

# Reflections on the Past — Learning in social movements: Experiences in the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement

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Jen Margaret is a 5th generation Pakeha from rural Canterbury. Her research links her participation in international development initiatives focused on learning in social change and her active involvement in networks of Tangata Tiriti working for Tiriti justice.

A discernable movement of Pākehā who support Māori efforts for self-determination, particularly through honouring the Treaty of Waitangi, emerged in the early 1980s. An approach was established with the movements of Māori and Pākehā each working separately with their own people but in relationship with one another. My Masters' research, completed in April 2009, considers learning within the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement by focusing on influences on members' learning about the practice of working with Māori activists and how this learning is shared within the movement. As a member of this movement I used a participatory action research approach to explore these issues with members of three generations of the movement.

In this research I addressed a number of questions about learning in the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement<sup>1</sup> derived from my experience as a member and also my engagement in the Facilitating Learning in Action for Social Change (FLASC) initiative led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex. The aim of the FLASC initiative is to increase effectiveness of social change work by focusing on learning in social change processes and considering ways in which learning might be facilitated. The motivations for my research, along with engagement with the literature, led to the formulation of the following research questions:

- What influences learning for members of the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement?
- What impacts on the sharing of learning between movement members?
- What are the implications of this study for future practice and research in this and other social justice movements?

While these questions apply to various aspects of Pākehā Treaty work, including approaches to campaigning or education, my focus was on learning in relation to our approach to working with Māori activists in the Tino Rangatiratanga movement. I focused on this in recognition of the importance of this practice and as a means of refining the topic. I used an analytical framework developed by Foley (1999) as the basis for exploring learning for individual movement members and the sharing of learning within the movement.

The aims in this study were threefold. I wanted to contribute to the efficacy of the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement through deepening knowledge of learning. I wanted to increase the understanding of learning in social movements generally. It was also important to contribute to the emerging body of work in development studies on facilitating learning in social change. This paper briefly summaries key research findings with particular emphasis on implications for future practice.

## Learning in the movement

Focusing on the influences on learning for individual movement members showed that the influences on their learning are diverse. Learning from Māori is significant. While the focus of the practice is Māori activists, learning is influenced by a range of Māori who may or may not be part of the Tino Rangatiratanga movement. The influence of other members of the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement is one among a number other influences and its significance varies for the different generations of the movement. Learning in social movements is complex and this learning is often informal and incidental because it is embedded in action.

The focus on sharing of learning within the movement highlighted a disjuncture: while individual movement members are doing a significant amount of learning, there is very little sharing of learning about the practice of working with Māori activists. Other practices however, are shared, though this is often inhibited by

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter One of the thesis I explain my use of the term Pakeha Treaty workers' movement and discuss the recent shift to the movement being described as Tangata Tiriti.

such things as conflict within the movement, members' self-perceptions and, to some extent, the awareness of generational positioning.

The focus of movement members on critiquing broader society can impact negatively on the ways they interact within the movement. In addition to these issues at the micro-political (within the movement) level, consideration of the movement within the macro-political context of broader society brings to the surface additional elements that affect sharing. How members conceptualise and identify with the movement is a factor. Broader Pākehā society's attitudes towards the Treaty, Pākehā individualism, neo-liberalism, and issues relating to gender and ethnicity all influence the sharing of learning within the movement. A complex interplay between the micro and macro-political levels is also evident, which supports Foley's (1999) analysis.

Inquiring into the lack of sharing of learning about the practice of working with Māori activists revealed that the dynamic, relational nature of this practice makes it difficult to share. Comparisons with other practices, in particular Treaty education, showed that the sense of identity as a movement can vary in relation to different practices. Recognising this, and considering the different ways in which social movements are conceptualised allows for a more nuanced understanding of learning within social movements.

### **Implications for practice**

Participants saw that in order to encourage sharing within the movement a more supportive and affirming environment needs to be created. It was suggested that given the history of conflict in the movement, movement members give greater attention to building positive relationships with one another and endeavour to engage with each other in positive and affirming ways. Developing constructive ways of dealing with conflict within the movement is regarded as important. It is also seen as necessary to acknowledge the impact of Pākehā individualism on how movement members interact and to attempt to address this through intentional efforts to work collectively.

Acknowledging and valuing a diversity of approaches to the work and valuing a range of contributions was seen as critical to enhancing sharing within the movement. There is no one 'right' way. Being open to a diversity of approaches may be critical but it also presents challenges. It raises issues such as how we respond if we think that a movement member's practice is detrimental to Māori and / or to the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement. This requires us to consider how we constructively critique and challenge each other's

practice. Attention needs to be paid to these issues so that diversity in the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement might be productively embraced.

