

**Communities of Practice, Communities of
Compliance or Communities of Resistance?
Regional Networks in the Adult and
Community Education Sector in Aotearoa
New Zealand**

Dr. Marion Bowl

**University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New
Zealand and University of Birmingham, UK**

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which the language of ‘networking’ ‘communities of practice’ and ‘learning in communities’ has been used to serve government policy priorities in the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. The paper draws on research which explored the role of regional networks in meeting ACE practitioners’ professional development needs. It reveals some of the problems arising from the attempt to impose an unclearly articulated ‘communities of practice’ approach to regional organisation in the sector. These include lack of clarity about the role of networks whose parameters were imposed by government and the difficulty of building inclusivity and partnership into the process of network development, particularly in the context of the Treaty of Waitangi¹ which governs relationships between Pakeha (those of European settler origin) and Māori tangata whenua (the indigenous population). The paper discusses the ways in which theoretical concepts may be bent to meet contradictory agendas – and suggests a more radical community development approach to networking which might be adopted in defence of adult and community education as it comes under attack from a newly-elected government with a revised set of priorities for adult and community education.

Theorising communities of practice.

The concept of communities of practice – a theory of situated and social learning - was proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) who explored processes of learning in apprenticeship and workplace situations. Wenger further developed this concept in relation to organisational learning (Wenger 2001) and it has become a popular one, widely applied to workplace and professional development settings. For Wenger, communities of practice are an essential element of organisational development. They function to foster shared identity and a

sense of community endeavour; to enable the exchange of information and encourage mutual learning. They provide a means by which newcomers (or, in Lave and Wenger's formulation, 'peripheral practitioners') learn the rules and rituals of their field of practice and, through a process of socialisation, become part of the core of that organisation. For Wenger, the theory of communities of practice acknowledges the link between knowledge and community, learning and identity. Community is defined as practice-related and sustained through a shared domain of interest, joint activity and practitioner interaction.

The notion of communities of practice seems to fit comfortably with professional development in the field of adult and community education; it stresses learning through social interaction and through informal processes; it suggests a means by which newer ACE practitioners can develop confidence and capability through active involvement. It seems to be a model of learning compatible with the ACE sector's way of working within communities and acknowledges ACE practitioners' ability to network locally and nationally (Bowl et al 2007). Coincidentally, in a sector characterised by low pay, fractional and casual contracts, communities of practice seem to offer a relatively low cost tool for professional development. For the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC)ⁱⁱ, which was responsible for implementing government policy for the ACE sector in Aotearoa New Zealand from 1999 to 2009, it also seemed to be a useful vehicle for ensuring the sector complied with its policies and expectations for tertiary education.

Adult and Community Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Adult and Community Education (ACE) in Aotearoa New Zealand has been defined as:

...A process whereby adults choose to engage in a range of educational activities within the community. The practice fosters individual and group learning which promotes empowerment, equity, active citizenship, critical and social awareness and sustainable development. In Aotearoa New Zealand, ACE is based upon the unique relationships reflected in the Treaty of Waitangi. (TEC 2001)

ACE embraces a diversity of provider organisations including secondary schools, iwi-based (Māori tribal) providers, small community-based groups, small and large regional and national voluntary organisations, Rural Education Activity Programmes (REAPs), Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) and private training establishments (PTEs). ACE activity, as defined above, encompasses a range of formal and informal educational provision. It should also take account of the bicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand in which the values, cultures and practices of the indigenous Māori and Pakeha (European) populations have equal standing. The Treaty of Waitangi is a crucial element of the relationship between Māori (tangata whenua – the indigenous people) and Pakeha (tangata Tiriti – the settler populations). The Treaty implies a partnership relationship between two peoples, where the cultural values, skills and world view of both are respected and honoured - something which successive governments have failed to achieve in relation to Māori. It also offers a guiding framework for the development of partnership whilst providing support to the voice of Māori to redress historical and current inequalities and discrimination (Yates 1996; Chile 2006; Munford et al 2006; Network Waitangi 2008).

