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for sustainable development

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Royal Roads University

Participants

Dr. Ann Dale, Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Community Development, Royal Roads University
Dr. Caroline Andrews, Professor, Political Science, University of Ottawa
Dr. Chad Gaffield, President, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
Dr. Noreen Golfman, President, Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences
Dr. John Robinson, Executive Director, Sustainability, UBC Vancouver
Dr. Giselle Yasmeen, Vice-President, Partnerships, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Dialogue

Ann Dale

Thank you for joining us today on what I consider the most important topic for this country, the future of social sciences and humanities funding. I have argued that it is really all about the social imperative, the production of useful knowledge as John Robinson talks about, that allows people to make more informed choices to act on some of the critical issues currently facing Canadian society and societies everywhere.

Could I ask each of you to briefly introduce yourselves to our audience, and John Robinson, congratulations on your new appointment as Executive Director, Sustainability for UBC Vancouver, can you tell us a little about what you intend to do now that the stars are aligned?

Caroline Andrew

Hello - I am Caroline Andrew, Director of the Centre on Governance at the University of Ottawa. My research work is at the intersections of women's studies, municipal political science and immigration policy

Ann Dale

Welcome Caroline, I regret to inform everyone that Professor Westley has just informed me she has an urgent family matter that she must attend to, and has asked me to convey her regrets. Caroline, I believe you are also conducting some research on homelessness/poverty?

Caroline Andrew

How unfortunate for her - and we will certainly miss her wisdom.

I am particularly working on issues of immigrant integration in ten Ontario communities outside Toronto - issues of housing and homelessness come into this research but the focus is on how to create welcoming communities for immigrants.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Hi this is Gisèle Yasmeen. Look forward to this experience!

John Robinson

Hi, This is John Robinson. Sorry to hear about Frances.

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

Hello, everyone, this is Chad Gaffield and many thanks for organizing this event.

Ann Dale

Welcome, Chad, could you explain a little about your background in addition to being the President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). At this point, I would like to acknowledge the funding that I have received from SSHRC standard grants and the Canada Research Chairs program, which has made such a difference to my own research. In fact, we are here today able to talk because of a SSHRC grant in 2002. Welcome, Giselle and John, we are just waiting for Noreen.

John, tell us about the exciting stuff happening at UBC, my congratulations?

John Robinson

I am happy to say that UBC has just responded to the recommendations of our proposed Sustainability Academic Strategy by creating an new integrated sustainability initiative, that is intended to combine operational and academic sustainability at UBC. Working with two cross-cutting themes (campus as a living laboratory of sustainability; and university as an agent of change in the community) we will be developing what we hope are transformational programs cutting across teaching and learning, research and partnerships, and operations.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

My background is in History and I bring a historical perspective to all my work here at SSHRC including how we articulate the value of SSH research and research training. My sense is that, by situating our times within a chronological context, we can contribute to debate about where we are and where we might go as a society.

Noreen Golfman

Hi Everyone. I am currently President of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CFHSS), commonly known as the Federation. I am also Dean of Graduate Studies at Memorial University in St John's, Newfoundland. My own research areas are interdisciplinary in nature, based in cultural studies, literature and especially film studies. I welcome this dialogue, which I think is a terrific idea.

Noreen Golfman

Thanks, Noreen, I certainly hope I can keep up with our esteemed panel, such a wealth of research experience and wisdom.

John Robinson

I should be clear that this new University Sustainability Initiative (USI) will cover the whole UBC-Vancouver campus. The UBC-Okanagan campus are developing their own set of exciting new sustainability initiatives.

Gisèle Yasmeen

This is so exciting John... you have worked so hard for so many years to see this come to fruition.

John Robinson

My own background is fairly undisciplined, encompassing energy analysis, philosophy and environmental studies originally, and developing an accretion of other ill-digested components. I live in hope that there is depth in breadth.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Ann, as requested, here is a bit more about myself. I'm the founding VP of Partnerships at SSHRC where I currently have responsibility for a good number of our collaborative granting mechanisms (e.g. CURA, etc), Joint Initiatives (e.g. Metropolis) and our thematic priorities such as Environment, North, Aboriginal Research, New Media, "Innovation, Leadership and Prosperity" (based on Budget 2007 funding for management, business and finance).

I feel strongly about the importance of articulating the value proposition of the social sciences and humanities and have written about it over the last few years. One example is on Kris Olds' excellent GlobalHigherEd blog at <http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2008/03/20/articulating-the-value-proposition-of-the-humanities/>. I hope he can join us. Like our President, I'm also intrigued by the growing social innovation movement and how that presents a good opportunity for the SSH. You should all see Chad's speech on this topic available for downloading at <http://www.ppforum.ca/events/accelerating-social-innovation-smart-ideas-canada>. I also wrote a piece myself for the MaRS blog on "Technopreneurship" and Social Innovation available at <http://www.marsdd.com/blog/2009/08/14/technopreneurship-and-social-innovation/>.

