

DESIGNING INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION PROCESSES:

Interim findings from the trial of a participatory evaluation process involving diverse rural communities and organisations

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Abstract

This paper discusses some problematic issues that were raised in the trial of a participatory planning and evaluation process involving diverse participants, organisations, and communities, and the use of diverse communication and interaction strategies. The LEARNERS process (Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment & Rural Sustainability) is being trialled as part of an innovative three-year research project that is using participatory action research, participatory evaluation, and feminist research methodologies. This project is being conducted by a Queensland University of Technology research team in collaboration with people in two Queensland rural communities (Tara and Stanthorpe Shires), and five government and industry partners.

The LEARNERS process aims to increase community capacities in collaboratively planning and evaluating community development initiatives that use new communication and information technologies (C&ITs). Technologies such as email discussion lists, community websites, and videoconferencing are used in these initiatives. Participatory evaluation methods, the inclusion and collaboration of diverse community members and groups, and analysis of differences such as gender, ethnicity and age, are advocated.

We position this project in the context of recent moves towards empowering rural community members and organisations to develop more sustainable and inclusive communities, and government policies that promote 'community engagement', 'community capacity building', 'learning communities', and the use of new C&ITs in these processes. Another significant feature of the rural context is women's leadership roles in community development activities, and in using new C&ITs such as email and the Internet.

Following an outline of the research project, and the participatory activities involved, case studies of the implementation of the process in the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires are presented. A preliminary analysis of these case studies raises several issues related to the participation and inclusion of a broad diversity of community members and groups in the project. The themes identified include the implications of framing the project as 'community development'; the problems that arose in working with a

diversity of community members and groups; and the perceived complexity of the LEARNERS process.

Our analysis indicates that a number of social, cultural, environmental, organisational and methodological factors were involved in obtaining participation from a wide diversity of rural people and organisations. Some factors, such as droughts, bushfires, and living in a remote location, have a particular impact on community participation in rural areas. The time, energy and cost of participation were also important. Other factors included the extent to which the local project coordinators could readily understand the process and communicate this to others; the existing skills and knowledge of people in various community sectors; and the communication strategies used to involve different groups.

We suggest that rather than seeing the lack of diversity in participants as a failure, in a project with a fixed timeframe, it is more practical and important to involve those who are most committed to the participatory evaluation process, willing to reflect critically on evaluation results, and to use these learnings to redesign C&IT initiatives so that they better meet the diverse needs of the community.

Introduction

The participation and inclusion of a broad diversity of community members and other stakeholders in planning, implementing and evaluating initiatives is often a key goal of community development projects. Community groups that are often targeted include women, people in rural and remote areas, indigenous people, and people of non-English speaking background. In Australia and overseas, government policies and programs have been instigated in recent years that aim to increase 'community engagement', build 'community capacity' and develop 'learning communities'. With the current shift towards a 'knowledge society', increasing community access to and use of new communication and information technologies (C&ITs), such as the Internet, for a wide range of purposes, is often one of the major aims of these programs. These activities aim to facilitate sustainable social and economic development and to address the growing 'digital divide' (Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Simpson et al, 2001). Given the major role of rural women in community development and in the adoption of new C&ITs in Australia (Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999), they are often the major focus of Australian projects in this field.

However, research suggests that community participation processes that aim to be inclusive and empowering raise many complex issues. Many social, cultural, organisational, technological, and economic factors can limit the effectiveness of participatory processes involving diverse community members and groups (Boyce, 2001; Lennie, 2002). These factors include the time and costs involved, people's level of familiarity with participatory processes, and the different agendas and power-knowledge relations of the stakeholders involved. In research projects involving urban academics and rural people, these factors are often highly relevant to the success or otherwise of strategies for empowerment and inclusion (Lennie, 2001).

This paper discusses the implementation of an innovative participatory planning and evaluation process labelled the LEARNERS process (Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment & Rural Sustainability). The LEARNERS project is currently being conducted by a research team at Queensland

University of Technology¹ in collaboration with two diverse communities in rural Queensland (Tara and Stanthorpe Shires), and five government and industry organisations. A diverse range of communication and interaction strategies are being used to facilitate community inclusion and capacity building in undertaking participatory evaluations of community development initiatives that use C&ITs. Examples of these initiatives are community portals and websites, Learning Centres and telecentres that enable access to education and employment opportunities, the use of videoconferencing to deliver health and legal services, and community-based Internet training programs. Many of these initiatives have been funded through the Federal government's Networking the Nation program.²

We begin by discussing the social and political context of the project, and the methodological framework that underpins the project and the LEARNERS process. We then outline the research project and the participatory activities involved in the project to date. Following this, case studies of the implementation of the process in Tara and Stanthorpe Shires are presented. Our preliminary analysis of these case studies and various texts, generated by the project, raises several issues related to the participation and inclusion of a broad diversity of community members and groups in participatory projects.

