Reflections on the Academic Retreat, UVIC, January 29, 2009

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Disclaimer

These notes do not offer a record of discussion, or even a selection of main points from the discussion. They set out a quick draft sampling of thoughts that occurred in light of the conversations at the recent academic retreat, juggled subsequently. Almost every idea here was broached or prompted by someone at the meeting, but only a couple of names are mentioned in attribution of a few very specific observations that I heard, or thought I heard, or perhaps wished I had heard. If these impressions reflect a misunderstanding of the discussion, that's my responsibility and I apologize for any errors.

Coin of the Realm

My old teacher, Nobel Laureate in Economics Paul Samuelson, offered in his 1962 Presidential Address to the American Economics Association his advice (though it really must be read in context) to the profession as to evaluation of their work. "In the long run, the economic scholar works for the only coin worth having—our own applause." This endorsement of the ancient and honourable tradition that sees the criteria for evaluation of academic performance—and the performance of the university as a social institution—in terms of internal disciplinary standards of rigour and quality seemed to find a direct echo in President Turpin's anecdote about the counsel he received early in his career, seeing publication in the first-rate journals as the only coin worth the effort—a 'good' journal being 'not good enough'.

From entitlement through enlightenment to accountability: the obligation to explain, to a broader, more questioning, public

But all that coinage now comes from a different paymaster. There is increasing emphasis on measuring the social impact and outcomes flowing from the rising flow of external funding of university research, in which broad-based curiosity-driven research competes with specific and targeted 'strategic priorities'. Major problems of attribution are present in accountability for results from either, but are obviously largely insurmountable in interdisciplinary initiatives and boundary-spanning research partnerships aimed at transformational results.

On evaluation of the impact of public investment in university research, there was a suggestion that universities have to move beyond a sense of entitlement to support as just a 'good thing' to a sense of accountability for much fuller (though not quantitative, because that ambition is everywhere pretty well illusory) explanation of the pathways and linkages through which university activities contribute positively to desired social outcomes. That explanation ultimately rests in interpretation and imagery. In this

setting, the faculties of Humanities and Fine Arts become the pointed end of the academic mission, conveying new ideas and new perceptions of enduring human needs and challenges, and means to meet them. Justification moves away from the university, downstream of the research enterprise itself. Disciplinary criteria for evaluation of performance and progression in the field become problematic in the face of emphasis on community-driven as distinct from curiosity-driven research.

It was noted that the effect of recent budgetary decisions is to shift resources away from general funding towards directly targeted expenditures, and vouchers for students, both measures moving discretion as to the allocation of resources away from universities themselves, and indeed away from the discretion of individual curiosity-driven researchers.

Peter Keller asked how we can get past the concentration of public investments in universities targeted toward specific industrial goals and economic growth, and look toward social wellbeing more generally. For this purpose, social sciences and humanities disciplines become crucial vehicles for delivery of the results of work in natural sciences and engineering in forms that will be understood and may forge enlightenment as to the links to economic, social and personal well-being, rather than skepticism about the roles played by academic effort. Those disciplines become the core educational preparation for building a society properly anticipatory and responsive to surprise, resilient against shocks, persistent in pursuit of sustainability.

Cultural cohesion becomes the foundation for receptivity to institutional as well as technological innovation, and thus fundamental to the pursuit of prosperity itself. Social Sciences, Humanities, and Fine Arts thus become essential elements of the research-intensive university, not less central. Indeed, cultural evolution becomes the key process through which the cohesive community is built and the norms of cooperation essential to the resilience of human systems in an uncertain world are forged. From where—from what sorts of imagery and stories and creative imagination—are such norms born and transmitted? Current scholarly research addresses such questions, and certainly a research-intensive university must do so.

A new intellectual and institutional context
Michelle Gauthier suggested in her presentation that there is growing pressure toward boundary-spanning research partnerships aimed at transformational social results in a setting where 'universities need to listen more'. The growth of 'concierge services'—science shops, for example—in institutions otherwise largely impenetrable for non-specialists in communities outside the academic tower is one response. But again, institutional incentive systems do little to support trans-disciplinary or community-oriented research.

More broadly, the new context for science, much literature suggests, drives conceptions of research toward a much broader peer review, more robust forms of social knowledge (Nowotny, 2001). John Schellnhuber—candidate for Director at PICS—describes (1999) a Second Copernican Revolution that now demands much greater recognition of the

limits of scientific ambition in a complex and profoundly uncertain world in which the researcher is embedded in historical and social context. "…there is nothing wrong with being particularly curious about the items and issues that matter most for society and with recognizing that the coveted borderlines between observing subjects and scrutinized objects have often been mere constructions of a preposterous reductionism." (Clark et al, 2005) "Reality is conceived, not perceived." (Buzz Holling, 1983)—"construed, if not constructed" (Mary Douglas).

Both those involved in research and those involved in the application of particular results as well as formation and implementation of public policy more generally—which is all of us—must be prepared to take more risks, to be wrong more often. We must therefore be prepared to subject decisions to a much broader and much more subjective reconciliation of conflicting perspectives in coming to judgment, downstream of the academy—or rather, in the midst of continuing turbulent exchange with and within the academy as well as in the arena of practice.

Yet ultimately the space for independent reflection, independent views and independent voices must be preserved. The university must transform itself in order to remain a safe forum for intellectual contest and deliberation in a world dominated by digital noise.

