Towards a new architecture of knowledge: the office of community-based research at the University of Victoria

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Strategic emergence of Community university research partnerships
There is a wind of change sweeping our research communities. There is a pervasive energy for something that is described variously as knowledge mobilisation, knowledge exchange, knowledge translation, and knowledge transfer or knowledge application. What most of these concepts are responding to is the notion that significant social, political and economic investments have been made in the creation and/or accumulation of knowledge based in or with universities. In this context, knowledge is understood as a state of understanding, feeling or awareness based on experience or study. Universities are often seen by society as institutional repositories of knowledge. Scholars, students and faculty are all understood to be creating knowledge through their research activities. The accepted understanding is that the process of research creates knowledge. Scholars or researchers are regarded as the facilitators of these processes and thereby the creators of this knowledge. This kind of knowledge is put into peer-reviewed journals, professional reports, books, CDs, DVDs, podcasts, blogs and other internet-based products. Much of this knowledge remains in the minds of the researchers, on shelves in libraries or in journals that may remain invisible to persons working on the practical side of social, economic, ecological or health challenges in our communities.

In the 1970s in the Netherlands, a structure called Science Shop was created to link academic research to community needs (http://www.livingknowledge.org). In Tanzania, India, Latin America and elsewhere, a new research approach called “participatory research”, which recognized the knowledge creating capacities of community, organisations and social movements, was also gaining visibility (Hall, 1975). Flash forward 40 years, and we have the emergence of a second or third wave of research and knowledge mobilisation initiatives that build on the early work of the Science Shops, the Participatory Research practitioners and others. It is promoted and supported by a new set of networks and structures such as Sciences Citoyennes in France (http://sciencescitoyennes.org); the Living Knowledge Network based in Germany (http://www.scienceshops.org); The Popular Education Network based in Scotland (Crowther, 1999); Community Based Research Canada (http://uvic.ca/ocbr); Campus Community Partnerships for Health in the United States (http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/); as well as the National CBR Networking Initiative (http://www.bonner.org/campus/cbr/home.htm) and the University-Community Partnership for Social Action Research Network.
Additional networks and structures include the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (http://www.pria.org); The Global University Network for Innovation of Barcelona (http://www.guni-rmies.net); the Sub-Saharan African Participatory Research Network in Senegal; the Developing Research on Citizenship network based at the University of Sussex (http://www.drc-citizenship.org); Observatory PASCAL on Place Management, Community Engagement and Learning Regions (http://www.obs-pascal.com); the Australian University Community Engagement Association (Temple et al, 2005); and many other emerging networks. Between August of 2006 and present, representatives from many of these networks have been engaged in conversations about how best to support this emerging theory and practice of higher education community based research.

What does it mean for universities?
The interest and support for community based research and knowledge mobilisation is an important component of the broader trend of increased attention to community or civic engagement in all Canadian universities. As the current generation of university strategic plans in Canada is released, it is notable that language around community university engagement has become more prominent. The University of Victoria speaks of “civic engagement”; other universities use a variety of other expressions from “social responsibility” to “local and regional engagement”. The notion of a “third mission” for higher education (teaching, research and community service) with its narrower and separate realm of community service is being replaced by a variety of ways of expressing engagement with the community, which cut across both the research and the teaching functions.

Ted Jackson at Carleton University has conceptualized what he calls the “CUE (Community University Engagement) Factor” (Jackson, 2008, p.1). He writes of a dynamic interaction of community university engagement that includes community based experiential or service learning; community-based research and community based continuing education. Community based learning, service learning, experiential learning and community service learning (the preferred term in Canada all refer to opportunities for students to have placements or engagements with community organizations. Community service learning as a concept often includes an aspect of social change or transformation as part of the intention. Experiential learning is a more neutral concept placing the value on learning through experience, with less emphasis on ‘service’ or transformation. Community engagement is about the interaction of a variety of forms of engagement both with each other and with the academic mission of the universities. Continuing education is the grandmother of all forms of community engagement and arguably still represents the deepest set of community partnerships. It is as diverse and multi-faceted as the human imagination. Service learning, community service learning or experiential service learning has seen considerable growth across the country over the past ten years. Service learning is experiential learning for students who learn off-campus through action projects with community groups. UBC’s Learning Exchange, where undergraduate students have opportunities to work in Vancouver’s downtown east side, is one of the better known programs, but the Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning lists 26 service learning programs in universities and colleges in every region in the country.
What does it mean for communities?
The United Way of Greater Victoria has established a series of 'impact councils' to make informed, research-based and evidence-based recommendations on what kinds of funding interventions show the most promise for permanent impact on issues of poverty, mental health and addiction, family services other areas of need the greater Victoria area. The creation of the OCBR facilitated the identification of university scholars who could sit on these impact councils and bring their academic knowledge and experience to the table shared by local business and government partners. The Downtown Business Association of Greater Victoria has initiated a lunchtime speaker’s series in collaboration with the Office of Community-Based Research and the Division of Continuing Studies to bring academics with practical and policy and business ideas to the attention of the downtown businesses. The Municipality of Saanich, one of the 13 smaller municipalities that make up the Greater Victoria area approached the OCBR with a request for help with a community mapping and citizen's consultation process for planning urban development. The Halalt First Nations, an Indigenous community about an hour north of Victoria has asked the University of Victoria for help with planning some agricultural initiatives, with legal help regarding threats to the regional aquifer and with documenting their history.

All of these are examples of the new community-university research partnerships that have emerged from the creation of the University of Victoria's Office of Community-Based Research. They illustrate what is happening across our communities in Canada and elsewhere. There is a new relationship between institutions of higher education and their communities being negotiated through practice. The emergence of these new partnership structures is a critical step in providing the capacity for partnership development. Relationships lie at the heart of community-university research partnerships. Neither brilliance, good intentions, need, passion nor charismatic leadership will work to assure success if relations of respectful and mutual understanding are not established early in a research partnership. Many individuals in both the community and the university have been aware of this, what is different is that this kind of thinking is being taken up at an institutional level.