Building sustainable and inclusive communities

Policies and programs have recently been instigated by both governments and the not for profit sector that aim to increase "community engagement", build "community capacity", and develop "learning communities" (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002; Faris, 2001; Mannion, 1996; Mission Australia, 2002). The aim of such programs is to facilitate sustainable social and economic development by building on existing community strengths and increasing the extent to which communities are inclusive, cooperative and self-reliant. Community capacity building has become a "buzz word" among government and community agencies in recent years. Mannion (1996, p.2) defines capacity building as "strengthening the knowledge, skills and attitudes of people so that they can establish and sustain their area's development". Programs aim to strengthen community organisations and groups "so that they are better placed to take part in decision-making, partnerships and community enterprises" (Smyllie, 2001, p.1). It involves communities solving their own problems, making their own decisions, and planning their own futures.

According to Aslin and Brown (2002) "good practice" community engagement involves using a wide range of processes that suit different situations or purposes, guided by a common set of values, principles and criteria. Such values include inclusiveness, respect for diversity, commitment, and flexibility and openness to learning and adapting to change. Along with the values of long-term sustainability, collaboration and cooperation, and community empowerment, these values also underpin the LEARNERS process.

The "learning community" concept is closely related to the concept of community capacity building. Learning communities are being established in many cities and towns in Australia and overseas. They involve community members from every sector working together to enhance the social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions of their community (Faris, 2001, p.1). Both formal and non-formal lifelong learning is encouraged. The aim is to facilitate sustainable economic development,

promote social inclusion and cohesion, and encourage civic and social participation. Engaging in ongoing learning is seen as having lifelong benefits for individuals and their communities.

One of the important goals of learning communities is to overcome the digital divide through universal access to technologies such as email and the Internet. This can enable networking within and between communities. The LEARNERS process is underpinned by the view that the ongoing assessment and evaluation of C&IT initiatives can increase the sustainability and success of these initiatives, and that this can be effectively achieved through participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation methods that take diversity and difference into account.

Participatory methodologies

Participatory research and evaluation methodologies have been successfully used in many community development projects in both developed and developing countries around the world for over 20 years (Lyons et al, 2001). Participatory action research is a political process because it involves people making changes, together, that affect others in their community or organisation. PAR involves ongoing cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. It seeks to include and involve community members, and to enhance democracy, and individual, group, and community empowerment (McTaggart, 1991).

Feminists undertaking community-based research often use participatory methods that involve working closely with women to share experiences and issues. Using praxis feminist frameworks, processes are used that aim to respond to women's needs, to give voice to women, and to be empowering and inclusive. However, many feminist researchers have long been aware of the power-knowledge differentials between researchers and participants that can affect the aims of empowerment and inclusion (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000; Lather, 1991; Martin, 1996).

Participatory evaluation methodologies are particularly useful for assessing complex community-based projects, including those that involve the use of new and evolving C&ITs. They have been found to enhance the long term sustainability and success of programs through building community capacities in undertaking evaluations, and including a diversity of community members and other stakeholders, such as project staff and funders, in planning and decision making. These methods can therefore potentially produce community and individual empowerment (Brunner and Guzman, 1989; Fetterman et al, 1996; Papineau and Kiely, 1996).

However, while participatory evaluations can have many benefits, like all community participation processes, they also have certain limitations. These include the time and resources needed to train those involved, and to participate in planning and conducting evaluations, obtaining representation from all the groups involved, and participants' varying levels of commitment to the process. An additional issue is the gendered power-knowledge relations that are often inherent in community-based projects that involve diverse individuals, groups and organisations (Lennie, 2001), and the problems associated with attempting to achieve diversity within the stakeholder group (Mathie and Greene, 1997).

