

The Tragedy of the Commons: Reflections on Human Ecology in Academic Settings

Robert J. Gregory

A sojourn in a non-Western culture led me to perceive at least a glimpse of a holistic way of life, whereas employment in Western universities has led me to see the particular and the specific, split asunder from any coherent entire. Collective life ways offer alternative concepts about the balance between individuals and communities. The ideas present in the field of human ecology offer ideas on dealing with these problems. Garret Hardin (1960, 1980, 1993, 1998) wrote of the many problems associated with a piecemeal approach to the common property of a community - when each individual seeks good for him or her self, while as a result, others and indeed, the entire community perishes or suffers. Hardin's essay set off an ongoing debate on the merits of the idea, which remain intriguing (Hardin, 1993; Hardin and Baden, 1977). Certain life-boat exercises used in team building exercises and training schemes have developed similar findings about the concept of the commons. These include the ideas that co-operation is essential, diversity is valuable, ability to work together as a member of a team to solve collective problems such as fixing, steering, and maintaining a lifeboat is important, and so on. These qualities are deemed essential to survival (Barner, 1994) and to enable organizations and communities to flourish.

The College and University System

Similar situations, that is, struggles between the individuals and their enterprises and the group, and collective survival, emerge in academic study and in the institutions themselves as represented by Western colleges, technical schools, and universities. Each individual academic, each discipline, and each faculty department may focus on their own agenda, or on their own students, research, and most of all, record of publications. By so doing, each of the "units" within the larger whole advances their specific interests. The rewards of individual achievement

are many whereas the neglect of such achievements may lead to losses, at least as universities are currently structured. To neglect this narrow and particularistic approach is to become vulnerable, in several ways. One potential loss is that promotions are awarded by the leadership of a department or university and are based on narrow criteria, so that advancement depends upon approval by those most powerful and "central" to that institution or discipline. A second loss is that those who stray from or who cross the disciplinary lines are subject to attack from other disciplines. The academic battle is almost as severe as play on the rugby field - any "slackness" can and will result in a loss of turf, of status, and supposedly, of academic excellence (Mead, 1937). Still another loss is that of choice of assignments or desirable work tasks.

Still, by some magical process, and a sleight of hand, attention to one's own interest by each competing individual is supposed to create a holistic effect at the university level. Such an effect, in which all personal and professional interests are balanced out to achieve a positive and pervading universal good, is unfortunately rarely or almost never achieved. The balancing act must be worked toward constantly.

Some staff, and many students fail to perceive the larger whole, or fail to understand the relationship of parts to whole. Their focus is on the content of each specific arena, not on the interconnections, and not on holistic or systemic views. The lack of integrative studies, the inability to work together for the common good, the claimed fuzziness of ecological points of view, and the failure of administrators and administrative measures to ensure larger and more beneficial visions, result in "the tragedy of the academic commons." This is particularly a tragedy for those staff members who do have an ecological vision, an interdisciplinary focus, a sense of the community. As well, students seeking knowledge or wisdom rather than technical

skills are left out. Similar problems ensue for the institutions themselves, and administrators try desperately to balance requests from individuals and departments, without gaining an overview or coherent and consolidated direction that assures survival and health for all.

Students, being lowest in the hierarchy of power, are used as bargaining chips in the resulting games of empire building - and each discipline, each department, and each teacher seeks to aggrandize their own agenda. The more students who seek study in a given arena, the greater the security of the position of the teachers in that arena, and subsequently, the more potential for advancement and the better the working conditions. The teaching staff, being next in the decision-making and power hierarchy, must support their own department loyally, and make gains (published empirically based refereed research papers) noticeable in their own unique discipline. Otherwise, they are likely to be ignored by those decision-makers who hold power. Those who venture afield may well be attacked as infringing on the turf of others, certainly they will be labelled as being without real knowledge or understanding in adjacent fields of study. The opportunities for collaboration and cooperation are lost in these situations.

Leadership in gathering more and more students, gaining research grants, and publishing refereed reports guarantees quality and quantity, say some. Others, perhaps those less successful in that "pig in the trough" style arrangement, claim the opposite. In either case, the collaborative, cooperative, learning environment and the potential for a "learning organization" is lost. Ecological understanding of the situation of the individual people involved is lost as well.

Education becomes a way of binding people to disciplines, to departments, to particular jargons and topics (Henry, 1966) and not a way of freeing people up to explore and be open to new learning. Students lose opportunity to make connections across disciplines, to become fluent in several specialized research languages or jargons, to explore freely through the wide range of academic disciplines, to sample and choose those studies that fit the ever changing world they will soon inherit. Education then prevents students from gaining experiences that will enable them

to work together as members of a team, either during their academic career, or ever after.