I'm glad Chad just mentioned the link between SSH and new Information and

Communication Technologies and new media as this a huge area for us with lots of achievements to date and future potential. Now to jump back into the discussion!

Ann Dale

I reviewed some of SSHRC's documents in order to help my moderation. This phrase is a nice introduction into our first question "One key challenge is to conceptualize and assess the multiple ways in which SSHRC's support for research improves and enriches the daily lives of individuals".

Our first question, can you describe 3 major Canadian social science and humanities research contributions of individuals (recent or historical) that you think have made a major contribution to our country?

Dr. Chad Gaffield

One compelling example was just made world-famous by the New York Times which compiles a list of the top ideas at the end of each year. For 2009, at the top of the list in the arts section were the results of a collaboration between Ian Lancashire and Graeme Hirst. Ian is a English professor and Graeme is a computer scientist both from the University of Toronto. They analysed the text of all of Agatha Christie's books and through digital humanities analysis proved that the famous author began suffering from dementia later in life. Lancashire says that this technology could be used today to detect Alzheimer's by using the same textual analysis on someone's emails or blogs. So there you have it, technology which marries content and programs is quite powerful and can lead an English professor to find a way to detect dementia.

Ann Dale

When I was a public servant, you may be glad to know, Dr. Gaffield, that in start-up situations, I always tried to have a historian on my team. Our failure to implement sustainable development, I believe, is a failure to learn from our history, but I digress, do you have another example?

John Robinson

Three examples that come to my mind are:
John Porter's concept of the vertical mosaic (1965), George Grant's lament for a nation (1965), and Margaret Atwood's Survival (1972).

Caroline Andrew

Although my background is political science the research contributions I think of first are ones done in the context of practice - women's safety audits for example - a Canadian invention that has gone across the world.

Ann Dale

Can you elaborate a little, John, on why you think these three are seminal? Caroline, do you have some others?

Caroline Andrew

John's examples are certainly ones that got people to think differently about subjects - they reframed the question - and therefore the answers.

John Robinson

Grant and Porter changed the terms of the debate on what it is to be Canadian and how we think about ourselves, sparking some pretty spirited political debates in the process (Grant arguably provided the template for the Red Tory concept). Atwood did the same thing in a somewhat more limited venue: changed the way we understand how Canadians have viewed the natural world.

Noreen Golfman

I can happily think of many examples but one close to my own home was a major collaborative research initiative commonly called "Coasts Under Stress," a massive project spanning the country and involving researchers across the whole social sciences and humanities spectrum. This MCRI was so timely because it focused on the collapse of the fishery and its effects --social, economic, psychological, cultural--on rural communities especially in Newfoundland and BC. Much good came out of that project -- especially foundational knowledge.

I like to harken back to John Porter's seminal work, *The Vertical Mosaic*, still a touchstone for social theory in this country. I was actually introduced to the work in a graduate seminar in literature and culture, where i was shown how sociology, for example, drew on narrative strategies, motifs, and metaphors to conjure an entire epistemology of nation. Needless to say, more than *The Vertical Mosaic* influenced me in that class.

And, as a third, example, because I see others have already poached the ingenuity of Ian Lancashire, one of my favourite examples, is the work of ray Siemens, a sometime collaborator with Lancashire on digital humanities research. These guys have opened up intellectual space we didn't know existed.

Caroline Andrew

And certainly the work on Benoit Levesque and others on the social economy - again allowed people to pose questions in a new way.

Noreen Golfman

Interesting how some of our examples overlap! We didn't consult beforehand, honestly!

Dr. Chad Gaffield

Another example would be Tima Bansal who leads the Network for Business Sustainability at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario, a network of social scientists, business managers and policy makers who are raising the profile of sustainability research and change in the community of practice. One result is the 2008 announcement by TD Bank that it would become carbon neutral by 2010 – the first such commitment by a major Canadian bank. This announcement is directly linked to their engagement with her in the network. By the way, I love the older examples and please keep them coming!

Gisèle Yasmeen

Another Cluster to point out is the one run by Stewart Elgie out of U of O looking at Sustainable Prosperity... they've got lots of foundations on board and partnerships across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Another yet is the Knowledge Impacts in Society grant held by Yolande Chan at the Monieson Centre at Queens.... on rural economic development in Eastern Ontario. This project is so successful that I'm told the Ontario government wants Yolande to reproduce it throughout the province.

Noreen Golfman

Survival is an interesting example of how far-reaching and provocative a slim text can

be. The work did change our views of nature in the Canadian imaginary, sure, but it also generated a decade of debate and detractors who found its themes too reductive, too generalizing, and quite counter to the ways some regional literature was recognizing the role of nature. Always controversial, Atwood practically produced an entire generation of lit crit with that single volume.