The LEARNERS project

The LEARNERS project is a three-year research project that is using PAR, participatory evaluation, and feminist research methodologies to evaluate a trial of the LEARNERS process in two diverse rural communities in southern Queensland. The project is a collaboration between the QUT research team, people in Tara and Stanthorpe Shires, and five government and industry partners.³ These partners are the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Learning Network Queensland, the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, the Office for Women (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Queensland government) and Legal Aid Queensland. The project, which began in October 2001 and will be completed in October 2004, was based on an earlier pilot project (see Lennie, Lundin and Simpson, 2000).

Recent research at QUT indicates that women's role as "new pioneers" in using email and the Internet could be a significant factor in the uptake of this technology in rural communities (The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999). This suggests that gender analysis should be an important focus of the evaluation of C&IT projects. However, gender-related issues are often marginalised or neglected in the evaluation, planning and implementation of C&IT initiatives, and in some rural community development research. The LEARNERS process aims to counter this neglect, but also to take the whole range of relevant differences into account in the evaluation process. The project's industry partners were particularly interested in women's participation in the project, as well as the participation of young people, and people involved in community education.

The project involves regular meetings, workshops, teleconferences, and email and phone communication with community participants, researchers and project partners. An email discussion list and a project website⁴ are being used to share information and provide access to relevant resources. A brochure about the project was also distributed to generate interest and provide information.

The researchers are using participatory methods to undertake an ongoing evaluation of the various project activities, and an evaluation of use of the LEARNERS process by the communities involved. The impacts of the project will be assessed, taking gender and other differences into account, as well as the value of the LEARNERS process for improving the sustainability and success of C&IT initiatives. In the long-term, the project aims to enable other rural communities in Australia to access and use this process by creating a resource kit for communities.

Case studies of the participating communities

The following case studies provide some contextual information about the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires, and the C&IT initiatives they have implemented. We outline the methods used to facilitate the inclusion and participation of people in these communities in the project activities, and the outcomes of these methods and activities. Data for the case studies was obtained from various sources, including the 2001 census, official reports, community websites, reports on the evaluation of LEARNERS project workshops, and feedback and information provided by key contacts in the communities.

Tara Shire case study

Tara Shire is located in “prime hard wheat country”, 330 kilometres west of Brisbane. It has nine small townships in an area of 11,680 square kilometres and a population of just over 3,800 people. The principal town of Tara has a population of 1,000. About one third of the population live in very impoverished circumstances on rural residential subdivisions with few services and facilities. The Shire has been identified as being in the top ten most disadvantaged communities in Queensland (Tara Shire, 2001) and has some significant communication problems. There is a lack of effective mobile phone coverage, ongoing problems with telephone services, no local newspaper and no local radio station. Some areas of the Shire only receive their mail twice a week, the majority of roads are unsealed, and public transport services are minimal.

The Shire’s extensive geographic area, scattered population, and changing demographic profile, created a very divided community. People were not working together in most communities and communities were operating in isolation. Many people were “apathetic and negative” and there was little proactive leadership. The community did not actively seek support and assistance from outside. Consequently, the area lagged behind in its development and in the uptake of new C&ITs.

However, around three years ago, a new Mayor and Councilors were elected who provided positive leadership and instigated new community development initiatives. They actively worked with the community to build a better, more cooperative and pro-active community. Community leaders, particularly women, started to generate motivation through workshops and successful events such as a multicultural festival. Some of the new initiatives used new C&ITs. They included the development of various community-based websites such as the Tara Shire Community website which is sponsored by the Shire Council, public Internet access at the Tara Library, a Learning Network Queensland Centre, computer and Internet training courses, and the ‘Cyberflora’ project which used C&IT to collaboratively design a public mural in a botanic garden.

Given this new energy and desire to build a more sustainable and inclusive community, community members were very interested in using the LEARNERS process to help people in the Shire work together to reach their community goals, engage in more effective planning, and improve communication across the Shire.

In May 2002, two QUT researchers met with senior staff and elected members of the Shire Council. A meeting with community leaders and a workshop for community members was subsequently planned. Invitations to the workshop were sent to all community, sporting and business organisations. The Council’s Community and Economic Development Officer agreed to be the local LEARNERS project coordinator. She was assisted by the IT Support Officer who worked in the Tara Library.

Seven women and one man from various townships participated in the community leaders’ meeting. They included the President of the Shire Development Association and one of the Cyberflora project leaders, who also took part in the workshop. Fifteen women and eight men with a diversity of ages and occupations participated in the workshop, which included presentations about local C&IT projects. Six participants lived on a farm, while the others lived in or near to Tara or other townships.

