

Research at arm's length: the risks of doing research in remote locations.

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Abstract

Conducting research in centres remote from home has many risks associated with it. In this paper, these risks are described in relation to the events that occurred while a research project was being undertaken. The project involved researching community perceptions and attitudes towards involvement in a school in a small town in a remote part of Western Australia. Distance, cultural differences, communication difficulties, lack of knowledge of the community and personnel problems were some of the risks that were evident. The paper provides advice on strategies to avoid the risks that remote management of research entails, and examines literature related to the topic.

Introduction

A team of researchers received a grant to conduct a study of Indigenous participation in school governance in a small country town in Western Australia, named Murnong for this study. The focus of the study was the participation of one of the local Indigenous groups in the operation of an Indigenous school program attached to the local district high school. This was not the first time we had studied the school. Four years before, we had been engaged to conduct an evaluation of the program when it was managed by a coalition of government and community agencies in the town (Partington, Kickett-Tucker & Mack. 1999). The school was being funded by the federal government through a special program at the time and was not under the wing of the Education Department.

As a result of our earlier evaluation, late in 1999 the Education Department agreed to fund the school as a special program of the local district high school. The recommendations of a subsequent investigation by one of the research team members into community participation in the management of the school ((Mack 2000) were not acted upon by the Department or the school. Now, several years later, we were revisiting the site to see the extent of community participation and gain an insight into community perceptions of the school and its management. It was intended to be a relatively brief study, one which would provide a rapid result and enable us to follow up with negotiations with the Department of Education and Training on the need for more community consultation in this school and others like it. In some respects the aim of the project was in line with Griffiths (1998) purpose of research for empowerment: to conduct the study in order to empower the community members whose children attended the school.

The town is thousands of kilometres from Perth, where we were located, and is difficult to reach even by plane. The research required considerable data collection: interviews with teachers, parents, community members and students, arranging group meetings and negotiation of potential outcomes.

There are clear research protocols to observe in conducting research with Indigenous participants (Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000; Shibasaki, Valery et al. 2000) and, being concerned to observe these protocols, I arranged for partner researchers, who were located in the town, to assist in the research. These were two people from the local community, Sandra who was Indigenous and Lynne who was non-Indigenous. They had worked together in the past and had good connections and credibility in the community. Also, they had the skills to participate in the research. Lynne had been an informant in an earlier project and had conducted research herself, so she was well versed in the process. Sandra was an Indigenous teaching assistant at the district high school and was related to the Indigenous community that had an interest in the school. While the label “flying visitor” (Forrest and Sherwood 1995) could be applied to me and my Perth colleagues, we felt that the link with local researchers would avoid the undesirable connotations of research in this manner.

The first step was to gain consent from the community for the study to be approved by the funding body. We had not intended to establish a community reference group because of the proposed brevity of the research and it was expected that we would report to a community gathering soon after completion. The community knew all the researchers from the previous studies and we had adopted a similar strategy earlier. In those previous studies I had worked mainly with the education providers and colleagues had worked with the community members. My experiences, mainly working with teachers and students, had not adequately prepared me for the broader context of the study.

Consent for the Study

I arranged for the local partners to organise the consent. They advised me that the community chairperson would be in a position to provide consent on behalf of the community for this project. However, after they talked to him, they informed me that he would prefer it if I was to speak to him directly. After discussions with Lynne, it was decided that I should make a personal visit to the community and discuss the project with the chairman. Fortunately—given the limited funds we had for the study— I had just commenced another project that was to take me through the community regularly so the cost of travel to the community was not a problem.

The first trip for the new year was coming up so I phoned the community centre two weeks prior to travelling to make arrangements for the visit. There was no reply. Several more phone calls over the next couple of weeks, along with a discussion with one of the local partners, proved fruitless and I set out on my trip gripped with portents of failure, having made no contact. The trip was punctuated by a stopover in a larger regional centre where we also conducted research. A couple of days later, I arrived in the town, in transit to the research site I was heading for, and visited the community centre. The portents were correct: I was informed that the chairman had gone to the regional town we had just left! In fact, he had stepped off the plane I had boarded on its return trip!

Fortunately, there was no cost involved in this failed attempt but it taught me to commence my efforts earlier to arrange such meetings. I did so for my subsequent visit to the town and I made careful preparations for a successful meeting with the chairman. The failure of the earlier effort lay in my assumptions regarding communication with the community. These assumptions were appropriate for a city organization but were not appropriate for this country

town. Rather than being accessible all day, the community office was busy very early in the morning — between 7 and 8.30am — and after that time was not always occupied. Staff at the centre were often out on projects and it would be unattended. Furthermore, consistent with Indigenous cultural protocols, face to face interaction was clearly more valued than phone conversations and as a result, messages left on the answering machine were given low priority. So when I met the chairman, the personal contact enabled full dialogue on the research project. He accepted the explanation for the research and was quite willing to consent to it being carried out in his community.