John Robinson

The term sustainable development, was popularized, though not coined, by the Brundtland Commission, the Executive Director of which was a Canadian, and 6 (I think) of the 10 public hearings it held around the world were in Canada, Arguably Canadians played a major role in the articulation of that concept. Though it is easy to forget now, Canada was at the forefront of thought and action on sustainability in the late 1980s.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

One transformative result on Canadian lives in recent decades has been a made-in-Canada school curriculum, made possible by Canadian scholarship.

Gisèle Yasmeen

I think it's important to remember that Canadian and Canadian funded SSH scholarship has an impact that goes well beyond Canada. Think of Terry McGee recently winning the "Prix Vautrin-Lud" which is the Nobel prize of Geography due to his seminal work rethinking the models of the Asian city, mega urbanization, influences on both theory and practice... that is a classic example. Think also of Innis, McLuhan, Jane Jacobs. I also learned that Jeanne Wolfe of McGill planning recently passed away - she had a huge impact in both Canada and internationally. There is just so much going on!

Dr. Chad Gaffield

Another example is the whole question of an aging population...which was SSHRC's first theme in the early 1980s...our scholars have helped Canada make a much more successful transition than anyone predicted two decades ago (including major changes in legislation such as compulsory retirement or practices of elder care, etc.). Lots of work continues and perhaps needed more than ever but major progress too

Ann Dale

Caroline and John's points hit the mark, I believe, in that a 'healthy' society has to have a robust social sciences and humanities community that 'asks the right questions'. I wonder if we engaged artists more in research dissemination if we would be able to address our challenge? If you think about the power of writers to influence change, I think of Victor Frankel, Man's Search for Meaning.

Gisèle Yasmeen

The Frankel book is fantastic of course, and a classic.

Noreen Golfman

Right on, Ann, or the work of Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka... profound effects on profound ideas about identity, democracy, diversity...

John Robinson

A clarification: at the forefront in official responses to sustainability issues. I think we are still very active in significant parts of civil society, academic organizations, NGO's and the private sector.

Caroline Andrew

And I think that it is important to think of contributions in the sense of shifting research interests - I mentioned the Metropolis project which has resulted over many years in an important increase in the research and thinking being done on immigrant integration in Canada – that's an important contribution.

Ann Dale

Caroline, can you give me a little more information on the Metropolis project, or any web links?

Caroline Andrew

Certainly - there are the five Metropolis research centres - in the Atlantic Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies and BC - plus the federal government office which has a coordinating role - an annual conference that brings together policy makers, university researchers, students and the community sector - it builds a community of practice <http://canada.metropolis.net>

Ann Dale

Noreen, and others, what influence do you think Avatar will have on people's attitudes towards their environment? I think it was Frances Westley who introduced me to the idea that you need to engage both people's mind and heart to get to meaningful action?

Noreen Golfman

When you consider the astonishing number of people who are seeing AVATAR, you have to be grateful that there is such interest in an environmental message --and that, indeed, that is the message. The other day I ran into our Rhodes Scholar Premier --who loves going to the movies-- and he was waxing ecstatic about AVATAR...gave me pause to think about the enormous reach and influence of such a film. It is easy to dump on the sheer size of the budget and the director's ego but I do believe the film demonstrates a global appetite for its themes... which are so decidedly against a long commercial tradition of individualism.

Caroline Andrew

And adding to minds and hearts - we also have to engage people's imagination.

Gisèle Yasmeen

I guess I'd better bite the bullet and go see it!!

Noreen Golfman

Well, the reach of an Avatar is pretty humbling in the short-term... we will soon have language courses in Na'vi.

Gisèle Yasmeen

You are too funny Noreen. Isn't this fun?

Dr. Chad Gaffield

I like Avatar as evidence of the impact of the re-thinking of the 'discovery' of america etc in favour of a whole new literature on native-newcomer relations, etc in which Canadian scholars played key roles (and undertook many comparative projects with colleagues elsewhere) and more recently began integrating western and aboriginal epistemologies in unprecedented ways...

Gisèle Yasmeen

Megwetch Chad... very à propos comment given our Aboriginal Research committee is in town replete with Elder Peter DeContie from Maniwaki and an excellent international reviewer from Aotearoa (New Zealand)!

Ann Dale

Noreen and John, the interesting thing to me about Avatar is that people are talking about what an emotional experience it is, you actually 'feel' as if you are part of that environment. And of course, we teach our students whether they are 'a part of' or 'apart' from the environment.

We have also talked about technology and new media, imagine if we could engage new media for proactive research dissemination?

John Robinson

Is the popularity of Avatar evidence that people really care about the environment, that they tend to think there must be something beyond the ever-present materialism of modern life, or just that draping exciting new 3D technology with a dumbed down (and arguably regressive) noble savage message is good marketing?

Ann Dale

Perhaps for some it is their first experience in 'nature' given the cyborg trend of modern society? Giselle, great idea to have ongoing dialogue among diverse sectors about emerging field of inquiry, and using new media?