Mission and objectives of the Office of Community-Based Research
The Office of Community-Based Research at UVic exists to facilitate collaborative community-university research partnerships that enhance the quality of life and the economic, environmental and social well being of communities. It is located administratively within the office of the Vice-President, Research and has a Steering Committee that is co-chaired by the Vice-President, Research and the CEO of the United Way of Greater Victoria. The OCBR is a small unit with a part-time Director who is a senior academic, a part-time Associate Director with a community organising background and a full-time administrative coordinator. It has a working motto that is necessitated by both size and philosophy: it will do nothing that someone else is already doing and it will do nothing on its own. It has two formal functions (1) The facilitation of community-university research partnerships and (2) The support and visibility of students and faculty who are engaged in or interested in community-based research.
The Vancouver Island Community Research Alliance (VICRA)
VICRA is an alliance of the five post-secondary educational institutions located on Vancouver Island. They are united via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the respective President's of each of the five institutions. The five campuses include: The University of Victoria, Royal Road's University, Vancouver Island University, Camosun College and North Island College. The MOU calls on the group to: (1) identify priority research issues with an island wide focus;(2) develop and implement a process to identify relevant and available knowledge, information, skills, and capacities both in the Parties and in communities (3) identify and develop research partnerships and share information on best practices that can be shared with others;(4) promote the engagement of the Parties’ students in action research projects identified by communities/community members; (5) build capacity for community-based research and evidence-based planning among the spectrum of organisations and agencies that work to address the needs of Vancouver Island residents and communities;(6) build on each other’s experiences and expertise, drawing on lessons from local, national and global networks/projects.

During 2008 and 2009, we worked with communities up and down the island to see what common issues there were that our VICRA team might be able to address. Three areas emerged from these consultations: Aboriginal Health disparities; lack of affordable housing and concerns about the sustainability and security of our food sources. In June of 2010, with a grant from the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, our VICRA team began work on a Local Food Production and Distribution Action Plan, a project that we proposed calling "Bringing the Food Home". VICRA will support the development of five "Local Food Production and Distribution" tables in various parts of the Island. With student CBR research interns from each of our campuses and research support from a team of distinguished food policy researchers, business people, organic farmers, chefs, food distributors, local government folks and others will sit together to decide how to remove the obstacles to local food production and distribution. Actions envisaged are the creation of a venture capital pool for small-scale farm producers, new solutions to food inspection sites and regulations, support for farm markets, better links to food wholesalers, and more.

Building the curriculum of community-based research within the University of Victoria
Given the large numbers of faculty involved in community-based research at the University of Victoria, it was a natural step for the OCBR to think about how it could strengthen sharing of the experiences amongst these knowledgeable scholars and between them and students in the University. We developed a speaker’s series called, "Promises and Perils of Teaching CBR at the University of Victoria". The series that was initiated in the 2009-2010 academic year was extremely popular, welcoming about 300 participants attending one or more of the sessions. There were 28 academics and community resource persons that participated in the first year of the series, which also proved to be very popular with graduate students. The idea that the series might have become a space for academics themselves to share amongst each other was less successful. While several faculty members took part in the sessions, most of the professors only turned up at the sessions where they were speaking. This is fairly typical in university life, but remains a challenge when we are striving to deepen the theory and practice of CBR within our University. We have
followed up the series with a proposal to produce a collaborative book on teaching CBR in higher education settings with the engagement of many of these same faculty members. We hope that producing this collaborative publication will strengthen the exchange of ideas amongst the authors involved.

**Networking to strengthen local action**

Community-Based Research Canada is an evolving open and inclusive network of people and organisations engaged in and supporting community-based research. It was born during the Community University Exposition 2008 that was hosted by the City of Victoria. Its first major policy effort was the publication of a report on the funding and development of community-based research in Canada for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Hall, 2009). This report made a series of recommendations to the granting councils, the universities and to community research groups. The study and the desire to follow-up with some of the recommendations in this study led to the launching of a national conversation on Knowledge and Society that is framed within the discourse of a new Knowledge Commons (Hall, 2010). The first national summit on the Knowledge Commons was held on June 2, 2010 in Montreal.

At the Global level, the European-based Living Knowledge Network, the Society for Participatory Research in Asia and Community-Based Research Canada have come together with a number of other regional CBR networks to create the Global Alliance on Community Based Research (GACER). GACER has initiated four key activities to date: a launch of the statement of principles; advocacy within the United Nations World Conference on Higher Education; a global study of the potential impact of community-university research partnerships on issues such as poverty and sustainability and the creation of a global communiqué on the role of community university research engagement as a strategic element in the development of higher education everywhere.

**Challenges**

Our experiences at the University of Victoria have given us some positive experiences. We can see new ways of understanding knowledge and get some glimpses of what a new architecture of knowledge might look like. The University of Victoria as well as other universities has not yet come to full grips with what this means for the administrative and knowledge mobilisation structures of the University. We are fortunate in Canada in not yet having the kind of league table approach to institutional research rankings that have had such impact in the UK. But recognising excellence in community-based research for annual merit increments or for tenure and promotion is still very uneven at our university as it is across Canada. Getting a full return on the public investment in our universities in Canada means paying for the facilitation and brokering services. Developing research partnerships that work takes time. Universities have always found the money for the laboratories that the natural sciences need. There will new investments needed facilitative structures to be able to build and support relationships that will make the connections with the substantial needs in our communities and in our troubled world come alive and make a real difference.
References


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