POLIS Project on Ecological Governance

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How can the University build *sustainable relationships* **with communities to facilitate collaboration on sustainability issues?**

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Presented as part of a panel on "Engagement with Community and Society on Sustainability Issues" (panelists Philip Dearden, Tracy Ho and Kelly Bannister) at the University of Victoria's Joint Senate-Board of Governors Retreat on "Sustainability: Institutional and Individual Leadership. "March 1, 2008. Dunsmuir Lodge, Saanich.

On the theme of "Engagement with Community and Society on Sustainability Issues", my focus will be on the importance of "relationships" that are pre-requisite to engaging with communities in addressing sustainability issues, but are often assumed or overlooked. I'll try to point out some of the challenges and give some "on campus" examples of the innovators of community-university relationship building. The question that I will try to address is "How can the University build *sustainable relationships* with communities to facilitate collaboration on sustainability issues?"

As already discussed, UVic is well-positioned to *engage* with community and society on sustainability issues (by generating knowledge and making it available for public use). And I think it is important that publicly-funded universities contribute to society in this way. But, like many universities who have become part of the "civic engagement phenomenon" which has spread across the continent, it seems important also to consider some fundamental questions about the *process* of engagement – that is, not *should* we do it, but **how do we do it?** Or perhaps more pointedly, how can we do it *well*?

No matter how broadly or narrowly you want to define this concept of "engagement" with community and society, the underlying assumption is the existence (or necessity) of some kind of *relationship.* As noted, the question I want to raise for your consideration is "How can the University build **sustainable relationships** with communities to facilitate collaboration on sustainability issues?" My view (and bias based on my own experiences) is that sustainable relationships are *pre-requisite* to effective collaboration with communities on sustainability (*or any*) issues.

So how does the university go about the relationship-building part? Are we already doing it? Are we doing it *well*?

The specific considerations in building effective, on-going collaborative relationships with communities are largely dependent on the questions of "with who" and "for what." For me, these

questions, in turn, raise an even more fundamental question of ***who do we mean by "community***" - a concept that for all its importance and recent attention by UVic is not defined in the Strategic Plan or in any University policies. Perhaps for good reason, but a lack of understanding (or perhaps I should say the diversity of understandings that exist) on such a key construct as "community" does present some challenges for policy and practice alike.

But not to worry – even though I am very interested in this topic, I'm not able to get into any detailed discussion about "community" here. I simply want to note that it is a complex concept that is not uniformly held across the campus, and therefore we can't always assume we are all talking about the same thing when the term is used. Community means different things to different people. I'm assuming within this forum we are using a very broad and inclusive understanding of community – whether communities of place, interest or circumstance - which conceivably could include any sector or stakeholder group – within civil society, First Nations, government, industry.

Now I want to mention a few "on campus" examples of the many innovators in community-university relationship building and sustainable collaborations:
- Many **individual researchers** across campus, both with and without much institutional infrastructure behind them (i.e., part of a Centre or Program) – individuals such as:
  - My fellow panelists and their respective organisations or academic units, and many of you who are participating in today's retreat.
  - **Lorna Williams** (Education) in her work on Indigenous science and environmental knowledge for school curricula.
  - **Carol Harris** (Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies) in her participatory research on communication technologies and leadership.
  - **Marge Reitsma-Street** (Studies in Policy and Practice) in her work on community action research methodologies.
  - **Bonnie Leadbetter** (Centre for Youth and Society) in her community-based approach to studying mental health of children and adolescence.
  - **Jutta Gutberlet** (Geography) in her Participatory Sustainable Waste Management Project based in Brazil.
  - **Ana Maria Perdo** (School of Business) in her work on community-based entrepreneurship and sustainable development.
  - **Jessica Ball** (School of Child and Youth Care) in her contributions to First Nations Partnership Programs to strengthen community capacity for well-being of children and youth in Aboriginal communities.

These are just a few of the many individuals at UVic, spread across almost all faculties on campus.

