

**Facing the New Economy:
A university–community research and learning network in
British Columbia, Canada**

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Introduction

In recent years, the University of British Columbia (UBC) Canada has renewed its mandate to conduct research that directly serves the people and communities of British Columbia. In the transition to the so-called knowledge economy, regions and communities traditionally dependent on resource extraction such as those on North Vancouver Island, suffered severe loss of jobs, revenues and population, which have in turn led to increased social dislocation and hardship. At the same time, new opportunities for economic and community development, for collaboration, learning and innovation have arisen in response to new problems.

Our project, funded under a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Initiative on the New Economy (INE) Research Alliance development grant, proposed to help develop a collaborative, multi-disciplinary research and learning network among UBC and other researchers and students, community organizations, the business community, local experts, and other concerned parties. This paper explores the process involved in developing a collaborative research agenda, articulating our shared research principles and values, and raises questions about the role of the university in working with socially and economically disadvantaged rural areas.

Facing the 'New Economy' on the North Island

As more university researchers attempt to foster and enter into collaborative research relationships with community partners as a strategy for doing relevant and useful research that matters to the futures of communities, it is becoming increasingly clear that there are a number of challenges and obstacles that we face in such a relational context. The Initiative for the New Economy (INE) Research Partnership Fund provided the impetus for a project of the University of British Columbia to develop a collaborative community-university research and learning network for innovative community and economic development which addresses the local and regional transition to the New Economy in rural British Columbia. The development phase of this project was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council SRHC - Initiative for the New Economy development grant. In this development phase, representatives from a number of North Vancouver Island community economic development and environmental organizations and University of British Columbia faculty and students met several times to identify a broad range of research problems with regard to social and economic community development in the region.

Living in the New Economy

The 'North Island' is a region whose economy has been based on extractive resource-based industries (e.g., fishing, forestry, and mining). In recent years, global markets and depletion of resources – particularly the fishery and mining activities – have contributed to a severe economic decline and social disruption in the region as resource-based industries taking with them jobs, investment and revenues. In the face of this decline the communities of the North Island have developed a strong coalition of local governments and organizations working in various forms of partnership to implement projects and activities that address the challenges and opportunities related to the changing economy. Yet among these various bodies, there are divergent visions of what the economic future should look like. The role of First Nations Land Claims settlements and the possibility of treaty implementation in the region add even greater complexity to the problems and the vision of the region's social, cultural and economic future.

Like all industrialized countries, Canada is undergoing a transformation from an economy based mainly on resource extraction and manufacturing to an increasingly knowledge-based economy. In this 'New Economy', knowledge and information become more central elements of the economic process than they were before (Lipsey, 2000). The terms 'knowledge-based' economies and 'knowledge-based' societies have been coined to indicate the central role that

knowledge is attributed in the present transformation. The most important element of knowledge being human intelligence, the understanding of complex systems, and continuous 'learning' becomes a central feature of all knowledge-based systems (Edquist, 1997). The increased importance of access to knowledge and information and the capability of 'absorbing' them (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Lundvall, 1992) necessitate a far greater amount of communication and networking with other actors - other companies, knowledge producers, information brokers, regulatory bodies, and others - both within and beyond the region. The emerging new economy is a 'networked economy' and the capacity to network and be part of various networks is a precondition for innovativeness and competitiveness. The transformation process requires more learning than before, not just by individuals (Rubenson & Schuetze, (2000). Thus the rationale for university and community research and learning network (Brabeck, 1998).

Aims of the Project

The project envisioned a broad, interactive, and dynamic network of local and regional research collaborations, both community–university alliances as well as multi-faceted community to community exchanges that produce and examine knowledge about the new economy and innovative ways to respond collaboratively to the economic and social challenges it brings to the region. The INE proposal was an attempt at developing a new model for universities to work with communities to bridge university scholarship with practitioner knowledge while advancing the work of both.

In early July of 2002, our core team of researchers from University of British Columbia made an initial visit to the region. The purpose of this visit was to continue a dialogue begun the previous year by phone and email, with representatives from First Nations, local municipal and regional government, community economic development organizations, the Federal Department of Fisheries, and the community college. We discussed the various problems the region was facing and the research interests and priorities of the region. This meeting, in the offices of Community Futures Development Corporation in the small town of Port McNeil, with 17 people around the table, marked the beginning of a process to develop a collaborative research and learning network.

