Reciprocities and Research**

The two settlements of our research were historically settled by pioneers who recognised the potential of Channel Country grazing. Aboriginal People and settler families live in the towns, side by side. This is the traditional country of the Aboriginal People, and it stretches away to the west across the great sand hills of the Simpson Desert. Aboriginal People point out that whilst they helped establish the pastoral stations, working long hours for little pay, the pastoralists are now wealthy and they are not.

Nevertheless, there is a high level of social, economic and political organization and indeed, cohesion, which everyone benefits from. Four industries, pastoralism, tourism, construction and administration, mean everyone has a job. Everyone has a well-constructed, well-maintained, air conditioned home. There is no serious crime, no drugs, the children all go to school, and everyone accesses healthcare at well-equipped clinics. There is a store, a pub, pool, playground, tennis courts, a community hall, and a racecourse in each town. This level of infrastructure and social organization, unusual in remote towns of 100 people, can be attributed to a very active local government. The source of revenue that enables local government to do so much in this remote community, is an economic venture which takes advantage of the physical isolation of the Shire. Because the roads are unsealed and since distance is too great for state governments to maintain them, Council has established a roads construction business. It has invested in heavy plant, so that it can both hire plant to state government and contract for maintenance of state government roads. With its construction business and its administration functions, Council is a significant employer of local labour, offering apprenticeships and a range of opportunities.

We began Round 2 of the research by re-visiting people to discuss the collated data of the first round. It was at this stage of the research that conversations began to approach dialogue. Firstly, Aboriginal People could not see themselves in the collated data. Their responses were there, but made invisible through collation – assimilated! It was a gusty, cool day, we were sitting around the table with Aboriginal People, they were carefully going through our feedback sheets, line by line, word by word. What they were doing was ensuring their voice, their perspectives were clear and visible.
Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people both believe life is good in this settlement, better than elsewhere, but, Aboriginal people said: “it could be better”. For them it would be better if their culture was more visible in the community. They said: “time to get around the table together, work it out together, move forward”. “Making culture visible” – is proposed as an aim which carries no blame, but a sense that the local narrative about people being equal is stopping forward movement. Can the issues be raised in safe ways? This is the challenge of dialogue. Whilst some Aboriginal people wanted to talk about these issues with other (white) people in the community, others approached the task of making culture visible through art.

This latter group were engaging around their desire to reconnect with stories, songs, artefacts, foods and medicines, sites, practices of culture, both for present enrichment and for transmission to younger generations. One expression of this was a desire to paint, and soon several artists were busy painting local stories with the Elder watching on, guiding, singing, and weeping. Painting became a tool for facilitating dialogue horizontally between community members, as well as with the researchers. Desert Knowledge CRC commissioned a poster, representing the project’s research cycle in relation to their settlement. The emerging poster expressed celebration and healing, and depicted the move from traditional to contemporary life, from community amongst their group, to building community with settlers, from bush food and humpies to stores, houses, electricity and cattle stations, within a landscape of vibrant desert colours. The meeting of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal takes place in an outer circle which is green - both the colour Europeans imported into the desert, and the colour of healing. The artists took the emerging painting to a local government council meeting, confident in a positive response, and trusting that their emerging aspirations for more visible culture would be seen as enhancing sustainability of the settlement.

Meanwhile, in collaboration with Council, another colleague and I undertook a cost of living study and Healthy Food Basket study with a view also to considering food accessibility and security. To this, the Aboriginal women added a comparison of what they buy at the store (transported in by truck every three weeks) and what they provide from the Desert’s natural store of traditional foods and medicines (cheaper, fresher, always readily available, and healthier). This gives new meaning to food security.

Conversations with diverse local people about tourism were beginning to produce some clear challenges from what had been a fuzzy issue. On our next visit a colleague with tourism expertise will accompany us and engage alongside us all as we explore the issues and extend the dialogue. So far, 4WD travellers have sought the settlement out, now the community contemplates seeking the tourist through co-ordinating a package tour. This shared aspiration faces some local barriers. Will pastoralists make sites on their land available, will the community recognise and support local Aboriginal tour operations in the desert?

The future of the community, its relations and livelihoods are being constructed here, out of people’s present responses to each other. Residents are leading the way, they are building their community and their settlement simultaneously, what is best for settlement may not always be best for community. We are outsiders, moving at their pace, lending extra resources at times, facilitating some conversations, and being rewarded with first hand insight into how sustainability is wrested again and again from the resources of this desert landscape and its small communities.