In hindsight, an approach similar to Thies (1987)—setting up a consultative committee to advise on the strategies for the research, the content of the material and decisions regarding who to interview and when to hold meetings— would have been a better way to approach the task. However, like Sanderson & Allard (2001), we were limited in the funds available to conduct such an extensive program. Our solution, the inclusion of local people on the team to engage effectively with local people, was not entirely successful but did resolve some of the shortcomings that Thies (1987) noted were possible. It would have been wise for me to consult more widely on the processes of communication with the community in the first instance.

Research assistants

A second issue in the project was the employment of a research assistant. I needed to employ a person who could liaise with people, get consent for participation in the study, arrange meetings, conduct interviews and record data. It was essential to have a person who was known and respected by the local community so that he or she could engage effectively in interviews regarding the topic. In a small town such people are rare at the best of times. Initially, it was planned that Sandra would conduct the interviews but she unexpectedly resigned from her position at the school and pulled out of the project at the same time. By this time, Lynne was immersed in a new job and had little time for the project, so it was necessary to conduct the negotiations myself when I visited the town.

My next visit to town was accompanied by deep concerns regarding impending doom. I inquired from the various sources I had—particularly Lynne—about appropriate people to carry out the work. One person was identified, Susan, a young female office worker with good credentials: she was a member of the Indigenous community, had good English language skills and was keen to participate. I checked with the community chairperson and my co-researcher in the town, who both agreed that she would be suitable, so I engaged her to work on the project.

Initially, I asked Susan to conduct interviews with parents of students at the school. The results, however, were disappointing. Rather than interview the parents, she interviewed immediate relatives, two of whom had no contact with the school. Being an outsider, I was unaware of the specific dynamics that led to this outcome, but, drawing on the literature regarding status and roles of females in Indigenous society, it is possible to speculate that she didn't have the necessary connections or maturity to conduct the interviews required (Harris 1980). It is possible that, being young and knowing that interviewing key figures in the community required more status, she sidestepped the issue. After she forwarded the tapes to me, I was unable to contact her, and subsequently heard that she had left town.

The qualities that are required in an interviewer in the context of the research that we were conducting included the authority to carry out interviews in an Indigenous social setting as well as the ability to interrogate the interviewee's responses as they occurred so that subsequent questions could build on the responses (Partington 1998). This required an understanding of the nature of human interaction and the ability to interpret discourse as it happened. Also, rather than just accepting answers to interview questions, the interviewer needs to question the interviewee regarding meanings and contexts so that the data are more meaningful. The interviewer who does this is more likely to get valid data than the interviewer who doesn't.

On my next visit—now some nine months after initiating the project—I was once again looking for an assistant to conduct the interviews. I spent two days searching for an appropriate person, talking to the local research partners, teachers, linguists and community people. I received two possible leads. One was a linguist in the town who had good connections with the community but who was pregnant and would be unable to complete the work. The other, Robyn, who was strongly recommended, was a member of the Indigenous community that was at the centre of the project, and she had had considerable experience as a language worker. This was a fruitful lead because people who fill this role are experienced at conducting interviews with Indigenous people, in this case members of the target community. I was given Robyn's mobile phone number and called her. She agreed to a meeting and gave me directions to her house. When I arrived there, a large gathering of people were outside the house, playing cards and talking. Robyn came across to me and we discussed the project but during the process others came up and it was clear that they were intoxicated. It was also clear that she had been imbibing to excess as well.

I left with reservations about employing her. In a discussion shortly after with Lynne, I was informed that Robyn had succumbed to alcoholism in the last couple of months and would not be in a state to do the interviews. This was disappointing for two reasons. It made me question the motives of the person who had recommended Robyn (Robyn was denied employment by that person) but also I was to depart the following morning and it looked as if the project would not get an interviewer.

That evening we ate at a local restaurant. In the course of the meal, Lynne observed that a person she knew, Andrea, was also in the restaurant. She suggested that I talk to Andrea as she may be interested in doing the work. I went across to her, to discover that she had been one of my students at University a decade before. Not only that, in the intervening years she had studied linguistics and was about to take over from the linguist when she went on maternity leave. This would give direct access to the community and was a possible salvation for the project.

Andrea was agreeable to take on the task and so I engaged her on the spot. This proved to be fruitful. She was well known in the community and was able to conduct the interviews with community members. Even better, when she commenced working in the language centre, she recruited the Indigenous language workers to assist in interviewing as well. This was particularly useful as it was culturally inappropriate for a woman to interview some of the men, and the male language worker was able to do this.