Learning to collaborate

Amid the lively discussion it very quickly became clear to us that there were deep divides among the community organizations concerning the social and economic development priorities within the region. One clear example was cited. Atlantic salmon fish farming, at the time a major growth industry in the region, had begun to provide significant economic benefits to families who had been hard hit by layoffs in the forestry sector and the closure of the wild salmon fishery. However, there were questions emerging concerning the impact of fish farming to the wild salmon stocks. This discussion provoked some table pounding statements from fish farming industry supporters and a measured and cautious response from the biologists from the Federal Department of Fisheries. In spite of such differences it was still possible for our group to produce a lengthy list of research issues, potential local and regional contacts for follow-up, and a set of criteria for working together. The work of deliberation, of deciding which projects were most urgent, most feasible, most important, was still to be done.

What matters to the North Islanders?

When we first met with the North Island community representatives, one local community development worker suggested that instead of being subjects of university research we university researchers need to re-consider what we believe counts as research and knowledge. Communities also do valuable research, she pointed out, and have generated and documented local approaches to community economic development. Tuhiwa Smith (2001) refers to this as community action

research which, as a ‘method assumes that communities know and can reflect on their lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities that can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects’ (p. 127). We were encouraged to set aside pre-established agendas and to be open to what university researchers and community partners might generate by thinking together. This adherence to a genuine collaboration may have been both the strength and weakness of our project in the early stages of its development.

In these initial conversations we devised a plan to continue building a collaborative research relationship, including hiring a local researcher to follow up on the research ideas presented in this meeting. She prepared briefing notes on each of the twenty-plus ideas for research which formed the basis for discussion at a follow-up workshop held at the university.

We set up a project website designed to serve as a repository for research reports, best practices, and standards. Within a month we posted the research ideas and questions generated by the community researcher. Down the road we planned to include a search engine to locate information quickly and easily; a membership directory; links to related sites; and a shared workspace to support video conferencing. The website was to be the information hub of the project – a tool for communicating among our university and community partners and a means to attract research partners for emerging community research projects. These research projects spanned a number of sectors including ecotourism, aquaculture, non-timber forestry/ agroforestry, forest practices/policy, environmental stewardship, youth, and community health care.

We also produced a video documentary that focused on the impact of economic transitions on particular communities and individuals in the region. The video documented the local perspectives on what the new economy meant for people on a daily basis and provided a location for individuals and community/regional representatives to tell the story of ‘what is happening’ in North Island as it is unfolding. Several community leaders, academics and activists spoke about the diverse issues facing the region and their diverse equally diverse visions for the region. The video has been an invaluable tool for communicating with interested UBC faculty and graduate students about the research needs and priorities in North Island, as well as providing an important opportunity for North Islanders to speak about what matters to them – about the kind of research that would benefit the region and the way in which the research should be conducted. Producing the video provided us with a way to listen to how problems and challenges were defined and the terms under which the community was interested in working with the university.

Over the three-year period of the INE project we envisioned that several research projects would be selected for in-depth research and learning activities. Each research project would be assigned an interdisciplinary team of university and community researchers and a community-university advisory board to guide in the development of project selection criteria, the intellectual direction of the research, and the dissemination of the findings. As starting point we jointly developed a set of principles for working together.

Principles for University/Community Collaborative Research

The project’s guiding principles for community-university collaboration were developed to inform the approach taken in the process to define the research and learning agenda and to move forward into the research work and dissemination.

- Any approach by universities to contribute to community development and problem-solving capacity must be one of mutually beneficial partnership and not, as the old linear model of innovation suggested, a top-down, ‘extraction’ relationship.
- The community university partners will include faculty and graduate students from a number of disciplines and representatives from community organizations who will jointly

- identify, design, conduct and represent research projects in which each partner makes significant contributions.
- Any collaboration must be problem-oriented; and is therefore multi-disciplinary, pulling together various disciplinary bodies of knowledge and resources (university –based and rooted in the local knowledge of the communities) that can contribute to analyzing and solving the problems at hand.
 - Collaboration between the various partners is not limited to research development activities; to be successful, it must include learning activities that are both formal and non-formal.
 - Research outcomes and data will be shared among partners.