- Some **Centers** and a number of **Programs** on campus are based heavily on community-university relationship-building, such as:
  - **Centre for Community Health Promotion Research's** work on health and social change, headed by Marcia Hills
  - **LE,NONET Project's** community internship program that places UVic Aboriginal students in local Aboriginal organizations.
  - **Service-Learning Internship Program** of Cooperative Education that places Co-op students in social and environmental non-profit organisations.
  - **Environmental Law Centre** that provides research and advocacy on public interest environmental issues.

- Certainly relationship-building has been the emphasis of recent work by the new **Office of Indigenous Affairs** led by Fran Hunt-Jinouchi, for example in participating in the provincial Aboriginal Service Plan process.
- Presumably building and maintaining collaborative relationships is part of long-term commitment of the new **Office of Community-Based Research** led by Budd Hall.

Of the many people and programs at UVic, some are explicitly addressing sustainability topics and some not. My point is that the building of relationships with communities is *not* topic or discipline-dependent and so in aspiring to build relationships to address sustainability issues, we can learn much from those working in many other fields.

One example of a UVic group focused entirely on sustainability and community is the **POLIS Project on Ecological Governance,** which I have been involved with for the last seven years. We say our work at POLIS is "designed to liberate the potential where people in place work together to develop sustainability in that place." This is the basic ethos that motivates our research, policy analysis, education and community action.

For example, our work with a diversity of communities on topics such as:
- **Campus Sustainability**, headed by Michael M'Gonigle that led to the book *Planetary University* coauthored by Michael and Justine Starke, and catalyzed the impressive *Common Energy* initiative already described by Jamie Biggar.
- **Water Sustainability**, led by Oliver Brandes, that engages all levels of local and senior government and water professionals in urban water demand management, based on an ecosystem approach.
- **Biodiversity Research and Education** – my own work in partnering with local community groups and First Nations on understanding at the "backyard level" why biological diversity is important to human and ecosystem health.

At POLIS, we believe that theory should not only inform practice but that we need to consciously and strategically "complete the learning loop" by ensuring practice informs and evolves theory. To achieve this, we see POLIS' work in relationship with "communities" of any type as based philosophically and practically on *non-linear* models of engagement and governance structures. What we aspire to is circular, reflective, and self-sustaining models, involving reciprocal exchange and equitable distribution of power. Building long-term, equitable relationships where all parties are valued contributors and learners (i.e., informing and being informed) seems to me as important to addressing sustainability issues as is generating knowledge about sustainability.

As I noted, there are many at UVic doing this and doing it well. But, I think we have yet to find an effective way to operationalize the building and sustaining of relationships with community at a broader *institutional* level, starting with our policies, strategic plan and action plans, such as the one you are tasked with developing on sustainability. How can UVic *as an institution* be a leader in North America on addressing sustainability issues? Perhaps in part, by consciously moving beyond the alluring rhetoric of "civic engagement", and taking the time/investing the resources needed to understand how to build transformative relationships with communities of all kinds.

One suggestion for early on in your efforts to create a sustainability strategy and action plan is to learn as much as possible from those across campus *and their community partners* who are actively doing this foundational work – especially in areas of community-based participatory health, education, and

Aboriginal studies. Some considerations or challenges that may arise involve:
- o time and timelines,
- o budget categories and funding levels,
- o ethics of engagement and collaboration (i.e., how we ought to treat each other)
- o decision-making and power hierarchies,
- o mechanisms for meaningful involvement/participation,
- o institutional commitments beyond time-limited project funding

In summary, I propose that our panel topic of "Engagement with Community and Society on Sustainability Issues" at an *institutional* level requires some further thought and articulation as to *who* we are talking about engaging with, *how* we plan to engage, and how we intend to engage *well* over the *long term*. Based on the breakout group questions, I think these considerations cross-cut most if not all breakout group topics.

As part of this "engagement equation", building sustainable relationships cannot be an assumption, an oversight, or an afterthought. It must involve an explicit and thoughtfully considered "methodology" for engagement, with just as much investment into the *process* (whether time, funds, experience or intellectual input) as in the desired *outcome* of achieving a policy and action plan on sustainability.

Finally, when we look at what UVic is doing well and what we could be doing better in tackling sustainability issues in society and with communities, I suggest we need to not only look to but *beyond* those who are working directly on the topic of "sustainability". We can and need to learn also from those in other areas who are working sustainably *in relationship* with communities.