Arts, Economics and the Boreal Shield:  
A possible research program

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1 Overview

This short paper brings three issues together. The first is the notion that the communities of the boreal shield region of Canada have a common set of interests and opportunities based on their geography, geology, biology population and modes of production. The second is that there is a link between design, the arts community and the potential for producing value-added in the boreal-shield communities. Finally, we want to suggest that social network approaches provide an appropriate methodology for exploring the economic potential of the arts in the Boreal-Shield communities.

If the three observations are correct, it follows that a collaboration among Boreal-Shield research institutions to explore how the arts communities are linked or not linked to the production sectors of local economies would be worth pursuing.

2 Community

The word community in this discussion refers to two different things: the people actively engaged in arts and cultural activities as individuals and as a whole; and the notion of communities as relatively small northern cities and towns. To develop policy for communities taken in the larger sense we need to identify a category of communities with common characteristics. Our suggestion is that the Canadian Shield as an environment is distinctive. It is not the North and it is not simply the hinterland of the various provincial economies. The Shield region is a natural geographic and economic unit divided by provincial boundaries but still possessing many commonalities. Similar environments and economies are likely to generate communities that share cultural features. It would then follow that boreal forest and shield universities across mid-northern Canada and the United States from Newfoundland-Labrador to Saskatchewan may have common research priorities.

3 Arts

The notion of arts and culture community may be similar in each of the rural locations of the universities (subject to empirical confirmation). There is a common image that springs to mind of writers and artists, actors and dramatists and others who use their creative powers to produce the kind of activities that society considers artistic and cultural. Artists, musicians and singers, actors, writers of drama, poetry and prose are all included in this context.
broad definition. In addition, arts may be related to crafts, artists may also be artisans; and what is considered a craft in one generation or from one perspective may be considered an art from another. Both arts and crafts are related to the design and production of artifacts.

The relationship of arts and culture communities to economic development is a question that seems to be relevant in each of the centres in which the boreal forest and shield educational institutions reside. It appears to us to be a topic that has attracted little research and virtually no convincing theory. The relationship may therefore it might serve as an example of the kind of research of interest across the entire region that can be done through a distributed process involving each of the universities.

The arts provide a particular project topic connected to social and economic development and of interest to these boreal and shield. Each of the universities may want to do research on a common topic from their own theoretical and epistemological perspectives. It may therefore be useful to do some preparatory work on such a topic to determine whether a distributed research program is worth undertaking.

4 Social and economic development

What might be a commonly accepted understanding of the relationship of community social and economic development to regional social and economic development in the context of the university communities in which such research might be done? What about the development of remote communities where there are no educational institutions, but long standing first nations institutions like reserves?

We begin with Robinson’s explanation of the connection between of value added activities such as mining, forestry, fishing, and tourist appreciation of natural beauty, and the marketing of these activities. With reference to forestry:

The key to economic development for forest communities is shifting from the export of slightly processed commodities to the export of wood products with greater valued-added. The bottleneck we identify is that to export manufactured wood products that will remain in human use for centuries it is necessary to add design and craft to the wood. The northern economy does not have a surplus of either craft skills or design capacity. (Robinson, 2006) And again,

Value added is really just the talent and skill we put into production. The
bottleneck for the production of exportable manufactured goods is that the northern economy does not have a surplus of either craft skills or design capacity. (Robinson, 2008).

5 Arts and development

The relationship between arts and cultural communities and social and economic development seems pretty clear on the surface. We need more artists and artisans that can add value to the products of the forest and the shield: who can, for example, make machinery for mining; or furniture or other wood products that will be treasured; or can invent dinners or open restaurants that utilize local fish and game; or will attractively sing the praises of lake and river. The question becomes, how do we create more artists and artisans, and how do we enable the expanded arts community to contribute value added design that will drive regional economic and social development? Robinson has some ideas how it is not being done.

The most important machine for producing design skills and fabrication skills is the public education system and it simply cant do the job. The teachers have not been selected for their knowledge of what the economy needs- if anything they are selected to train kids to leave. The schools have no workshops or labs. The curriculum doesn’t deal with northern Ontario content.