Gisèle Yasmeen

I love the possibilities that the new technologies afford us... the challenge is to use the tools effectively and not have them control us (I think of Heather Menzie's excellent work here). I do worry a bit about young people having physical reality now mediated by virtual reality.... also the health issue that come out of that kind of sedentary activity... Wii games aside. So, you don't learn how to do the real thing but go through a simulation (ie sports, artistic pursuits etc)? At the same time, the compression of time and distance is so incredibly important if we are to get along on this tiny little planet of ours. Is anyone here familiar with TakingITGlobal? They are an amazing group of young people committed to global change who use new media to advance the cause...

John Robinson

I also wonder about talking about Avatar and the work of, say, George Grant as if they are part of the same phenomenon. While both have impacts on society, the differences between the kinds of impacts, audiences, and implied arguments about knowledge and meaning may be as illuminating as the similarities.

Noreen Golfman

I think it's a bit of both, John, but I do not believe the film would be resonating emotionally so much -and certainly not with entire sectors of the public-- if it were all about transformers blasting each other. It offers, as Chad has suggested, an old myth but re-imagined as a 'discovery' of new possibilities. It's about more than the 3-D effects....

Gisèle Yasmeen

Jungian archetypes à la Star Wars, Harry Potter but with more techno bells and whistles? I suspect Joseph Campbell would be proud. I really ought to go see the darn thing.

John Robinson

As someone who has been involved for about 15 years in building computer game-like simulation tools to engage citizens in thinking about sustainable futures, I am a big fan of the potential of various forms of new media to engage people and allow them to express their views. But for related reasons, i am not a fan of using such approaches to guilt-trip people, or even to try to induce individual behaviour change.

With respect to the role of the arts, i am proud to be supervising two brilliant PhD students, with backgrounds in piano performance and dance, who are looking at getting beyond the cognitive approach to communicating and acting on sustainability issues. David Maggs is working on the role of cultural narratives and ritual, and Meg O'Shea on embodiment and performance studies. I think these kinds of interdisciplinary--almost unimaginable only a few decades ago--are potentially transformative.

Gisèle Yasmeen

John... good on you! This officially makes you a "research-creation" scholar!!

Noreen Golfman

I really like John's examples of current graduate student work, points out the fruitfulness of involving more of the performing and creative arts in our own research fields. I think we still have a ways to go there but, interestingly, technology is helping to bring these worlds together.

Gisèle Yasmeen

This also reminds me of the exciting Public Humanities work being shepherded in the US by the Imagining America Group at Syracuse. I want to thank Karen Grant for bringing that to our attention at the FedCan AGM last spring.

John Robinson

I am a bit uncomfortable with focussing on social sciences and humanities in isolation. Virtually all of my work involves collaboration also with engineers, natural scientists, health scientists, etc.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Indeed, codified knowledge is an integrated web. The tri-agencies are learning to work together a bit more effectively. I'm proud that we were able to have two tri-agency competitions on "Knowledge Synthesis" on Environmental Issues in collaboration with CIHR and NSERC. Also, we recently launched the tri-agency plus IDRC Global Climate Change initiative. It's all very exciting. Still, though, we have a ways to go...

Caroline Andrew

I like John's point - it is important to think in terms of the questions we want to answer and involve all the perspectives that can help to solve that question.

Ann Dale

Giselle and Chad mentioned a number of interdisciplinary funding programs as well as individuals leading large research projects that bring together researchers in unique partnerships with the private sector, and civil society. How important do you think interdisciplinary research is to modern day issues and challenges?

Dr. Chad Gaffield

I like the expression 'discipline-based interdisciplinarity' which embraces the 21st century both-and rather than the 19th-20th century either-or...

Caroline Andrew

I have to ask Chad what discipline based interdisciplinarity means?

Gisèle Yasmeen

Indeedie do... a classic "Gaffieldism". It would be great to have a little mini-dialogue on what are the emerging fields of enquiry... how they are being institutionalised in both curricula and scholarly/professional associations... I think of the new associations at FedCan, one of which I have a personal fondness for given my personal intellectual history... Canadian Association of Food Studies... including grad students, scholars, chefs, restaurateurs, activists, folks from industry and government, etc.

Caroline Andrew

Hi - thanks for the interesting example Gisèle - its newness seems to be partly the subject but partly the people it brings together - it is research in the context of practice - and a wide practice that involves food in a variety of ways.

Noreen Golfman

Good point, Giselle, about how institutions are dealing with or regularizing emergent interdisciplinary areas. As we all know, our universities usually struggle to keep up with what researchers are pursuing.

Edmund O Wilson:

The problem is that we have stone-age emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology.

Ann Dale

So the solutions are social?

Noreen Golfman

The solutions must be social . . .

John Robinson

To my mind, we need to think about two kinds of interdisciplinarity: discipline-based interdisciplinarity, which is proto-disciplinary, aimed at filling the spaces between existing disciplines, and which derives its problems from the academic literature; and issue-driven interdisciplinarity, which is often critical in principle of disciplines, derives its problems from society, and simply tries to use what certified expert knowledge may be available to address those problems, often in active partnership with non-academics.