A broader view of teaching?
We should move away from the language of 'teaching' and 'courses' and the structured 1.5 unit course as the universal building block. Informal engagement with graduate students is time-consuming and is also a setting for learning (both ways). This time should be recognized as part of a 'teaching load' (again, do we really want that language—maybe it is a teaching 'opportunity', a 'teachable moment', to be seized) in the same way as an undergraduate course. Maybe we should be thinking of engagement with undergraduate students differently, too.

There was talk of 'ownership' of courses, of keeping regular faculty involved in courses or course streams even as release time stipends (RTSs), (or WSCs, workload substitution contracts) are negotiated. [This remark was later clarified, emphasizing that it was referring to ownership without control.] But wouldn't the alternative to ownership be collaborative effort through a 'creative commons', especially with respect to learning in an interdisciplinary orientation? Especially with an aging professoriate needing constant renewal, 'ownership' suggests too much a dominant, single point of view within a course or course stream?

More importantly, in a Web2.0, wiki-based world, engagement with students is more akin to a research undertaking than a standard course delivery. And isn't this where the unique opportunity at UVIC arises? Using all the capacities of social networking, scholarly engagement with undergraduate students at a research-intensive university can offer an experience very different from the teaching universities. [And at the same time, senior scholars can lean on social networking to remain an influence in the learning of undergraduates even as the burden of animating that learning is shared more widely with junior colleagues, post-docs and graduate students.]

A student entering UVIC could be entering a community small enough to be personal, but at the same time part of more directed social networks—Facebook with facts, YouTube with purpose—moderated by scholars and researchers for the purpose both of preserving and communicating a heritage of accumulated knowledge, and of creating and mobilizing new knowledge. Enlisting Twittering and texting in pursuit of truth as it should be seen (or as extended discourse might frame it) offers new teaching vehicles. As a research-intensive university, UVIC could see itself as having an opportunity to create a unique learning and living experience at undergraduate as well as graduate levels. And that undergraduate experience need not be shaped and directed solely at the production of applicants to graduate school and preparation for the glass bead games of future academic careers.

But of course, as was notably observed at the meeting, one cannot aspire to excellence in all things. At some point, "Yes, we can" must confront "Get a grip". Campus 2020 envisages a research and innovation cluster in the Georgia Strait Global Leadership Initiative, not a single institution doing it all. UVIC, as a research-intensive institution within this cluster, will face some wrenching choices as it brings focus to its program. Again the links to communities outside the tower will be crucial in these decisions.

Specific suggestions respecting organization of academic units and research centres
In this new context, it would be helpful generally to broaden the notion of faculty to embrace greater roles for others from outside the ranks of regular faculty, to capitalize on resources beyond the tower walls: adjunct appointments, for example, or community visitors, scholars in residence or executives on exchange from government or formal civil society organizations as well as the grassroots groups of civic society (to draw on the penetrating distinction proposed by Jim Tully in his recent President's Distinguished Lecture). But the impact for research centres specifically would be to promote greater integration and greater recognition of the potential contribution of the tacit knowledge brought by such visitors to the learning experience as well as the research programs.

Such integration of external resources could be coupled with more explicit mandates (somehow drawing increased resources) for research centres as contributors to learning experiences and engagement with students.

One vehicle would permit research centres to recruit associates who would be considered regular faculty. This might be a grant-funded or endowment-funded (not necessarily full-time) faculty appointment that could be made on the recommendation of a research centre search committee without requiring the full apparatus of faculty appointment on the basis of scrupulous application of disciplinary scholarly criteria. 'Competence in inter-disciplinary mobilization of knowledge' might be one alternative criterion to be recognized in this connection (or indeed in scholarly career progression more generally).

Through such measures, research centres might more effectively promote the University's academic mission by drawing on links with broader peer review

communities and epistemic networks that may help to frame research priorities. [But should these others vote on election of departmental chairs or appointment of faculty?]

Conclusion: Opportunity for Jude the Obscure as well as for Canada Research Chair aspirants?
There is a new context for science, there is a new social contract with science, there are new understandings of science that carry the notion into the furthest reaches of work in social sciences, humanities and fine arts as those in the academy seek to contribute to greater knowledge and wellbeing through influence on the perspectives and norms that individuals bring to the negotiation of social consensus and the exercise of their individual agency in an uncertain world.

In this context there is fresh urgency around the challenge of bringing the text and covenants formed in the tower into play with the learning and tacit knowledge of those in the arena of practice. Affirming and building this link 'from the tower to the arena', in the words of the title of the last, monumental, volume published by our late distinguished colleague Douglas Johnston—and more importantly, back from that arena—is the present task of the research-intensive university.

Institutional and social transformation and innovation must accompany knowledge revolutions and technological revolutions, in the academy as elsewhere. Conversation at the academic retreat makes it clear that we have a long way to go before disciplinary and institutional incentive and reward systems, criteria and procedures for career progress, recognition systems and status structures reflect these new realities. Language and interpretations—to say nothing of space constraints—need to be considerably redirected and relaxed to come to grips with social needs for learning in a web2.0 world.

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A few links perhaps bearing on the pace of change and the scale of transformation.

http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=xHWTLA8WecI

http://shifthappens.wikispaces.com/

And one to a set of video clips that I used (courtesy of my colleague Justin Longo) in a recent talk. The learning resource represented by universal access to the TED talks themselves (along with Google, Google Earth, Google Trends and such sites) is perhaps as good an illustration as any of the revolutionary change in the context in which contemporary students work as they pursue learning or undertake research (or both at once).

http://url.ca/163t