ACE in Aotearoa New Zealand has traditionally been under-resourced and under-recognised. Most ACE educators and organisers, except those working in larger schools, tertiary institutions (universities, polytechnics and wānangaⁱⁱⁱ) or local branches of national organisations, either work on part-time contracts or entirely voluntarily. However, following the election of a Labour Government in 1999, there was a renewed commitment to supporting the development of the sector and a strategy to build ACE capability and capacity was developed by the government's Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), in consultation with ACE sector practitioners (TEC 2001). This strategy established five national priorities for the sector:

- Targeting learners whose initial education was not successful
- Raising foundation skills
- Strengthening communities

- Strengthening social cohesion
- Encouraging lifelong learning

The strategy also sought to encourage and resource local networks of practitioners to adopt a 'communities of practice approach' (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2001) to the professional development of those working in the sector. The following definition of community of practice was adopted:

A community of practice can be described as "peers in the execution of real work" (www.ewenger.com: Communities of Practice; A brief introduction). What holds communities together is a common sense of purpose, joint enterprise and a need to know what other members know and learn from each other. Communities are defined by knowledge rather than task and focus on creating value for, and with members. (TEC 2006:6)

A number of assumptions underpinned this approach. First, that there was understanding across the sector of the purposes of regional networks and a willingness to come together to share information and engage in joint activity; second, that it would be possible to bring organisations and practitioners from this diverse field into the regional 'fold' and thereby induct new organisations and practitioners and strengthen ACE sector leadership'; third, that the establishment of regional groupings would then help to develop the capacity of the sector nationally.

The concept of communities of practice was translated into the establishment by the TEC of 35 regional ACE practitioner networks across the country. However, as the TEC strategy for network development began to be rolled out, another agenda began to emerge.

From communities of practice to networks of compliance

The TEC's rationale for setting up regional ACE Networks was articulated in information released to ACE providers (TEC 2004: 3). A system of regional networks, it was argued, would:

- Promote a cooperative approach in place of the prevailing competition for resources

- Promote 'ownership' of changes taking place in the sector – particularly around issues such as quality assurance and compliance with TEC goals
- Promote efficiency and long term effectiveness through collaboration
- Provide a framework for continuous engagement on the part of sector practitioners and organisations

The TEC envisaged networks as being representative of a wide range of ACE providers in their localities and responsive to the diverse demographics and needs of their regions. ACE Networks were tasked with coordinating regional ACE activity, identifying gaps in provision and undertaking projects to meet ACE needs and priorities; they were to be a forum for sharing good practice and for participation in regional consultation processes around tertiary education. They were also expected to reach out more effectively to Māori and Pacific adult education providers who tended to be under-represented in the existing formal ACE networks and also less likely than Pakeha-led and -focused ACE organisations to gain TEC funding. The TEC stated that it expected ACE networks to meet four times a year, to keep records of meetings, to identify need and to:

Work on activities that progress the Tertiary Education Strategy
e.g. collaboration, excellence, relevance, access.

A small sum of funding was allocated to each network to carry out these tasks. The money was not paid directly to the networks, but was claimable from the TEC against receipts and evidence that activities had been undertaken. Finally and somewhat ironically, given the long list of tasks allocated to regional networks by the TEC, its guidance to networks ended with the statement:

It is not TEC's Network – it is owned by ACE providers in the region. (TEC 2004: 10)

Even on paper, this was a tall, and somewhat contradictory, order. In practice it was even more difficult to achieve. At an early stage in the setting up of regional networks, the communities of practice approach had become a little blurred. There were also questions about whose

interests were being served by the establishment of networks. It was certainly apparent to many of those in the networks that the TEC's aspirations would be difficult to deliver.

Researching ACE Networks as communities of practice

In 2006, the Adult and Community Education Teaching and Research Team at the University of Canterbury, based in Christchurch, in New Zealand's South Island, was contracted by the TEC to explore the professional development needs of the ACE sector. The project was to focus on the role of ACE regional networks as communities of practice, and to identify those approaches that were most effective in achieving the government's strategies for the ACE sector (Bowl et al 2007; Bowl and Tully 2008).

The research team's approach was influenced by its commitment to participatory research methods (McTaggart 1989; Whyte 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2001; Cardno 2003; Wadsworth 1998; Jason et al 2004) and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Erlandson et al 1993). The team sought the collaboration of six of the regional ACE networks. A particular focus of the research was to explore the extent to which these networks, as communities of practice, were able to meet the professional development needs of the whole sector – large and small providers of different types, and organisations representing Māori and Pacific, as well as Pakeha, ACE practitioners and learners. Data for the project were collected from a number of sources including:

- A search of documents relating to the history of, and current policy for, the ACE sector
- Interviews with 'key informants' who had been involved in advising on the TEC's strategy for ACE sector professional development
- Workshop sessions held at ACE regional network meetings in which members were invited to identify their own and network members' professional development needs and how these might best be met, as well as discussing their views on the capacity of networks to operate as regional communities of practice

- Follow-up interviews with providers identified as undertaking activities which could be regarded as effectively demonstrating a communities of practice approach
- A feedback workshop of participating regional ACE network co-coordinators at which the preliminary findings of the research were presented to gain sector feedback and critical comment.