**Multiple Layers to Negotiate**

There are multiple layers to this university-community engagement and the researcher must respond to them all on-goingly. Luckily in our project, collaboration and support crossed all layers, but this is perhaps more the exception than the norm. Nevertheless, for researchers, there are questions of sustainability in juggling so many requirements.

The university releases staff time to work on this project as part of its commitment to research, community engagement and public scholarship. Outcomes, such as funds and publications are expected. However, those are not the only returns anticipated. Increasingly the new institutional environment of universities requires students to be engaged wherever possible in academics’ research. Each expectation, should I aspire to meet it, increases the workload multifold.
At another level, Desert Knowledge CRC require that our research enhance settlement livelihoods and sustainability, contribute to a science of desert living, and produce a range of associated outputs. The contract requires the production of a set of outputs or products which signal the achievements of the engagement. This includes working papers, journal articles, conference presentations, and materials which are valuable to the settlements themselves. It also necessitates the work of team building across a national project. This requires monthly teleconferences, regular contributions to an e-forum and annual workshops. Additionally are three monthly reporting and ongoing record keeping.

When we enter a community, different groups of that community ask how their aspirations can be served through the project. Our commitments to the local government, the Aboriginal people and the community members developing tourism take us in several directions. Yet these activities must be accompanied by ongoing validation with community of the emerging research findings. When in the community, we work non stop, to ensure that we maintain relationships and address all emerging research/action tasks. When not in the community, we are constantly in touch with various community members through phone and email.

In our efforts to progress the engagements around settlement sustainability, we have engaged various other institutional bodies. Each contributes however as part of meeting some agenda of its own. Whilst the research is strengthened by their involvement there are costs to the researchers who must manage both the reciprocities incurred and the ongoing articulation of the research focus through the resulting dynamics.

University-community research then may be understood less as a linear approach to addressing a research problem, and more a process of bringing different interests together in a dynamic field of force, which, if skilfully negotiated will produce something for everyone. New knowledge will be generated and utilized in iterative ways, by diverse people. The research skill of gathering and documenting such multi-dimensional knowledge, siting knowledge from practice, generalisable fact from particular insight, so as to contribute to archival as well as living knowledge, are skills rarely taught in research courses. Nor can the ethics of such interactive dynamics be fully anticipated by formal processes.

Our use of contemporary theory and research, combined with personal interest, passion and goodwill, have thus far enabled us to steer a way through the potential pitfalls of community engagement to create some very sound research/action relationships and produce some very interesting data. But the acid tests are still to come. If the new relationships and activities change power relations within the community, conflict may emerge. Can we assist the community to address such issues through civic and democratic processes? Can we sustain our engagement long enough to maintain the dialogues across two symbolic systems about livelihood, recognition and respect? We can dialogue with Aboriginal People about culture, painting and tourism, but can we sustain that dialogue to address the risks of appropriation and commodification. Can we participate in the processes through which data is aggregated upwards, in a nation wide research project, in a way which holds the integrity of what people have shared with us? Can we, for example, maintain that integrity of enabling Aboriginal People to speak from the cultural symbolic within which meaning is found for them, without freezing or objectifying culture, patronizing or privileging again the western symbolic?

CONCLUSION

Following one current project this paper has identified that there are skills associated with the politics and ethics of community based research which are not conventionally part of the research repertoire. It has established, although not yet fully justified, an argument that research construed within the dominant symbolic frame will miss much of importance to Aboriginal People and may not enliven their aspirations. Combining research and action or closing the loop between knowledge production and utilization does have benefits for communities and does open up many new opportunities for research and partnership. Sustained collaboration is highly desirable but opportunities may be lost because the funding structures are not sufficiently flexible to assure continuity.

Working with communities in very small settlements is a rare and delightful opportunity for university researchers. It signals how very valuable university-community collaboration can be. Making the needs of the community a research/action priority, enabled this small study to go some way to creating and/or restoring trust between university and community. Even such a small study can contribute insights to bigger questions, such as the
question of how relations between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians can be strengthened. Above, all perhaps, such engagements restore creativity and conviviality to the research, and indeed, human, endeavour.

References


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