Participants worked in the areas of education and training, community and youth development, retail, accounting, and agriculture. One was a priest, three were retired, and one was unemployed. Six women and three men held official positions in community organisations, and one man was a Shire councilor.

Following the workshop, the local project coordinator made presentations about the project at a major community meeting and at a meeting of school principals from around the Shire. A local project steering committee was formed which participated in an 'email meeting' that nominated two projects that could be evaluated using the LEARNERS process: the Tara Shire Community Website and IT training and access across the Shire. Six sub-projects were also identified. A workshop to plan the evaluations was held in late March 2003.

At a critical reflection workshop held in Toowoomba in December 2002, two local project coordinators reported that the business sector was the first to "drop out" of the project and there was initially "a lot of misconception as to what [the project] was about". They had found it "very hard" to explain the project, and suggested that it needed to be put into "a lot more user-friendly terms". While groups such as the school principals "picked it up straight away", others found it difficult to understand.

However, the project also had several positive impacts. It had helped to improve the networking, communication, and sharing of information between various community groups through email and the Shire website. More people in the Shire were using IT, and people had identified new ways of using C&IT to overcome communication and distance problems. Interest in the project continues to be high.

Stanthorpe Shire case study

The Shire of Stanthorpe is located 230 kilometres south west of Brisbane in the Granite Belt region. It has two main towns and six villages within an area of 2,697 square kilometres and a population of 10,373 people. The main town of Stanthorpe has a population of 5,500. The major industries in the Shire are agriculture, farming and tourism, and the region is well known for its popular wineries and national parks. A significant number of residents are of Italian descent, and some have poor literacy skills. Compared to Tara Shire, Stanthorpe Shire has good communication systems and is serviced by a local radio station and newspaper. However, there is a lack of public access to the Internet, and a lack of awareness among the business community of the potential opportunities of new C&ITs.

While the Granite Belt is a vibrant community, there are concerns about the number of residents who are leaving the area, particularly young people. The retention of young people is considered vital to the community's sustainability. The community was seen as conservative, and somewhat fragmented and reluctant to seek help from outside. Like Tara Shire, women have taken leadership in many community development projects. Several community members have recently become extremely enthusiastic about developing the Granite Belt into a learning community.

The Stanthorpe Shire Council has recently implemented a range of economic and community development initiatives that use new C&ITs. They include 'GraniteNet', a virtual community project, and the Stanthorpe Community Learning Centre initiative, which aims to become the hub of learning in the region. GraniteNet was expected to enhance telecommunications and e-commerce access in the region. This initiative is

funded through the Networking the Nation program, and a key issue is the sustainability of GraniteNet once this funding runs out. A further issue is that community ownership in the project has not yet been established and it was largely regarded as a Council project.

In June 2002, QUT researchers and a project partner met with the Shire's Economic Development Manager, the GraniteNet Project Officer, and the Stanthorpe Learning Community consultant. The Project Officer and the Learning Community consultant had previously agreed to be the local LEARNERS project coordinators. A meeting with the local project 'advisory committee' and an initial workshop for community members was subsequently planned. Invitations to the workshop were sent to selected representatives of community organisations, projects and businesses.

Five women and two men participated in the advisory committee meeting. They included the Deputy Mayor and a committee member of Granite Belt Disability Support Services (both women). All of the advisory committee participated in the workshop, which involved ten women and three men with a range of ages and occupations. The group was younger than the Tara workshop group and was less diverse. Three lived on a farm while the others lived in or near to Stanthorpe or other townships. Participants worked in the areas of education and training, community and economic development, and local government. Two women and one man held official positions in community or educational organisations. Several participants expressed disappointment about the lack of broad community representation.

The workshop identified the establishment of a learning community as a key area of interest. Further meetings and workshops were held to begin planning activities. Participants were encouraged to join the Lifelong Learning Group on GraniteNet to facilitate communication and information sharing. New participants gradually joined these activities, most of which were conducted without any QUT presence.

The QUT researchers subsequently facilitated a workshop, involving fourteen women and four men from various organisations and occupations, that developed vision statements for a learning community. However, while some participants were happy with the workshop process and outcomes, others wanted to work on short-term projects and were unclear about where the project was heading. A small group subsequently began planning and conducting an evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Group's use of GraniteNet as a pilot project.