Noreen Golfman

I see many graduate students trying to marry the two kinds of interdisciplinarity you describe John.

John Robinson

The problem is that what it takes to support these two kinds of interdisciplinarity (reward systems, P&T criteria, etc.) are often extremely different. Universities tend to conflate them (usually have only discipline-based interdisciplinarity in mind) and thus strongly disadvantage issue-based interdisciplinarity.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Check out the two links below for interesting resources to address the P and T challenge above... things are changing, slowly...

http://www.aucc.ca/pdf/english/reports/2008/faculty_recognition_09_e.pdf
http://old.fedcan.ca/english/about/governance/meetings/speaker_presentations-March2009.cfm

Caroline Andrew

Thanks Noreen for your description of the difficulties we can have in trying to fit new groupings into medieval institutions - it would be interesting to see the ways Food Studies people are fitting themselves into the universities and the research granting categories.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

One key feature of our current Kuhnian paradigm shift is the idea that specialization is not the only path to knowledge and understanding. Rather than hoping that we can understand the jigsaw puzzle only by separately studying specific pieces and then adding them, we now recognize that new understandings of specific pieces may (often do) change the whole puzzle. Thus, we need both specialization and contextualization.

Ann Dale

Shall we move to our next question? Can you talk about how the funding for social sciences and humanities research in Canada compares to other countries? Please don't hesitate to give our listeners any references that you think are relevant?

Noreen Golfman

I am interested in what my expert colleagues have to say to Ann's question. I asked my own colleagues who generally admitted we are not very good at knowing the answer to the question, at least not yet. Is that true? Have we really ever fully empirically investigated the question, or do we navel gaze too much about it. Those who keep asking this question ought to help support the research we need to conduct to answer it.

John Robinson

The Canadian funding Councils have been extremely progressive in funding new forms of research. The Tri-Council Eco-Research Program of the 1990s is an example. It required collaborative interdisciplinary teams of scholars from fields within the domains of at least two of the three main funding Councils (SSHRC, NSERC, and MRC(at the time)), with strong community involvement. I remember being at a meeting of the International Group of Funding Agencies (IGFA) where several other national funding councils were extremely impressed at this. Before that, SSHRC's Human Context of Science and technology program was extremely innovative in its interdisciplinary orientation and its focus on social problems. I am not sure that we are still quite as innovative as we used to be.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

Around the world, many countries include funding councils that support the social sciences or humanities or both. For example, in the United States of America, there is the National Endowment for the Humanities (their new Chair, Jim Leach, recently spoke in Ottawa when we announced the results of Digging into Data) and the National Science Foundation. In the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research council supports the social sciences while the arts and humanities research council focuses on history, literature, etc. It's quite difficult to compare these councils directly to SSHRC esp since the context varies enormously (e.g. the USA has many foundations etc that play a major role). But we can say that relatively speaking and thanks to the Massey Commission that lead to the Canada Council and then SSHRC, Canadian scholars have not only been able to establish a Canadian voice on the past and present but have also contributed significantly to Canada's relative success as a country - great investment!

Noreen Golfman

And many of us believe that SSHRC's emphasis on quality and its increasingly international emphasis are key to where we need to go to consider comparisons adequately.

Caroline Andrew

I agree - the international focus and its ability to encourage comparative research - at all levels. I can do comparative research on very local contexts because that's what I am interested in - but with a broadly comparative focus - so that the large questions of context and the detailed questions all get looked at.

Ann Dale

And yet to return to John's discomfort about excluding the natural sciences and engineers, and in the belief that today's problems are beyond any one sector, any one discipline to solve, any one level of government, we need trans-disciplinary research?

Caroline Andrew

And in trying to answer Ann's difficult question we also have to include the individuals and groups affected by the question or situation - so thinking about research we need to think about collaboration with community.

Ann Dale

Caroline, I totally agree, given the complexity of some of our modern day challenges, to ensure that the knowledge is useful and relevant. But it is so difficult to get funding and recognition for the importance of these 'soft' processes, as one of the two civil servants who helped to establish the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, we were constantly challenged on what was the value of bringing people to the table? I know there are some unanticipated outcomes of that process, for example, Minister Charest was one of our Ministers, did his experience hearing some of that dialogue influence his leadership on some of Quebec's environmental leadership? An important research area is to try and identify measurements for these community engagement, deliberate dialogue and democracy?

Noreen Golfman

I was at a conference in Switzerland in 2008 at which the organizers refused to use the word interdisciplinary --were pushing transdisciplinarity, and invited scientists, engineers, humanists, social scientists, and so on to engage in a 4-day dialogue marathon, probably the most stimulating and productive conference I have ever attended. The framing context was social and focused on global issues and problems,

but the exchange was rich and polyphonic. I have dreamed of such a conference in this country ever since.