Our findings (reported in Bowl et al 2008) revealed some of the problems involved in attempting to implement a communities of practice approach from above and without a clear articulation of the theory, and its implications in practice. They also highlighted some of the difficulties with the whole notion of communities of practice – the assumption that where people share a common practice they necessarily form communities, or that communities of practice are an appropriate approach to addressing structural inequalities and underfunding.

Creating communities of practice: some practical problems

One of the issues which emerged early on in the research process was the fact that regional network membership was made a condition for receiving TEC funding. It was intended that this would encourage participation in networks and ensure that duplication of provision and competition for funding would be reduced. In reality, the requirement to be a network member created resentment, and some confusion. Some practitioners were already voluntary members of other formal and informal networks which they valued and within which they cooperated. Some of these were national networks representative of particular types of provision: for example, schools-based community education, literacy or ESOL provision. There was also already in existence a small number of ACE regional branches under the umbrella of ACE Aotearoa, the national membership organisation for ACE providers.

Another grievance was that membership of a regional network imposed a further burden on practitioners' scarce time and resources with little recompense since the overall level of funding to the ACE sector had not increased to compensate for the additional demands being made. The

capacity of any given Network to undertake all the tasks allocated by the TEC was always bound to be limited by its lack of person-power.

Those who could attend network meetings, and who consequently were able to take leadership roles, tended to be practitioners in larger organisations with paid and permanent staff. Thus the situation was perpetuated whereby larger, stronger organisations were more likely to be active in regional networks than smaller less well-resourced organisations. Practitioners from organisations which were already funded therefore formed the 'core' of the regional ACE networks, whilst the 'periphery' – small, emergent and unfunded groups – were not in a position to participate in network interaction and the social learning which is said to characterise a community of practice. Rather than encouraging involvement, therefore, network development in some ways perpetuated the exclusion of small and under- or unfunded groups. Furthermore, there was no incentive for smaller organisations – such as some Māori or Pacific organisations – which did not receive funding from the TEC to join a network. Many of these organisations were either self-supporting or resourced from other government departments with a social development or health focus.

In the process of moving from the formulation of a professional development strategy (TEC 2001) to the implementation of regional ACE Networks (TEC 2004), a marked shift in the TEC's emphasis was discernible: the language of mutual learning and joint enterprise had been replaced by the language of tasks, compliance with TEC goals, quality assurance and 'efficiency'. The networks were to be a mechanism for ensuring that the sector undertook tasks of needs analysis, development and organisation of activities and training provision whilst ensuring inclusivity and building sector capability and capacity. There was a lack of clarity about which of these roles and functions of networks was the priority. Indeed, some roles seemed contradictory. The strongest networks tended to be those which had already been established for the purpose of information exchange and sector advocacy prior to the TEC

initiative. But the imposition of the TEC regional network framework on these existing networks caused dilemmas for some as they tried to reconcile an independent role as advocates for the sector with TEC compliance. These contradictions caused much debate and, arguably, hindered the effectiveness of even the most well-established networks.

An aspiration stressed in a number of TEC policy documents on the ACE sector (TEC 2001; TEC 2006) was that of 'weaving....an understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi (TEC 2006:6) and ensuring the full engagement of Māori and Pacific practitioners and organisations in the structures supporting the ACE sector'. In effect, regional networks (in which Pakeha organisations and practitioners were predominant) were charged with doing what the TEC and the government itself had not been able to achieve effectively: redressing inequalities and addressing obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi.

The way in which regional networks were conceived and established by the TEC did not take account of the differences in organisational norms and protocols between different ethnic communities. The aspiration for network building, based on the notion of communities of practice, assumed that there was a shared domain of interest (regionally-based ACE provision) and that a bureaucratic and Pakeha-dominated approach to network building would be effective in promoting partnership and cooperation between Māori and Pakeha providers and practitioners. This could not possibly work. In imposing a Pakeha approach to networking, assumptions were made about the forms of organisation which were conducive to learning for Māori and Pacific peoples, about the appropriateness of the proposed formal meeting structures and about the cultural neutrality and homogeneity of the ACE sector – all of which were unfounded and ran counter to the letter and spirit of the Treaty of Waitangi (Yates 1996). There was no analysis of the power relations between Pakeha and Māori and this would have been essential to lay the ground for trust-building and partnership (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata 2006). Such an analysis was absent from the TEC's regional network

aspiration; it is also absent in Wenger's theorising of communities of practice.

Some problems with communities of practice as a conceptual tool

The notion of communities of practice has been enthusiastically taken up in local government, education and business fields. Its strength is that it recognises the value of informal learning and the importance of social relationships in work-based learning. In the ACE sector it has appeal in that it recognises the community nature of learning – for practitioners as well as adult learners. The term 'community' invokes sentiments of unity, inclusiveness, and joint purpose, as well as a discourse which runs counter to institutional and formal structures of education. However, there are problems with the uncritical and unclearly articulated application of communities of practice as a tool for professional development, as evidenced by the experience of ACE sector regional networks.

The first is the extent to which theoretical concepts can be used to promote policy agendas which actually run counter to the overall thrust of the theory as originally proposed. This tendency is apparent in the shifts in role and function of ACE regional networks articulated by the TEC. At the more benign end, communities of practice promoted learning on the cheap. Although some funds were made available to networks to undertake professional development activities, they were not accompanied by resources to encourage sustained engagement with more formal professional development opportunities – through accredited training for adult educators and organisers. Nor were the resource incentives offered to encourage engagement in professional development activity sufficient to truly reach out to isolated and excluded providers.

Less benignly, the networks which resulted from the communities of practice notion were actually presented as a means of ensuring compliance with TEC demands for accountability and quality assurance procedures. As Margaret Ledwith (2005) has noted, it is tempting (and sometimes necessary for the sake of financial survival) for community

workers to buy into government policy agendas. This was certainly the case in relation to the development of regional networks. To do so uncritically is likely to end in compromise and disempowerment, rather than collective action; to domesticating collectivity, rather than harnessing collective power.

However, the problems were not just with the practical application of the communities of practice idea to the ACE sector. The concept of communities of practice itself has limitations, particularly in its failure to situate practice within the wider context of historical and current inequalities and power differentials. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi provides a focus for recognising how these inequalities have been played out – historically, through land appropriation and cultural suppression and currently, through the unequal distribution of life chances, particularly in education and health. The concept of communities of practice tends to imply that the shared domain of practice will somehow subsume the social, economic and philosophical differences between communities. It assumes that all are equally able to participate in a community. It also tends to assume a shared understanding of how communities should be structured, how their members should relate to one another and – even more crucially in relation to a discussion of learning – how knowledge is generated and what constitutes useful knowledge for a community. Epistemological questions cannot be brushed aside in any consideration of learning – particularly learning in communities with diverse ways of seeing the world. Aotearoa New Zealand provides a good example of some of the difficulties of over-extrapolating from a theory of learning to the practice of community building.

Critical education: reconceptualising learning in networks

Freire (1972) is often invoked by adult educators in relation to their work with communities. Freireian education is not neutral; it is political. It either liberates or it domesticates. If it is to liberate, a number of prerequisites need to be met. First, the process of learning needs to begin by

problematizing the status quo and to proceed, through dialogue, debate and active participation, to collective action for a more just and equal world. It is therefore a process which cannot successfully be imposed from above or subjected to compliance with bureaucratic guidance. It requires a clear purpose, agreement to be reached about appropriate ways of working together, sharing of resources and information and the creation of a climate where all can participate on equal terms. A learning network based on a Freireian perspective provides:

.....a structure for organisation where groups and projects become cross-germinating and more collective, and where networks and alliances are formed. It is a place where the conflicting interests of the community are expressed, and where the interests of the people are protected by participatory democratic decision making. This is a public space with the potential for critical reflection and collective action, and for the deepening of consciousness. (Ledwith 2005: 86)

Such a network cannot be tied to meeting at specific intervals, performing prescribed tasks and working to an externally-set agenda. It sets its own priorities and rules of engagement, within an open and flexible structure, and develops a means of communicating beyond its own membership, linking with learners and the wider community.

Second, learning for liberation requires engagement in critical analysis of power structures and relations of inequality and discrimination. In the case of Aotearoa New Zealand, this implies acknowledging and addressing the history of unequal relations between Māori and Pakeha. The means by which this might be achieved has been suggested by Ledwith (2005), with reference to her experience in the UK, and by Herzog (1996), Yates (1996) and Munford and Walsh-Tapiata (2006) drawing on the experience of community work and adult and community education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ledwith advocates the development of a 'critical alliance' forged through separate reflection within caucuses which are based on shared experiences of power or oppression, as evidenced in the women's movement and some trades unions and political organisations in the UK and elsewhere in relation to 'race'-based

inequalities. Ledwith (2005: 105-6) explains that the process of developing critical alliance:

....begins in separate groups where critical consciousness emerges from reflection on shared experiences. Pride in who we are in the world, in our separate identities, leads to more equal alliances where issues of power have been addressed.

Herzog (1996), Yates (1996) and Munford and Walsh-Tapiata (2006) address this issue with reference to the Māori concept of tino rangatiratanga which is perhaps best translated in this context as collective self-determination, where each group has authority to determine its own destiny because:

It is possible for a group which is dominant politically to leave space for at least some cultural determination for other groups, but for a group to be fully self-determining culturally, it must have political self-determination as well. (Herzog 1996: 129)

In other words, only through realising one's own power can there be movement towards mutually sustainable relationships.

Finally, learning for liberation involves an understanding of the importance of praxis in education - the link between theory and practice (Freire 1972; Carr and Kemmis 1986). Underlying theory are values and beliefs about education and its role in creating a society which is either just or unjust. There is a tendency in the ACE sector Aotearoa New Zealand (and no doubt elsewhere) to regard theory as alien and 'academic', abstracted from reality. Value is placed on the practical as if it stands in noble opposition to theory, rather than being its companion. Conversely, theory can appear so abstracted and so unrelated to 'the real world' that it is not helpful in helping practitioners to interpret the complexity of their work on the ground, in face-to-face interaction with learners and communities. This tendency is not helped by the uncritical application of theoretical concepts such as 'communities of practice', to which some ACE practitioners have struggled to relate.

A postscript: communities of resistance?

In 2008, after nine years in power, the Labour-led government in Aotearoa New Zealand was ousted in a general election and replaced by a centre-right coalition government led by the National Party. One of its early acts (justified by the global economic crisis) was to radically reduce staffing in the Tertiary Education Commission and subject the already under-funded ACE sector to a substantial funding cut. Particularly hard hit was funding to adult and community education through schools which, as well as organising schools-based adult education provision, had responsibility for distributing funds to small, locally-based community education providers. School-based community educators have, arguably, been among the most active networkers in the ACE sector both nationally and regionally. Ironically, part of the government's justification for cutting community education funds to schools was that it planned to redirect resources to literacy and numeracy – the very area of practice in which Freire developed his theoretical approach to liberatory education, in Brazil and elsewhere. It is unlikely that the government had a Freireian notion of literacy in mind when it proposed this shift in funding policy.

Thus far, regional ACE networks have been left intact although, with the TEC having been drastically reduced in size, there has inevitably been a diminution of interest in and support for regional networks as a vehicle for building ACE sector capability and capacity. It seems that the test of regional ACE networks will now be their ability to demonstrate a unity of purpose by seeking to protect ACE provision, or whether sectional interests will prevail, with different parts of this diverse sector collapsing into competition to retain their own funding. Will the 'common sense of purpose and sense of joint enterprise' be sustained without the support of the TEC? Or will collective anger and frustration galvanise these somewhat fragile networks into communities of resistance for whom adult and community education is a means of addressing inequality and discrimination? Will they be a means of ensuring that adult education survives as a vehicle for developing critical citizenship and active democracy? Time will tell, but the signs are not good.

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ⁱ The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by representatives of the British Government and a number of the Chiefs of Māori tribes, established British governorship in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst also recognising inter alia Maori rights to land and property ownership. Today, the Treaty is an important document which underpins the bicultural status of Aotearoa New Zealand and relationships between Māori and Pakeha (those of European settler heritage).

ⁱⁱ The Tertiary Education Commission: Te Amorangi Matauranga Matua is responsible for leading the government's relationship with the tertiary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand and for policy development and funding of tertiary providers including: universities, polytechnics, wānanga, industrial training organisations, private training enterprises and adult and community education.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Aotearoa New Zealand a wānanga is a tertiary institution which provides education in a Maori cultural context.

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