The local coordinators experienced problems with involving the business community and people in service clubs and schools. Participants were also confused about how the LEARNERS process fitted with the Learning Community project and wanted more participation by the researchers in the community activities. Maintaining motivation and interest was a key issue. However, the project had several positive impacts, including improved communication and linkages between community groups and organisations, and the formation of a core group of people who are enthusiastic about developing a learning community.

Analysis of the case studies

Several themes were identified in our preliminary analysis of these case studies and some of the large quantity of data generated by the project. These themes include the implications of framing the project as 'community development'; the problems that

arose in working with a diversity of community members and groups; and the perceived complexity of the LEARNERS process. The first two of these themes are now discussed in more detail.

Framing the project as “community development”

The LEARNERS process was framed as potentially having a wide range of benefits for all sectors of rural communities, including local government, education, health and community services, business, and natural resource management. One of the aims of the process is to increase cooperation and collaboration between people in all community sectors. However, the people in the participating communities appear to have largely framed the process as “community development” rather than one that might also have important outcomes for the economic sustainability and wellbeing of the community, for example. In both communities, the project now mostly involves people working in the community service or education and training sectors. There has been limited involvement from the business sector and from people involved in natural resource management. In addition, most participants in both communities are relatively well-educated women who are already active in the community. This outcome is not unexpected, given the formal and informal leadership roles that women are playing in rural community development and in the uptake of new C&ITs in rural areas (Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

The project has attracted support and energy from a diversity of community members and organisations, particularly in Tara Shire. However, intense participation by people in positions associated with legitimate male dominated power, such as CEOs and business people, has been limited. In Tara Shire, the project received good initial support from the Mayor and Deputy CEO (both men). The Mayor is no longer directly involved, but the Deputy CEO has continued to be actively involved. Participants from the small business sector could not see the relevance of the LEARNERS process to them and did not see immediate outcomes, so were the first group to drop out of the project.

Similar difficulties in attracting the business sector were experienced by the Stanthorpe group. In Stanthorpe, the Economic Development Manager (a man with progressive ideas about the use of C&IT in development) actively participated in the project but left the community at the end of 2002. He was recently replaced by a women who has had limited contact with the project. The male project coordinator (a retired Deputy Principal of a high school) has taken a very active leadership role in the Granite Belt Learning Community project. However, given the dominance of women in local rural community development and educational activities, the majority of active participants in this community are women working in these areas in paid and voluntary roles.

These outcomes illustrate the gendered nature of leadership and community participation involved in rural community development processes. Wells and Tanner (1994) suggest that the “transformational” forms of leadership that have been associated with rural women could be vital to building sustainable rural communities. It is possible that the participatory processes used in the LEARNERS project were more congruent with the empowering and inclusive leadership and participation styles of women in these rural communities, compared with those of most rural businessmen and men in positions of formal power.

Problems in working with diverse groups

Mathie and Greene (1997) point out that creating and maintaining diversity within the group involved is “often considered to be essential to the very concept of participatory evaluation” (p.279). While both of the participating communities had some success in involving a diversity of people and organisations in the various project activities, working in an inclusive way was problematic.

In Tara Shire, a broad diversity of people took part in the initial workshop. However, following the workshop, participants had very different understandings about the aims and outcomes of the project. In addition, while the concepts underpinning the LEARNERS process were readily understood by highly educated groups such as school principals, other community members were less familiar with the terminology and concepts used. They are likely to have experienced some disempowerment as a result.

Although the researchers consulted the local coordinators about the suitability of the information provided, they later considered it “quite complex”. One woman suggested that information needed to be “tailored” to the many different “target groups” involved. Explaining the process to the diverse community groups was very difficult. To overcome this problem, she focused on the positive outcomes of the project for the community, rather than the type of process being used and the concepts underpinning the process. This outcome indicates that the somewhat academic and bureaucratic discourses used at times by the urban researchers were inappropriate for many of these rural participants, who were unfamiliar with terms such as “participatory action research” and “community capacity building”, and perhaps suspicious of the agenda behind their use.

Compared with Tara Shire, the Stanthorpe Shire coordinators were initially less successful in attracting a very diverse group. They used various strategies to encourage new people from a broader diversity of organisations to participate, including press releases published in a local newspaper. However, they found this process “hard to handle”. Also, when new people joined, they lacked an adequate understanding of the project’s aims and methodology.