Caroline Andrew

Noreen's conference sounds like it was a wonderful experience. Are you suggesting that we have been too timid here about working across sectors or working across different kinds of knowledges?

Noreen Golfman

I think we have a way to go to staging that kind of dialogue, and, as I said, and perhaps because I am a dean of graduate studies, I see the way forward in the work being proposed and pursued by graduate students, many of whom are taking disciplinary risks, so to speak, I never dreamed of.

John Robinson

I'd like to return to the question of depth in breadth. Are there forms of understanding that are inherently "horizontal" but which we systematically exclude or devalue because of our strong focus on the vertical criterion of disciplinary depth. Perhaps there are skills and aptitudes in pattern-recognition, connectedness, creative problem construction and integrated solution finding that we need to start cultivating.

I would add to that the need to think about the knowledge we need as emergent from the combination of certified or expert knowledge with non-certified but extremely relevant 'lay' understandings and knowledge, and the normative preferences and values of society at large. These latter two inputs require new forms of interactive participatory process, I think.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

I am really energized by our emphasis on user engagement, the campus-community connections of CURAs, the digital focus of Image, Text, Sound and technology, Research Creation, Aboriginal Research initiative, etc.

John Robinson

I think there is a lot of very exciting issue-based interdisciplinary (and/or transdisciplinary) work going on in Canada, some of it stimulated directly by funding Council requirements (e.g. the shift from MRC to CIHR changed some funding criteria rather dramatically). But most of it is project-based, and dependent on soft money to proceed. There is not much resilience in such a system, nor much tolerance for failure. I think we need to institutionalize such processes more deeply, so they are less dependent on project funding, can take more risks and, can be allowed to fail on individual projects without fatal consequences for those involved. This in turn has two consequences. We need to create safe institutional places for such activities, and we need to re-think some of the traditional promotion and tenure requirements.

Ann Dale

One of SSHRC's objectives is to achieve "outcomes which help to change thinking and behaviour in everyday life". Can this be done without interactive participatory processes?

Caroline Andrew

I agree with Ann - it is very difficult to get funding for unconventional mixes of people or processes - for instance we have the CURAs which are terrific but we don't have the range of kinds of grants that would facilitate, for example, small or medium projects involving the co-construction of knowledge - or building communities of practice because we know that can take time.

Gisèle Yasmeen

So true Caroline... especially not-for-profits... SSHRC has worked a lot with government and NFPs and is now doing more with private sector but the power issue is important.. Universities are places of privilege in society and when we promote collaboration with others, especially those less well-resourced, the power issues are complex... in addition to speaking different languages and the resources often being insufficient to collaborate equally in a meaningful way. We recently had Angie Hart here from Brighton's Community University Partnership Programs ... the previous intervention is a bit of a paraphrasing of what she said.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

Along these lines, you will be interested in our program architecture renewal efforts....

Gisèle Yasmeen

We're hoping our new program architecture will help address this problem. Stay tuned - we'll be asking for feedback on our website soon.

Noreen Golfman

I agree fully with John, and I do think that shift in institutional culture etc will come, if slowly, with a new generation of researchers, as long as we don't completely remake them in our [sic] own image.

Caroline Andrew

Noreen's point gets back to the question of structures - if these exciting new researchers have to fit into very conventional discipline based structures - what will be the result?

John Robinson

It is sometimes instructive to think of the PhD process as a process of creating enough psychological damage that the new graduates will be happy as academics.

Gisèle Yasmeen

You're being naughty! Chad often speaks to the fact that we used to say at SSHRC that half of our doc scholarship holders were "lost" because they didn't go into academe. We don't say that anymore... Chad talks about the fact that we foster talent that contributes across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors, as well as the formal research world.

Ann Dale

Can anyone answer what percentage of funding by each of the three granting councils goes to interdisciplinary and disciplinary research?

Gisèle Yasmeen

It depends how you define interdisciplinary versus disciplinary. Many of our thematic competitions are/were multi/inter and sometimes trans disciplinary (e.g. the suite on Environment last summer). In SRG, we have Ctee 15. However, the Blue Ribbon Panel suggested building in more interdisciplinary perspectives into our regular committee structures. And then there is the interesting "semi-disciplinary" structure in the fellowships competitions.... quite different.

Noreen Golfman

One argument I have heard against the small or medium project idea is that the social sciences and humanities community thinks too much in terms of projects, and not enough in terms of longer term research programs. That argument appeals to me... suggests a coherence and continuity have to be considered instead of a one-off project.

Caroline Andrew

This would require institutional commitment on a longer term basis than is now often the case - but also capacity to make judgments about programs so that there is also the possibility for new entries.

John Robinson

I agree with Noreen: we need to have more funding to more programs and less to projects. But the funding Councils cannot do this alone. The universities need to see one of their roles as fostering or incubating such activities. This means creating safe institutional spaces where there is a common culture of issue-driven interdisciplinarity, which plays out, for example, in promotion and tenure processes.