Participants also noted that meeting structures can inhibit newcomers contributing to discussion. The focus in meetings on specific issues privileged those who felt confident to speak on a particular issue. As a way of addressing this, it was suggested that in meetings time is given for all those present to share what related work they've done since the last meeting. Participants suggested that sub-groups might be established for peer supervision, mentoring and reflection on specific issues. Participants made the observation that they tend to offer this type of support more often to people outside the movement than to those within. This led to discussion of ways to enable people to feel confident to ask for this support. Members, particularly those who have been in a movement for a long time and are regarded by others as highly competent, need to be aware of how they might be perceived by others. It was suggested that they should highlight their fallibility by sharing not only their successful practice but also the mistakes they have made. There was the specific suggestion that there could be the sharing of 'out-takes', examples of times when people felt they had not acted appropriately.

Though it was not named explicitly by participants, power exists in movement relationships and has an impact on interaction. Considering the operation of power in the movement may provide useful insights into how we understand learning. However, explicit discussion of power *within* the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement is generally avoided. The focus of the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement is on shifting power relationships in broader Pākehā society. Power tends to be perceived as a negative force. Discussing concepts of power and finding constructive frameworks within which to discuss its exercise within the movement could be of value.

These suggestions for ways to improve sharing are focused on changes within the movement over which participants can exercise some control. Implementation of these ideas would be beneficial as they would enhance movement relationships generally and address issues which are currently inhibiting sharing of learning. The research findings show that there are also broader societal influences to be considered that affect the sharing of learning within the movement. While enacting the suggestions outlined above could be beneficial this will not necessarily address all the inhibitors to sharing of learning in the movement. We could build a more affirming and supportive

environment and still find the sharing of learning is inhibited in many ways. An increased understanding of macro-level influences is also needed. At the macro level, the broader societal context influences how members conceptualise and identify with the movement. This affects participation and engagement in sharing. Broader society's changing attitudes to the Treaty have also had an impact on approaches to sharing. Pākehā individualism, gender and ethnicity also affect participation and sharing. Neo-liberal reforms, including user-pays tertiary education, were perceived as having an impact on participation in activism generally. Discussion within the movement of these issues could provide a starting point for a more nuanced understanding of the influences on sharing of learning. While these issues are yet to be explored in depth, bringing an awareness of macro-political influences to discussions of learning could be an initial step.

Foley (1999) states that 'we need to recognise the complex, ambiguous and contradictory character of particular movements and struggles. Analyses of these complexities provide a necessary basis for future strategies' (p. 143). Recognition of the complexity of the learning environment can help us understand the nature of sharing within the movement. Social movements themselves are inherently complex and it would be helpful to make this more explicit. The Pākehā Treaty workers' movement is like the 'movement of movements' as described by Bullard (2005). 'The 'shape' of the movement is nonlinear: it is intuitive and personal, based on commitments, relationships, networks and empathies. It is a plastic, dynamic, intergrative and disintergrative [*sic*] process' (p. 5). Similarly Conway (2006) describes the social movement she researches as 'a complex and contradictory ensemble of practices, discourse and identities that were constantly emergent, always in process, always in the making' (p. 13).

In addition to identifying influences on the sharing of learning at the micro and macro-political levels, research findings highlighted the fundamental nature of the practice itself as a key determinant of the extent to which learning about practice might be shared. Understanding that learning does not happen in the same way for all practices and exploring appropriate approaches for sharing learning about different practices could be an important next step for the movement.

### **Approaches to sharing practice**

While participants' suggestions for future practice focused predominantly on enhancing learning generally in the movement, the need to share learning about the

specific practice of working with Māori activists was also noted. It was felt that greater sharing could help develop this practice. Treaty conferences were considered an important site for movement learning.

The research findings suggest that the practice of working with Māori activists is complex and contextual and as such is difficult to share. The usefulness of sharing understandings of this practice was questioned. Yet ways of approaching sharing appropriate to this type of practice do exist.

Within the FLASC initiative I learned a great deal from hearing stories from very different social change contexts. This suggests that we could, in fact, learn from sharing our practice of working with Māori activists even though we operate in diverse contexts. It would be useful to make clear that the aim of sharing is not to generate a collective practice but to strengthen the practice of the collective through learning from one another's diverse experiences. This allows us to be open to listening in these conversations for the similarities and differences in experiences which can enrich our understanding of our own and others' practice.

Participants highlighted the need to develop language to talk about relationships with Māori activists. The need to develop language may provide a starting point for movement discussions. Members will need to be mindful of the contested and changing nature of the practice we are describing and recognise that it may be difficult to develop a shared language as there is not a collective practice. With this awareness, engaging in a process of generating language may provide an opportunity for sharing about understandings of practice.

The Treaty Resource Centre (2007) makes a useful contribution to conceptualising practice based on relationships. Writing in the context of organisational Treaty application, the metaphor of a journey is used:

...to represent ideas about how organisations are moving along various paths towards achieving relationships based on the Treaty's intentions. The emphasis is on travelling together rather than reaching a pre-set destination.... The course of the journey is to be mapped through dialogue and negotiation between the parties in the relationship. (p. 6)

The metaphor of a journey acknowledges both on-going process and the potential of many different routes. It could be fruitful as a way of framing discussions in the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement about the practice of working with Māori activists.