While some Stanthorpe participants were happy with the way the project was proceeding and the participatory methods used, many wanted to be “told what to do next”; they wanted an agenda and objectives they “could achieve by the end of the week”. It was therefore decided that smaller short-term projects needed to be implemented. A small group was formed to coordinate the evaluation of the Lifelong Learning group’s use of GraniteNet. They successfully planned this evaluation with guidance from the researchers and two industry partners. This group of six women and one man was relatively diverse in terms of the organisations represented, but less diverse than the larger Learning Community Project group. This outcome appears to support Mathie and Greene’s (1997) argument, in relation to participatory evaluation, that “less diversity may sometimes be a practical and strategic step for a transformative agenda” (p.282).

A number of other factors, particular to rural areas, affected the number and diversity of people who have been involved in the project. They include the drought which has severely affected both of these communities and other parts of Queensland in recent times, and the major bushfires that occurred in both areas at the end of 2002. The long

distances that some people needed to travel to workshops and meetings, particularly in the Tara area, was another significant barrier. A further important factor is that active community members in rural areas are often involved in multiple community organisations and projects, and their time and energy to take part in community consultations and research projects is therefore often very limited.

Conclusion

As other research has found, implementing community participation processes that aim to be inclusive and to involve a diversity of community members and groups raises many complex issues (Boyce, 2001; Lennie, 2002; Mathie and Greene, 1997). Our preliminary analysis of the implementation of the LEARNERS process in two diverse rural communities suggests that a number of social, cultural, environmental, organisational, and methodological factors were involved in obtaining participation from a wide diversity of people from different community sectors.

Some factors, such as droughts, bushfires, and living in a remote location from project activities, have a particular impact on community participation in rural areas. The time, energy and cost of participation are other important factors, as well as the time required to create interest and understanding. The time, energy and resources required to participate were not always readily available, given that many participants or interested community members were often already actively involved in several community groups and projects. This situation is common in many rural communities. While communication technologies such as email and teleconferencing can be useful in overcoming some of these barriers, our research has shown that effective community participation processes requires some face-to-face communication and interaction (Lennie, 2001; Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

Other factors identified include the extent to which the project's local coordinators could readily understand the process and communicate this to others; the existing level of skills and knowledge of people in various community sectors; the perceived relevance of the project; and the communication strategies used to involve different community groups. A key issue was the perceived complexity of both the information provided and the LEARNERS process itself, which incorporates many different concepts such as participatory evaluation, sustainability, empowerment and inclusion. The Tara Shire coordinator had particular difficulties in getting people in some community groups to understand the process and resorted to focussing on the benefits of the project to the community instead.

Information complexity is compounded by the different discourse communities that urban researchers, rural community participants, and government partners often inhabit. The academic and bureaucratic terminology used in some project literature, and during some project activities, was clearly inappropriate for effectively generating understanding among the diverse rural participants. Complexity is also complicated by differing contexts of meaning, different values, perceptions and agendas, and a lack of time to effectively develop relationships between stakeholders characterised by mutual understanding.

Mathie and Greene (1997) suggest that, when the participatory evaluation process moves into the action phase, "the loss of diversity at the margins of participation need not necessarily be seen as a failure" (p.284). This indicates that our strategy of

continuing to encourage the involvement of a broad diversity of community members and organisations in project activities may not have been the most appropriate one during the later implementation stages. In a high-energy research project with a fixed timeframe, it is clearly more practical and important to involve those who are most committed to the participatory evaluation process, willing to reflect critically on evaluation results, and to use these learnings to redesign C&IT initiatives so that they better meet the diverse needs and goals of the community.

Endnotes

1. This research team comprises three chief investigators: Lyn Simpson, June Lennie and Greg Hearn, and two part-time research assistants: Kitty van Vuuren and Emma Kennedy. June Lennie is a full-time Postdoctoral Fellow on the project.
2. The Networking the Nation program was launched by the Federal government in 1997. Its aim was to assist the social and economic development of rural Australia by funding projects that enhance telecommunications infrastructure and services, increase access to services available through telecommunications networks, and reduce disparities in access to such services.
3. This project is funded by an Australian Research Council Strategic Partnerships with Industry - Research and Training grant and an Assisting Rural Women Leadership grant from the Office for Women, Queensland government.
4. See <http://www.learners.bus.qut.edu.au>

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