Noreen Golfman

As Hemingway once wrote in another context, it would be pretty to think so.

John Robinson

In fact the funding Councils in Canada have often been ahead of their core constituencies on these issues, as all of us who have sat on adjudication committees know!

Dr. Chad Gaffield

At the moment, we can give some support at any one time to the top 25% of SSH scholars....a tiny group achieves sustained funding by succeeding in successive competitions...

Caroline Andrew

And it is certainly true that the low level of funding has a terribly discouraging effect on young faculty - even if they know the figures they take it as a personal defeat and/or insult.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

New scholars have usually done exceedingly well winning doctoral fellowships etc. - at SSHRC, we are determined to do a better job of supporting new scholars...

John Robinson

The low success rate is purely a function of the budget, I assume. Perhaps we need to think more about other sources of funding. Certainly in the sustainability field at least, the funding Councils are not the only source of either money or ideas. The discouragement scholars may feel is perhaps at least partly because the assumption is that this is the only important game in town.

Caroline Andrew

You are right John that there are other sources of funding - but in general the universities rank the sources of funding - so do academics but so do the institutional processes.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Indeed, the frank reality is that we have significant supply and demand issues. However, the SSH community also needs to remember that CFI, NCEs, the Community College Innovation Program etc. are also there for our community.

Ann Dale

As a new scholar in 2000, (in spite of my age and career change) I cannot agree more with this statement, and the diversity of grants available are excellent. I do think the level of funding compared to NSERC, however, is not conducive to propelling this country's innovation and competitiveness into the next century. Some say that the technological break-throughs in the next decade will be more than the previous 100 years, and yet, if we are incapable socially of optimizing the full potential and take-up of these new technologies?

I do think, however, that we need far greater funding for new scholars in the social sciences and humanities, and for post-doctoral scholars, especially compared to the funding for NSERC, if this country is going to realize its untapped potential in social invention and research.

I think a question we all may want to ask ourselves as we move to a knowledge-based society and economy and trying to advance knowledge and build understanding, is what degree of institutional coherence and support do we have to realize those objectives. As well, if we are committed to discipline-interdisciplinary and issue-based interdisciplinary (thanks John for the elegant definition), I ask the same question?

John Robinson

Arthur Koestler made a brilliant argument in the appendix to one of his books when he talked about the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Dead Horse. He pointed out that although most people said that reductionism was thoroughly discredited (and thus continuing criticism of it was simply flogging a dead horse), in his view it was actually alive and well and flourishing in academia.

Dr. Chad Gaffield

My favourite question from the extensive survey done by the Blue Ribbon Panel (with more than 6 thousand respondents) was the question= how do you identify yourself? 1) exclusively disciplinary...4) extremely interdisciplinary? Can you guess the results?

Noreen Golfman

I guess most said interdisciplinary...?

John Robinson

I'd guess a mean of 3.2

Ann Dale

And the answer is, Chad? And what does this mean for current university disciplinary structure, if anything?

John Robinson

It means very little, I would think, especially since the term means very different things to different people.

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

I love the guesses which suggest how energetically our scholars are embracing horizontal connections...the results, overall, gave quite even percentages across the four options and showed no real variance among research fields etc.

Noreen Golfman

A fully Canadian response!

Caroline Andrew

That actually surprises me that so many answered towards interdisciplinarity - considering the institutional incentives of the discipline based organization of the universities - I have had so many young female researchers tell me that they feel they have to wait until they get tenure to express interest in women's studies or feminist studies where that is institutionalized as an interdisciplinary program.

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

I was similarly surprised...

Ann Dale

To be a tad cynical, the more things change, the more they stay the same, is perception the reality? And we haven't even touched the transaction costs of leading or participating in large trans-disciplinary teams, another subject for another day.

John Robinson

If we are serious about engaging with the community, serious about strong forms of interdisciplinarity, and serious about contributing in some tangible way to the resolution of societal problems, then perhaps it is useful to think about new forms of collaborative engagement with the public, private and NGO sectors, where the funding Council contribution, if needed at all, is about adding reflexivity, contextualization, and more critical evaluation to the process.

Noreen Golfman

Indeed, we can imagine the emergence of a new funding model along these lines, and perhaps that's where we are all going. Some researchers are cobbling together this sort of layered partnership anyway, but it hasn't been institutionalized.

Caroline Andrew

Good point John - we do need to think about the parts of the whole process - and what parts require what kind of financing and support - reflexivity is a really good example.

Gisèle Yasmeen

Indeed John, not that it will be a panacea but our new PA will allow for and encourage that kind of leveraging recognising SSHRC's unique value added re: merit review and quality control. This discussion is happening at a good time.

John Robinson

I look forward to seeing this.

Gisèle Yasmeen

We have a general one pager on our website at the link below.

http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/site/whatsnew-quoi_neuf/renewal-renouvellement-eng.aspx

In addition we discussed with our SSHRC Leaders in early December and an expert panel on Jan 21st and a "webinar" with CAURA (the RGO association) on Jan 29th. We have draft program literature that we're refining and translating prior to posting on the web by end of Feb. Stay tuned. We also gave a sneak preview to FedCan but are hoping to brief them more shortly.