Informed Consent

It was necessary to obtain informed consent from the participants (Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2000). As we were not in a position to negotiate consent with the participants ourselves, it became necessary to rely on Andrea to intercede for us. The importance of gaining consent and its implications — such as opportunity to withdraw at any time, and having no adverse effects if a decision was made not to participate—was discussed with Andrea. Copies of the consent form were given to her and her immediate response was that the language was too technical for the community. Set in standard Australian English, the consent form met the approval of the University ethics committee but, according to Andrea, was not sufficiently comprehensible to the parents. Many of the participants we would want to interview were unable to read. The Indigenous community members thus needed to have the consent form read to them. The initial letter of consent was modified in order to make it comprehensible.

One of the dangers of non-Indigenous researchers conducting research in Indigenous communities is the issue of power: the assumption of power by the non-Indigenous researchers over the participants in the study (Scheurich 1997)—in this case members of the Indigenous community. One expression of this power is the assumption of the researchers that participation will be automatic. Instead, Indigenous community members often lack the verbal assertiveness and fluency in English necessary to express their reservations. As stated above, we intended to rely on local people, versed in the language and culture of the local community, to assist in gaining consent for the research through proper channels. Sandra's withdrawal endangered this approach and subsequent efforts to engage another Indigenous person were fruitless. Andrea, however, provided a gateway between both worlds, particularly given her ability to work with the language workers who were able to gain necessary consents.

Whose voices should be heard?

It took many months to gather the first useful interviews in this study, but in the process it raised the issue of whose voices should be heard. The stakeholders in the project were the Department of Education and Training, particularly the district director, the school principal and the teachers; the townspeople; the community members; and the students. Among these, who was to decide who should be interviewed? Because I was at a distance, it had to be a mixed decision. It was easy to identify the institutional participants: teachers in the program, the principal, the district director and possibly the director in the Department. However, decisions regarding community participants needed to be made by a person with local knowledge. Susan chose to interview relatives, only one of whom had contact with the school. Andrea, with more authority and more experience and knowledge, adopted a broad approach, choosing to interview all of the parents of students in the program, significant community members, and students.

Because the program is part of a government school, participation of the parents in the governance of the program requires Department of Education and Training consent. As researchers, it is our role to make clear the views of the community and the Department and communicate them to the various stakeholders. This does not mean that the views will be acted upon. Power, in this case, resides with the Department and, because it is unusual for a community to be involved in the ways perceived by the community, the chances of implementing the wishes of the community remain problematic.

Meetings

Working with colleagues in the town to arrange meetings was a difficult task. An important meeting held by the Indigenous community to discuss the research project was missed by the researchers because none was available to attend when it was unexpectedly moved from the originally scheduled time. At this meeting,

The chairman is giving the project preference at the community meeting on Tuesday of next week. He wants to inform people of the project, start up discussions, give people time to think about their responses. He has suggested we then visit and interview individuals/small groups so that people have the opportunity to express their views independently. If every one is in agreement I will tape the meeting (Andrea, personal communication, 8/4/03)

The lost opportunity to participate in this meeting was unfortunate. Had we been available, it is possible another member of the research team might have attended.

The school program was managed by two teachers, one male and one female. The male teacher, Willis, taught the boys while the female teacher, Rhonda, taught the girls. This was consistent with the cultural expectations of the Indigenous community that maintained most interest in the program. The teachers were keen to establish links with the community and, independent of the researchers, called a meeting to inquire into community participation. However, for various reasons, on two occasions they were unsuccessful. Although there was general consensus among the community members that the teachers were doing a good job, they had not established credible links with the community itself. Due to their failure to consult the community about the date of the meeting, which clashed with other community events, no one turned up. A subsequent meeting was also a failure as a result of a funeral at the same time.

At that stage, it was decided that we would hold a combined meeting and use the resources at our disposal to promote the meeting. The day selected, Friday, was chosen because it fitted in with my schedule for the other research project. This was a mistake. Although Lynne and Andrea were successful in attracting a number of people to the meeting, the fact that it was held on the day after pension day meant that many of those who might have attended were otherwise engaged. Consequently, fewer attended than we wished.

The poor choice of day was made known in hindsight, although I should have been aware of it: Forrest and Sherwood (1995) identify meeting times as an issue that needs to be contextualised in relation to pension days, funerals and other significant community events. As it turned out, however, the issues emerging in this first meeting were more complex than we thought, and a second meeting will be needed. This will take place on a Tuesday, which, according to Lynne and Andrea, should be a more propitious day, so long as no funerals are scheduled and other activities do not conflict.