Unfortunately, the modern world presents problems that are not neatly carved up along disciplinary lines that originated in most cases, centuries before (Lucas and Ogletree, 1976). Those who seek to solve the real world problems are, by virtue of their specialized academic training, unable to work together effectively. They may not be able to reconceptualize and address questions, problems and issues, indeed, they may even have problems in communicating with each other. This inability to work together enables politicians, ignorant in everything except power politics and decision-making, to extract from the specialists, their valuable information which is then used to bolster the vested interests, the lifestyles of and decisions of the elite. The masses are left out, for they are specialized so much that they cannot take part in the on-going debates about the future, the environment, and their own lives. Thus the problem of the commons contributes to the have versus have-not issue as well.

Opportunity to Change

Creating an integrative programme at a university is possible but not probable and certainly not simple. External or state power to enforce, and market forces may have roles to play, but are not sufficient by themselves to facilitate such developments (Ostrom, 1990) nor can they eliminate the tragedy of the commons. Based on her empirical studies of common-pool resources, Ostrom claims that many communities of individuals can and do "fashion different ways of governing the commons" (page 2). She argues that unlike the models presented by "tragedy of the commons", the prisoner's dilemma games, and the logic of collective action (Olson, 1965), that alternative models are possible. Such models include the key difference in which "the participants themselves design their own contracts . . . in light of the information they have at hand." (p. 17). Thus at least one strategy for academics to deal with their common pool resources is to self manage.

A similar conclusion was reached (Stevenson, 1991) in an empirically based study of grazing in the Swiss Alps. Stevenson noted that the players in the situation learn to limit entry of other

players, and coordinate or self manage as a collective. Thus the group of individuals involved with a common property learn to govern the use of that property by themselves.

In the academic world, the stranglehold of the disciplines is perhaps the central issue that must be addressed, although in many such institutions, at least part of the stranglehold has passed over to the administrative bureaucracy. A wide range of approaches can add influences, such as cross disciplinary team teaching, academic requirements for exposure of all students to a liberal arts, science, and humanities curriculum, allocation of funds to joint ventures, communication exercises and workshops for multidisciplinary groups, and so on (Kerrier, 1993). But the heart of the matter is breaking down the distrust that exists among individuals arrayed in departmental and discipline based structures in most universities. Building up of trust between members of different departments is one of the potential solutions to the tragedy of the commons. Much of this building must be centred on the financial arrangements of the leadership and the departments, which, it is safe to say, parallels the academic arrangements of the leadership and the departments.

Restructuring education, and specifically at the university level, is essential if the university is to be relevant to the existing problems in each and every community and nation, around the globe. Human ecology and related approaches provide at the least useful frameworks for conceptually advancing appropriate questions, and generating insights. The tragedy of the commons in academic settings need not be left to fester.

KEY WORDS Academic. Commons. Tragedy. Ecology.

ABSTRACT The balance between individual and community is sometimes out of balance, especially in such locations as academic universities. This imbalance leads to a perversion of education and a dysfunctional working environment. Students in particular, are likely to fail to succeed, and may well reproduce the problems in their own careers. Greater understanding can be gained from concepts taken from human ecology, and steps can be taken by individuals and by groups to achieve better balance.

REFERENCES

- Barner, Robert: *Lifeboat Strategies: How to Keep Your Career Above Water During Tough Times - or Any Time*, American Management Association, NY (1994).
- Buck, Susan J.: *The Global Commons: An Introduction*, Earthscan Publications, London (1998).
- Hardin, Garrett.: *Nature and Man's Fate*, Cape, London (1960).
- Hardin, Garrett.: *Promethean Ethics: Living with Death, Competition and Triage*, University of Washington Press, Seattle (1980).
- Hardin, Garrett.: *Living within Limits: Ecology, Economics and Population Taboos*, Oxford, NY (1993).
- Hardin, Garrett.: *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia*, Oxford University Press, NY (1998).
- Hardin, Garrett and John Baden (Eds.): *Managing the Commons*, W. H. Freeman, San Francisco (1977).
- Henry, Jules.: *Culture Against Man*, Tavistock, London (1966).
- Kerrier, Thomas M.: *Beyond Competition: The Economics of Mergers and Monopoly Power*, Armonk, M. E. Sharpe, NY (1993).
- Lucas, George R. Jr. and Thomas W. Ogletree.: *Lifeboat Ethics: The Moral Dilemmas of World Hunger*, Harper and Row, NY (1976).
- Mead, Margaret (Ed.): *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive People*, McGraw Hill, NY (1937).
- Olson, M.: *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA (1965).
- Ostrom, Elinor.: *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1990).
- Stevenson, Glenn G.: *Common Property Economics: A General Theory and Land Use Applications*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1991).

Author's Address: Robert J. Gregory, School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. E-mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz