

CULTURALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH & FACILITATION

Active Development Projects with Small Island Cultures

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Abstract

This paper outlines an approach to community-based research that I have developed along with my colleague Denis Crowdy and various postgraduate students at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. We have named this approach **Culturally Engaged Research and Facilitation** – initialised as CERF^[1]. We developed and deployed CERF in our interaction with communities on Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island, the Whitsunday Islands^[2] and – as Dan Bendrups’s paper elsewhere in this volume discusses – Rapa Nui (Easter Island). While we have based CERF on interactions with small island cultures (hence my presentation at this conference) we also contend that, with modifications, it is more widely applicable. While we do not claim that there is anything particularly novel about individual elements of CERF, we would argue that our advocacy of it as a coherent approach is distinctive.

From its outset, CERF was consciously conceived as an activist project. One of the more welcome developments in anthropology, ethnomusicology (and linguistics) over the last two decades has been the combination of traditional forms of scholarly research with community-orientated and/or community-beneficial outcomes. CERF locates itself within an essentially similar frame of reference but borrows its political inflection from a different context. One foundational point is the application of a Green politics to culture. CERF is premised on the assertion that just as it is important to maintain biodiversity in (and *through*) diverse local habitats, it is important to maintain cultural diversity and distinct local heritages. This is not simply a restatement of 1970s’ pre-occupations with media-imperialism, nor more recent concern with the impact of globalism (although it is congruent with these); it is also a more local-regional reading that recognises micro-differences as important.

Having established a Green paradigm as a basic referent, it should be made clear that CERF acknowledges that forms of culture are far more fluid and volatile than biological species and that heritage is far less fixed and able to be ‘restored’ than local biological

habitats. Here CERF takes a cue from the founding principles of the quadrennial Festivals of Pacific Arts (<http://www.festival-pacific-arts.org/hisuk.htm>). The FPAs were established to preserve and promote traditional cultures *simultaneously* with their development. The emphasis here is not so much on a purist 'freezing' and protection of traditional cultures as a maintenance of the old along with the new.

CERF retains a major element of traditional academic research in that scholarly documentation and analysis of culture is regarded as a primary and essential part of its project. In common with more progressive developments of other disciplines it also advocates a shift to thinking of members of local cultures as *collaborators* rather than research *subjects*. As other researchers have found, this approach has major benefits all round. Collaborative research is a reciprocal, engaged and interactive form that can prove far more productive than passive observation. Yet it also raises an immediate question. It is clearly not enough for the researcher to ask someone to collaborate with them in undertaking *their* research. The collaborative aspect requires consideration of what the collaborator wants. In this regard, CERF aims to be enabled by (and is reflective of) the needs, desires (and sometimes unintended stimuli) provided by collaborators. These are not simply those that exist fully formed and ready to be asked of the CERF researcher - they are also ones that can be stimulated and formed through discussion of what the CERF researcher can realistically offer.

In the case of our work with small island communities, academic articles, books and PhDs formed *one* component of a series of collaborative activities. With these texts as one of our identified initial areas of interest we have also undertaken community requested activities including:

- a) a wide range of field and studio recordings
 - b) recording format transfers and re-masterings
 - c) research and re-location of lost recordings
 - d) packaging and release of recordings
 - e) funding and organisational help with song contests & concerts
 - f) promotion of local performers overseas
- and
- g) provision of various professional advice and advocacy services.

While we are not claiming any originality in contributing these (as researchers from various fields have provided similar 'extended services' to other communities) it is

pertinent to note that the various activities I have just outlined go beyond those usually expected of a researcher and occupy a niche more usually filled by a community arts worker. This is not simply incidental, it merits consideration of the ethics involved. Specifically, to what (if any) extent is it legitimate to 'interfere' in local culture - that is, to encourage and/or facilitate developments that may not have occurred without external intervention?

As will be apparent, CERF workers *are* intrusive. But it is pertinent to consider the string of cultural outsiders who have exercised a powerful influence on the small island communities we have worked with. Outsiders such as settlers, whalers, whalers' wives, missionaries, educators, visiting artists etc. (not to mention various external media forms) have all played an important role in developing the music and dance culture of island communities. From this perspective, such island communities are not isolated, pristine environments. Rather, they are localities within a global matrix that experience and engage with cultural change as part of their dynamic. Heritage is here seen within the framework of the UNESCO 2002 Year for Cultural Heritage formation, as something that "can develop new objects and put forward new meanings as it reflects living culture rather than an ossified image of the past"(UNESCO, 2002: online). To state this is not however to embrace *all* change and stimulus. The project of the Pacific Arts Festivals can be seen to embrace development but also to adopt a simultaneous politics of protection and preservation.

Along with the earlier introduction of Christianity and the imposition of colonial power, late 20th and early 21st Century globalism (and its regional fractals) has had a highly significant impact on local Pacific cultures. It can be seen to have spread as a dual form, as both specific industrial imperialism (through conscious attempts to destabilise and penetrate local markets to its advantage) and through the indiscriminate 'collateral' impact of internationalisation in general (GATT, the General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs being a prime example).

Compared to these massive forces, CERF workers are minor players. Their influence is dependent on various factors, chief amongst which is the degree to which they establish relationships of trust with communities and find collaborators. Assessment of the CERF worker's success and/or the appropriateness of their actions and outcomes is – of course – highly complex. Whereas there is no requirement for globalism to be *anything but* indiscriminate in its impact; the CERF worker is accountable on several levels. Most importantly, they are responsible and answerable to the community. This characterisation only gets us so far though, since communities are inevitably diverse, with various factions, and various concepts of cultural purity, integrity (and micro-personal perceptions of these). In these regards, CERF is far more risky and problematic than conventional research, whose professed distance and non-disruption of its object of study gives it distinct (if often dubious) rhetorical armour.