To put the point as strongly as possible, we have a school system design for southern Ontario and it is destroying the northern economy. It is a colonial school system (Robinson, 2008).

Art is no longer a priority of the school system, nor is shop, or music.

Considering the contributions of artists and artisans to development with value-added activity, we can also ask; how are more artisans and artisans to be created for the sake of development in the Boreal-Shield region? This question seems to fall into the general category of how innovation and change in boreal and shield communities (from the perspective offered here) might be encouraged.

How then are more artists, artisans, musicians, actors designers to be created in boreal shield communities? There may be two possible aspects to this question. How are more artists and artisan to be created, for art and crafts own sake? And the other question is how are more artisans and artisans to be created for the sake of development? A complementary question has already been posed. How can the contributions of artists and artisans be
linked to development as value added? The two latter questions seem to fall into the general category of how innovation and change in boreal and shield communities (from the perspective offered here) might be encouraged.

There is a large literature on innovation and change, and how to achieve these goals at different levels and in different political and social settings. For example, social workers have long been concerned with change, social movements, and social development at the community level (Shragge, 2003). There are those that attempt to create describe how change can be encouraged from both inside and outside the political system. (Sussman, 2007) (Mullaly, 2007) Suggestions may be found in the sociological literature about how social and economic issues can become public issues (Gusfield, 1981); and there are those who use Durkheimian approaches and complexity theory derived from general systems theory and ecology as a foundation. (Westley, Zimmerman & Patton, 2006) (Milley, 2009, May 19) (Holling, 2001) Westley, for example, in spite of her structuralist foundations, speaks of actors who link the activity to be encouraged to other actors who do the encouraging of changes in the real world, and other actors who are policy makers, etc.

6 Towards a research design

To get from general theory to practical policy to exploit the links between the arts in the Boreal-Shield communities and economic development of the communities we need a methodology that focuses on relevant features. A possible method is based on social network analysis. We can consider that actors act within networks, and that these networks have structures as well as being collections of individuals; and that it is possible to have networks of networks. (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000) The relationship of actors to networks as structures is a large field of discussion in itself, with those like Wellman and Berkowitz considering that the structure of networks dictates the roles of actors within them. (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988) (Carrington, Scott & Wasserman, 2005) Others see the possibility of a post-structuralist perspective on social networks that stresses a dynamic relationship between networks and the individuals who both form and are formed by them. (Kildiff & Tsai, 2003) Although not directly in the social network tradition, Kenneth Burke illustrates a compatible model for interaction between actors that includes both structure and motivation. (Burke, 1969)

In a research proposal, we suggest a design that links the arts and culture community of a town, (or city, or remote community) as a network to other networks. The arts and culture community as a network may be linked to other artisans who combine arts with crafts, or
that produce crafts and design for the industries that extract raw materials. These networks might also be linked to a network of those who would encourage the arts and artisanship of that community with the creation of value added in view and that argue for the crafts and design needed to provide those value added aspects of the otherwise raw materials that the community produces. We further need to examine the links between this network of encouragers and the network of policy makers locally, at the provincial or state level, and in the federal government.

This approach means the research work needs to identify a number of interrelated networks, a fairly large task for one research project. Perhaps it would be practical to look at the arts and culture community as a network, and trace its ongoing connections to those who may be in other networks, without a full analysis of those networks and their interconnections together - as attractive an idea as that seems. All of these considerations are part of the draft proposal that has been written in part.

7 In summary

This short paper has raised the prospect of a distinct research program for the boreal shield universities and the possibility that one particular research topic focused on arts and cultural communities in boreal shield communities might be worth pursuing as a strategic initiative. Developing the link between the arts and cultural community and artisanal and design activities may contribute to more value added creative design work that will help to develop these communities. The research method proposed, in brief, is to analyze arts and culture communities as a network, and to explore the contacts of members of that network with actors in other relevant networks in the design process that either produce crafts and design, or that encourage the development of crafts and design as value added activities in resource economies. Based on this analysis, we believe the first task may be to bring together a coalition of boreal forest and shield university institutions directly concerned with social and economic development issues to develop a proposal for funds to undertake the proposed research.

References