There are parallels between the complex, contextual nature of the practice of working with Māori activists and development practice described in the work of Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) (2007). CDRA regard relationships as central to development practice and see development practitioners working in 'a world of systems, of relationships, of connections; ambiguous, shifting and changing, developing, interweaving, continually being formed and continually changing into something else. In a word dynamic' (p. 86). They describe the process of 'apprehending the particular dynamic of an individual's or grouping's development trajectory or process' as 'reading development' and suggest that 'A reading of development must remain supple, subtle and nuanced; it must be iterative and gradual; it must be reflective and reflexive' (p. 73). Understanding the dynamic nature of the practice of working with Māori activists and cultivating an approach of 'reading' this type of practice could enable its sharing within the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement.

#### **The contribution of research to the movement**

Participants identified research as an important way of enhancing individual and collective learning in the movement. It has the potential to promote praxis and to prompt conversations that otherwise might not happen. The methodology and method adopted for this research were strongly influenced by the work of Huygens (2007), who had recently undertaken research as a committed participant within the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement.

In the research workshop there were a number of comments on the contribution of the research to building the movement. Participants valued learning more about each other's stories and were surprised by the realisation that although they had entered the movement at different times and had different backgrounds their journeys, once they were a part of the movement, were similar. Participants identified personal and collective benefits in being able to see connections between their experiences. The research process strengthened individual's connections to one another. Learning more about each other in this research process sparked an interest in continuing and expanding the process of sharing the personal stories of movement members. It was suggested that it is time for a documentary or book about the movement. The process of each generation reflecting on its story and these being collectively discussed by the research participants at the workshop facilitated greater understanding and insight into movement relationships and generated ideas for actions to enhance learning and

sharing of learning. Participants noted that the focus on the effectiveness of the movement's work and the implications for future practice was critical to this research being seen as useful and relevant to the movement.

One of my intentions in this study was to better understand the experiences of the different generations of the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement. I defined social movement generations based on the chronology of the movement rather than the age of its members. This was useful to the research process. It generated learning for participants about the distinctions between generations. Some participants also became aware of their assumptions about other movement members based on their age. It also created awareness of differences and a sense of continuity in the experiences of each generation within the movement. This study has highlighted a need to continue to explore the implications of such intergenerational awareness.

In presenting this research I endeavoured to balance the generating of a piece of work to fulfil the academic requirements with the providing of resources useful within the Pākehā Treaty workers' movement and to others working in different social change contexts. Part of my commitment to engaging with movement members in a participatory action research process has been generating information from the research in a range of forms for a variety of audiences. These include contributing resources to the FLASC initiative website, making records of the interviews and workshop publicly available through the Treaty Resource Centre, and making presentations at Treaty workers' and other relevant gatherings and conferences such as this. In these ways I intend to make the learning from this research accessible, understandable and actionable (Chatterton, Fuller, & Routledge, 2007).

#### **Future Research**

Undertaking this study highlighted how the understanding of learning in social movements might be developed in future research. The focus in this study was on the experiences of people who are currently active in the movement. Discussion of conflict in the movement highlighted that because of the difficult experiences in the movement, many people have left. Interviewing those people about their experiences could contribute another dimension to understanding about learning in this movement. Furthermore, the participants in this research were from one geographical region. Given the diversity of relationships with Māori throughout Aotearoa, a comparative study of experiences of Pākehā Treaty workers in other parts of

the country could provide interesting and productive learning for the movement nationally.

More broadly, there is a need for the development of theory to support research into learning in social movements. My approach using Foley's (1999) framework as a basis and then drawing in work from a range of development and social movement theorists felt somewhat fragmented. The development of frameworks which more effectively integrate a range of concepts and allow for more detailed analysis would enhance future research. In particular analysis could be enriched by the inclusion of theoretical understandings of power and of the relationships between individuals and the collective.

Using a generational approach in this study was useful for creating awareness of the different experiences of the generations in the movement. It stimulated discussion on the notion of generations and raised the question of whether an increased awareness of generational positioning might inhibit learning within the movement. However, this study also highlighted the limitations of existing language and concepts for analysing the influence of generational positioning in social movements. The development of consistent language and theoretical frameworks that provide insight into generational positioning is needed in order to advance future discussions and research on intergenerational learning in social movements.

Pākehā Treaty workers are allies to Māori who are working for tino rangatiratanga. As such our position parallels that of people in countries with similar colonial histories and that of development practitioners who are supporting social change for marginalised groups but are not themselves a member of that group. Central to Pākehā Treaty workers' approach to social change is focusing on shifting the dominant culture, 'our own people'. This research raised this but did not explore it in depth. Further research into how Pākehā Treaty workers act as allies would be useful both within and beyond the movement.

#### **Acknowledgements and further information**

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If you are interested in a copy of the full thesis which contains detailed background to the topic, literature review, methodology and more detail on the findings please contact me: [jen.margaret@clear.net.nz](mailto:jen.margaret@clear.net.nz).

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