Given this, CERF requires a broad agenda to orientate its workers and their projects. As

identified and formulated by us in the regional interactions I have referred to, these comprise:

- 1) *Methodological, contextual and precedential study* – This is the familiar territory of academic training, the literature study and consideration of methodologies.
- 2) *Possession of relevant skills/ access to relevant resources and expertise* – Intellectual training is not on its own sufficient to ensure the effectiveness of CERF enterprises, other skills and access to equipment and facilities are also essential.
- 3) *Project design* – This involves being able to formulate and modify project design with regard to the perceptions and suggestions of the communities involved. It also depends on:
 - 4) *The ability to acquit project design and/or to sustain continuing project development* – These require the CERF worker to ensure that they can acquit the project they design and agree to undertake.
 - 5) *Returning produced materials/ensuring circulation of materials* – There are various levels to this. At its most basic, this involves the provision of scholarly publications to individuals and community resource centres but more importantly, it involves the provision of what might be considered ‘byproduct’ by the researcher - word processed copies of various accounts, transcribed cultural texts, audio/visual recordings etc. to various members of communities.
 - 6) *Producing locally accessible and useful materials* – In addition to written and/or audio-visual material aimed at a *scholarly* audience, the CERF worker should also aim to present their research to communities in various appropriate formats, through talks, accessibly written papers, locally-orientated publications etc. presented in appropriate style(s) (and/or language[s]).
 - 7) *Assistance with the publication/presentation of cultural work by local producers* – In parallel with 6), the CERF worker should assist the public presentation and circulation of cultural work in a manner that is advantageous for the cultural producers concerned.
- 8) *Access to funding/funding knowledge networks capable of acquitting the above* – Aspects 4-7 all require funding and resource assistance and it is a pre-requisite of any CERF activity that the worker should have access to either (and ideally both) designated funding schemes and/or institutional funding assistance for CERF activities. Such provision should be a pre-requisite for any CERF project (not something that a CERF worker should be expected to conjure as a test of ingenuity or undertake as part of a research rite-of-passage).
- 9) *Commitment and ability to impart skills and facilitate autonomous production and*

development – The essential corollary of the CERF worker’s involvement as an external agent is that they communicate and convey as many of their skills and knowledges to the local community as possible to ensure that local, self-initiated projects can develop along with those the CERF worker has been involved in.

CERF work is essentially interventionary in that it involves itself in stimulating and facilitating cultural activity. But one of its central aims is to empower the community to develop autonomously (rather than slip into a relation of dependence on the worker). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that CERF is not simply a package that can be delivered, it is one that requires servicing (in both senses of the word); periodic upgrades (of technology, knowledge and training); and also benefits from being informed by the experiences of communities and initiatives in other regions. In these regards, geographically isolated small island cultures are no differently placed than any geographically located community elsewhere. The ideal is a mixture of as much locally accessible and autonomously used facilities as possible with as much access to external facilities and equipment as is necessary. Rather than dependency, we need to imagine a global grid of resources and communications that communities can access, share and dialogue within.

For more politically progressive researchers, many of the arguments contained in this paper will be part of an increasingly assumed ‘common sense’ ethical framework for practical research. Few researchers would be prepared to admit to simply latching on to informants and communities primarily in order to extract knowledge and then use that nutrition to further academic careers – far fewer still would publicly defend such a position (even within terms of a rhetoric of the virtues of knowledge gathering and theorisation as worthwhile things-in-themselves).

What is still prevalent however, is an assumption that the CERF components I’ve identified should be something that emerge as a ‘gift’ – a form of beneficence – from the committed researcher to a deserving (ie ‘compliant’ and [ideally] grateful) community. The model here is of the religious missionary or altruist doing ‘good works’. As should be immediately apparent, such a model is so untenable as to be offensive. Conventional researchers and CERF workers alike are involved in remunerated or grant assisted professional activities that require the input and assistance of the communities they target. In this regard, a further category needs to be added to the CERF agenda:

10) *The ability to communicate the nature of CERF activity is in such a manner as to demystify and enable it.*

In terms of all of the above, my colleagues and I would argue that it is a fundamental ethical responsibility of universities and research and arts funding organisations to affirm and support CERF’s model of engaging with and facilitating cultural communities.

As should be apparent, CERF is a radical idealistic project in the current intellectual,

educational and cultural climate of most developed capitalist countries. In the early 21st Century, 'economically rationalist' notions developed in the 1980s have come to dominate research policy and funding, particularly in the West, to the extent that any alternative approaches are openly denigrated and disadvantaged by national, regional and institutional bureaucracies – choked as 'deviant', dismissed as 'naïve' and disparaged at every turn. With a few exceptions, CERF activities continue to be largely dependent on its workers' successful exploitation of niches within institutional and research bureaucracies - and an extension of their research work into collaborative activities at one remove from their principal professional activities. Commendable as this might be, it must also be fundamental to CERF's broader project for it to seek and obtain firmer and more facilitated institutional bases. Hopefully forums such as the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative – which identifies CERF-type activities as core to its project (www.sicri.org) and the contacts and networks that will emerge from it can begin to facilitate this.

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End Notes:

[1] Which, using some pronunciation licence, we usually orally express as "SURF".

[2] Details of CERF work on Norfolk Island are detailed in various sections of Hayward (2006); on Lord Howe Island in Hayward (2002: 117-121); and in the Whitsundays in Hayward (2001: 167-188).

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