

Knowledge and Democracy: Indigenous, Historical and Engaged Thoughts on a Knowledge Commons

Remarks to the Canadian Knowledge Commons Initiative

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Budd Hall, University of Victoria

My name is Budd Hall; I am of English Settler heritage and have the privilege of living and working on Coast and Straits Salish traditional territory in what we call Victoria, British Columbia. I work at the University of Victoria in support of strengthening the use of knowledge in making our community, our land and all of our peoples more just, sustainable and inclusive.

I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to the Mohawk First Nations of the Haudanosaunee Peoples on whose traditional territory we are meeting and working today.

In 1813, Thomas Jefferson, wrote the following:

"If nature has made one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as one keeps it to oneself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of everyone, and the receiver cannot dispossess themselves of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less because every other possesses the whole of it...That ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of humanity...seems to have been peculiarly and benevolently designed by nature...like fire, expansible over all space, without lessening its density at any point, and like the air in which we breathe, move and have our physical being, incapable of confinement or exclusive appropriation"

In 1908, Henry Marshall Tory, founder of three Canadian Universities, wrote,

"The modern state university is a people's institution. The people demand that knowledge shall not be the concern of scholar's alone. The uplifting of the whole people shall be its final goal"

So what do I mean by a knowledge commons?

I draw from Hess and Osrom who have written *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*. They describe a commons as " a general term that refers to a resource shared by a group of people".

They define knowledge as "... all intelligible ideas, information, and data in whatever form in which it is expressed or obtained"

A Knowledge Commons, following their reflections refers to "a shared resource that contains ideas that result from perception, experience and/or study/reflection/vision"

Peter Levine encourages us to include knowledge from academic and non-academic settings:

"...The process of creating public knowledge as an additional good, because such work builds social capital, strengthens communities and gives people skills that they need for effective citizenship. If this is correct than we should aim to include as many people (and ways of knowing) in the collaborative creation of "free" or open access knowledge...ordinary people should be recognized as knowledge creators."

From a study of a biocultural approach to a Traditional Knowledge Commons established by 80 traditional healers living in the Mpumalanga province in South Africa we have the following:

"Knowledge is an outcome of virtuous relationships with the land, the plants and the animals. It is not property to be bought and sold. It is simultaneously cultural and spiritual and its movement and application promotes a kind of virtuous cohesiveness"

The Honey Bee Network that originated in India and designed to document and share indigenous theory and practice has spread to 75 countries. This knowledge commons builds on the metaphor of the honeybee that collects pollen without impoverishing the flowers, and it connect flower to flower through pollination. The idea is that when we collect knowledge of people we should ensure that people don't become poorer after sharing their insights with us.

The gift giving cultures of the Western indigenous peoples demonstrate that we grow and benefit an economy where wealth moves through our communities as a continuously flowing gift. Just as the objective of a gift economy is to increase value through the movement of wealth, the objective of a knowledge society is the to increase value and well being through the continuous gifting of knowledge.

In our background documents for this conference we say:

"A knowledge commons refers to conceptual spaces where the boundaries between diverse locations of knowledge creation, forms of knowledge uses of knowledge are diminished. In such a commons, we are better able to address complex economic, social and environmental issues that confront us locally, nationally and around the world. Our proposition is that lowering the barriers that separate knowledge is desirable and necessary"

Some of the questions that we might ask about a Canadian Knowledge Commons include:

1. Whose knowledge counts?
2. How can we recognize and strengthen the systemization of knowledge creation outside academic circles?
3. Can indigenous and western ways of knowing work together in solving some of the world's problems without losing their special values and differences?
4. What changes in the academic knowledge structures including their funding are needed to give full and energetic life to a knowledge strategy for the solution of some of the complex issues that we face today?

References

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