What Can Universities Do?

The University of British Columbia has many academic and service units willing to contribute to the research and network many of which have community linkages and involvement of varying types. Clearly, the university offers expertise that is useful to regions such as the North Island as it is undergoing structural, institutional, technological transformation including: basic and applied research, synthesis of research, and the distribution and dissemination of research through peer reviewed publications and conferences. This expertise in knowledge creation and learning is central to the university mission. Yet there are cultural and value differences not just between universities and communities (Lynton & Elman 1987; Lerner & Simon, 1998).

Funding collaborative research

The process of developing the network has been challenging. Faculty are pressed for time, graduate students need funding, decisions about what research projects to lead were compounded with the difficulty of attracting research funding and waiting for decisions to be made. Once we had developed the broad approach to the project and submitting our letter of intent to the funding agency, we waited more than four months for a response. Finally, the principal investigator was notified in writing by the INE Secretariat that our project, after being carefully considered by a multi-disciplinary selection committee, was not invited to submit a full proposal. Forty-four proposals were submitted and only twelve were invited to submit a detailed proposal. Almost one year later, after considerable thought, planning, care and time invested by communities and university researchers intently focused on the possibility for innovation, research and learning, our plans were pulled out from under us.

According to the adjudicators, the strengths of the proposal included a diverse and experienced research team, as well as strong and diverse partnerships with organizations from all sectors. The review committee was also impressed with the innovative nature of the proposed dissemination plans. But where did we go wrong? The committee thought the project was geared more to learning than research and that at this stage the proposed outcomes were unspecific and required further development. That is why we had specifically detailed the process planned to develop the research agenda. This begs the question, how can you expect the diverse community partners to invest the time required upfront to clearly define the research questions and outcomes prior to a financial commitment from the research funders? We had learned very quickly, that our community partners' time was severely constrained. In fact, time was one of their most precious assets and survival of some of our community agencies depended on a constant search for funding. How much time can be reasonably asked of these folks to develop a detailed research agenda prior to having a financial commitment? The research funding requirements was out of step with reality. The Director of the INE hoped that we would find other means to assist us in carrying out the research and we will have to decide together if we should appeal the decision and/or look elsewhere for funding.

There seems to be a real difficulty to creating genuine collaborative relationships. Above all it takes time. As the university partners we did not predetermine the final research agenda and insisted on a process for focused deliberation between the university and the community partners. This process is outlined in the proposal and something that would occur once we had some assurances that the project would move forward. We are also keenly aware of the expectations such a development process raises. Not to mention the time the community partners have invested with the university so far. What could we have done differently? Should we have pushed through a more detailed and committed research agenda with specific projects thus asking for even more of an investment in time and energy? What other considerations did we overlook? We invited the community partners to respond anticipating that they may be too disappointed, fed up, or busy to continue the conversation. At this stage in the project we are examining other ways to partner with other universities and other research funding agencies to continue this work.

Conclusion

Research is highly institutionalized. The university is bound up with its departments, faculties, units, disciplines, and traditions of intellectual freedom. The difficulties of communities and geographical regions do not fall easily into categories that line up with university research. And funding of research is politically structured and government programs that fund research relevant to the transitional resource-based economies often do not line up with the time and process involved in creating a university –community research agenda.

Through the development phase of this project we have initiated various kinds of talking circles among researchers from various departments and disciplines within the university and the North Island region who share similar interests. We wanted to bring research and learning to bear on the socio-economic self-help initiatives and skill building in the region and to support local and regional planning and environmental stewardship projects generating local solutions to local problems. The challenge remains for university researchers to imagine new and responsive ways to extend the knowledge and learning resources of the university to support the plans and priorities of rural areas of the province. Listening to the community is where we began. The question remains, what effective and ethical ways do we offer as partners with the community researchers living in and working for these hard hit and struggling communities?

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