John Robinson

And the ranking process you describe Caroline may be a significant part of the problem, which takes us back to the earlier discussion about promotion and tenure criteria.

Rhetoric about interdisciplinarity and community engagement, even if accompanied by funding, does not change these key institutional and cultural barriers.

The exciting thing is that despite these barriers, so much wonderful work is going on.

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

Barrier-wise, my sense is that a SSHRC grant provides a kind of armour for scholars...highly-respected across institutional cultures, old and new...

Gisèle Yasmeen

And I am always so amazed how much cash and in-kind folks are leveraging through all kinds of SSHRC grants. Our challenge is to track and report on this effectively as a community. It really speaks to the value of what people are doing... including grad students who, as a direct source of funding represent 53% of the SSHRC budget and up to 70% if you include support within grants... we really need to hit that point home as per Chad's "developing talent" argument... that's a good deal what SSHRC is all about in many ways.

Ann Dale

In the interests of time, and we have a very interesting question from the e-audience, I would like to move to our last panel question. Is there a link between social sciences and humanities research and Canada's innovation and competitiveness? Since Frances could not join us today, I will ask her to add a post-script to our conversation with respect to this last question.

Gisèle Yasmeen

I noticed her question in the audience forum. Gail, as you may know, North was identified as a priority by SSHRC back in 2002-2003. We did the Dialogue on Northern Research (there is a link under publications on our website). We had the Northern Research Development Program that developed capacity and excellence in this area. We also participated in the tri-agency International Polar Year initiative. In 2008, we received dedicated federal funds allowing us to beef up work in this area. In summer 2008 we had a call for proposals aligned with the federal northern strategy... There was good work funded and, for the most part, meaningful involvement of northerners was a must. We're developing a longer term strategy for work in this area... there's a lot of buzz due to the Northern strategy, sovereignty issues, the announced construction of the High Arctic Research Station etc. We would welcome your input on where you see this area going.

Ann Dale

Thanks, Giselle, the question was "Where does the panel see opportunities and challenges for Northern SS&H research?"

Gisèle Yasmeen

Thanks yes... the punchline is that there are opportunities given the new funds.. the theme that has constantly emerged is meaningful collaboration by and with northerners. Climate change was hugely popular as a topic but I was surprised to see a lack of interest in northern sovereignty. Where is the community on this one?

Ann Dale

We are nearing the end of our conversation, I hoped you enjoyed the good Italian coffee:) Shall we try for a major national conference (Noreen), using new media and bleeding-edge (forgive the jargon, I love the term) learning technologies, a 4 day dialogue marathon, the framing will be social and contextual (Chad), aiming for breadth and depth (John), and revealing emergent interdisciplinary areas (Giselle), employing community engagement processes (Caroline) and staying tuned for program architecture renewal (SSHRC)?

Last comments, ideas, you want to share?

Noreen Golfman

Brilliantly summarized, Ann. Sign me up.

Caroline Andrew

I agree with John - there is wonderful work going on - and in ways that is making real contributions to Canadian society - this gets us back to our social innovation theme - and also to hoping that the wonderful work is being acknowledged as such by the people around the people who are doing it.

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

Lots of evidence emphasizes how central SSH research and research training are to innovation and competitiveness - both the human dimension of tech, etc. and the emerging integration of business innovation and social innovation. Our grads are key across the private, public and non-profit sectors in the new era of the customer-driven marketplace, the user-engaged public sector, etc.

Caroline Andrew

Canadian diversity.

Gisèle Yasmeen

This has been amazing. Can we do it "en français" perhaps with one of your kindered spirits in the francophone realm like Thérèse Lafférière at Laval (you two should meet if you don't already know each other).

C'était super... merci. I really enjoyed this forum. What's next Ann?
It would be great to get the students and new scholars involved as well as collaborators from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Over and out and thanks to all... enjoy the rest of the week... Ciao and yes the Italian coffee was delicious... as well as the biscotti!

Caroline Andrew

I agree - a great synthesis Ann - and you included good coffee.

Noreen Golfman

I only got tea in Newfoundland, what's up with that?

Gisèle Yasmeen

I'm afraid you got screech and flipper pie.

Noreen Golfman

That explains the odd sensation of dizziness and nausea.

Thanks, Ann and colleagues...a pleasure!

Dr. Chad Gaffield (SSHRC)

Grand merci et à la prochaine!

John Robinson

Goodbye all, its been great fun.

Caroline Andrew

Goodbye.

Ann Dale

I cannot thank you enough for your time, and contributions to our discussion today. I am always amazed at the generosity of our research community to collaborate, and sorry about the tea, Noreen, next time we'll do better when you host the 4 day dialogue marathon. Take care, and thank you again.