Local knowledge

Local knowledge was difficult to attain for the Perth based researchers. We endeavoured to incorporate this into the project through the participation of a local research partner (Jennings

1998). This was successful but required regular interaction to ensure that what we acquired in other contexts was filtered through our local researcher who was not always available. Decisions were sometimes made in the absence of this knowledge and mistakes, such as the timing of the meeting above, were made. It would have been desirable for the local researcher to conduct the study but she was only available intermittently for the work and so this option was not possible.

Local knowledge that would have been useful included a knowledge of politics at the local level: who the key players were and what the relationships among the various stakeholders were. However, this lack of comprehension is remedied rapidly through the process of interviewing participants in the study. In most research projects of this nature, the micropolitical situation is clarified as a part of the research process. It is unlikely, also, that any one person has a grasp on the diverse machinations that occur in any social setting. The reality as viewed from the local researcher will be only one of many interpretations of the local scene and through the processes of data gathering and analysis a more complete picture of the diversity of the research setting will be revealed.

Travel, Communication & Accommodation

Unlike Thies (1987), who had to travel to remote Indigenous communities by four wheel drive vehicles or light aircraft, the town in which we conducted our study was on a regular air route. Because the town was not a major centre, however, air travel was limited. It was necessary to fly in one day, do the work the next (and subsequent days if necessary) and fly out the day after business was concluded. Flights into town arrived in the mid afternoon when schools were closed and community members were unavailable. Thus a one day meeting in town could take three days in total: two days travelling and one day for the meeting. The demise of Ansett introduced further complications to the project. When it was initially devised, Ansett flew into the town and air fares were relatively cheap. Without Ansett, we were reliant on a regional carrier whose charges were far higher, although their schedule was more regular than Ansett's.

Other elements of communication also introduced difficulties. On my first visit to town, I was using a phone with an account with Optus. Unfortunately, Optus didn't have a service in the town and I had to switch to Telstra to maintain mobile communication in the town. Also, the motels were of variable quality. One motel had no flyscreens and, as Ross River virus is widespread in the north, this was a concern. Wildlife, too, was a problem, particularly the frog in the toilet bowl. Fortunately, my travel was only within the townsite and so larger animals did not represent a hazard, unlike for colleagues engaged in the other project, who crashed into a cow on an outback road.

Change

Change was an issue that had not been factored into the project. When it was devised, there were two teachers (one male and one female) in the program and two Indigenous aides. The school was in the charge of an acting principal and the district was managed by a director who had been some years in the job. By the time the project was under way, the male teacher, the principal, one Indigenous aide and the director had gone. Personnel in the Department of Education and Training also changed. This required the establishment of relationships with new participants, accepting changes in perceptions regarding the program and gaining consent from the new participants.

There is always an element of risk in such change, and we were concerned at the reaction of the new directors at the Department and district levels. This concern was not misplaced: an early decision was made by the new departmental director to cut the funding to the program and allocate funds to the district office in which the school was located. This raised the possibility that the district office would withhold the funds from the school and use them for other purposes and this gave the research team considerable concern. Shortly after, however, we were informed that the district office was willing to continue to fund the school and our fears of termination were allayed.

Other changes also influenced the nature of the program. When we first researched the school, four years ago, it was being managed by a coalition of government and community agencies. Now, under the Department of Education and Training, the coalition no longer existed. Typical of many country towns, the turnover of government employees is considerable, and Murnong was no exception. There were few, if any, of the personnel left who had participated in the management of the school in 1999. The pressures that had led to the formation of the school in the first place—school absenteeism and high levels of crime being carried out by Indigenous youth in the town—had arisen again and it was possible that the youths attending the school were among the perpetrators.

The composition of students at the school also had changed. In 1999, they were largely from the one language group. Now, the mix of backgrounds was considerable, with students from communities far from Murnong attending. This introduced another variable into the deliberations of the researchers and participants, because the program had been initiated on the understanding that it would be specific to the one group. The process of achieving a resolution of these issues is continuing.

Conclusion

The problems that have beset the project so far have been a mix of distance and ignorance. Resolution of these problems has been attempted through using research partners on site. The lack of regular and appropriate communication with the onsite partner, however, has meant that some problems weren't avoided. Others were: the final choice of a research interviewer was resolved satisfactorily as a consequence of the local researcher's contacts; awareness of the best time to hold future community meetings has been clarified and the subsequent meetings should be successful.

There is no question that researching at a distance is not as effective as working at a local level. The knowledge of the context is important for qualitative studies and can only be acquired through extensive contact with the community. For this research project, the alternative of long term residence in the town while the study was carried out was not available. However, the study is highly desirable from the teachers' and the community's points of view. Local resources are not adequate to drive the project and to analyse and write the results. Despite the shortcomings of the research process so far, research at arms length is, hopefully, better than no research at all.

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