Bridging Gaps:
Social Justice Studies at the University of Victoria

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Abstract:

'We all want to change the world,' wrote John Lennon in the 1960s, and since 2009 the University of Victoria has offered an undergraduate program for people with the same aspiration. In September of that year, UVic launched Social Justice Studies (SJS), the first Canadian program of its kind west of Saskatchewan. Within SJS at UVic, issues pertaining to law and criminal justice are set within a wide-angle view of justice and injustice. The program focuses both on the conditions that create and perpetuate kinds of inequality and oppression – class, environmental, racial, gender, sexual, among others – and on the social and movements, policies and visions that point, however tentatively, to a just world. (The program's website is at http://web.uvic.ca/socialjustice/). In this essay, I reflect on the origins and development of the program, its pedagogical aspirations and design, and the challenges it has faced in its first five formative years.

Introduction: Origins and Development, 2001-2008

SJS had its origins within UVic's Sociology Department, long divided between positivist and critical versions of sociology. In 2001, the division became institutionalized in the form of a two-track undergraduate program that obliged students to concentrate their studies either in Social Research (a traditional positivist curriculum featuring quantitative method) or in Social Justice (incorporating critical perspectives through a 300-level course I introduced entitled Critical

Research Strategies (Carroll 2004)). Only a handful of our students opted for the positivist stream, and chronically low enrolments led the Department to retire the Social Research concentration in 2008. It was replaced with a concentration in Health and Aging, alongside a revamped Social Justice and Social Change concentration that added a new 400-level course on Sociology and Social Justice. The Social Justice concentration within Sociology, and the keen interest our students showed in it, motivated me to think of social justice program design beyond one discipline. I had already developed strong interdisciplinary interests in critical theory, through UVic's graduate program in Cultural, Social and Political Thought, which I helped found in 1989 and directed for part of the 1990s.

So it was that in 2007, as Sociology was expanding its Social Justice concentration, I began working with a nucleus of colleagues in Women's Studies, Human and Social Development, Political Science and Sociology, on a proposal for an interdisciplinary undergraduate program in Social Justice Studies. In an era of neoliberal corporatization and entrenched austerity (cf. Giroux 2002; Newson and Polster 2010; Marginson 2013), we were mindful of the challenges in proposing a radically-oriented program that would inevitably require resources. The University had recently poured millions into its international business school, but a program devoted more to jamming the machinery of domination than to subtending it could not expect similar treatment. We were also concerned to avoid self-marginalization: the creation a safe space so autonomous as to lack strong ties into the mainstream. With these concerns in mind, we designed the program to be (a) light-weight – making use of existing resources rather than requiring new hires – and (b) open in its architecture, drawing in students and instructors from as many fields and locations as possible.

The vision of social justice studies that evolved, and that late in 2007 was concretized in a proposal, was built upon a root metaphor of bridging. The program would constitute itself as

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a bridge, fostering connections to build capacity for critical thinking and action pertaining to justice issues. This vision leaned heavily upon neo-Gramscian thought (emphasizing the need for a radical politics of solidarity across movements, publics and communities, based in an ethico-political conception of counter-hegemony; cf. Carroll 2006, 2010; Mayo 2010). But the program design also drew upon feminist thinking on intersectionality (Walby 2007; Choo and Ferree 2010), left traditions of radical pedagogy (Freire 1970; Macrine, McLaren and Hill 2010), as well as community development initiatives (Thibault 2007; Toomey 2011; Su and Jagninski 2013). SJS would serve as a bridge across a number of social fissures whose effect is to compartmentalize discussion and action on justice issues, pre-empting the prospects for radical change. Adopting a wide-angle conception of justice and injustice, it would bridge across disciplinary silos, political issues and social movements. It would bring together different kinds of students, not simply across disciplines, but across age cohorts and categories of experience, from full-time undergrads just out of high school to part-time and adult learners and seasoned activists, some already with a BA. It would mediate between the typically contradictory motives many students have – on the one hand, the instrumental concern to gain a marketable credential of some sort, on the other, their critical-reflexive interests in developing creative capacities for self-development and even emancipatory praxis. Finally, and importantly, Social Justice Studies at UVic was designed to bridge across academe and activist communities, across theory and practice.

In practical terms, developing Social Justice Studies was itself an exercise in community development. Most new programs at universities are either dreamed up in the upper echelons of university administration, or launched from an existing program. SJS, in contrast, was created through networking practices among university teachers, spanning from our core group, and connecting in early 2008 to 10 departments and schools and three programs, which together reached across four faculties (see Table 1).

Table 1 Departments, Schools and Programs Participating in SJS at UVic

Department, School or Program	Faculty
Anthropology	Social Sciences
Environmental Studies	Social Sciences
Political Science	Social Sciences
Sociology	Social Sciences
History	Humanities
Philosophy	Humanities
Religious Studies	Humanities
Women's Studies	Humanities
Indigenous Studies	Humanities and Social Sciences
Child and Youth Care	Human and Social Development
Social Work	Human and Social Development
Social Policy/Public Health	Human and Social Development
Leadership Studies	Education

Each of these (inter)disciplines has its own critical aspect, and within each academic unit at UVic one could identify at least a couple of justice-oriented professors, whether through their teaching and scholarship or through their political activism. In some UVic departments, such as Social Work, with its strongly anti-oppressive approach to the field, and Women's Studies with its deep commitment to wide-spectrum feminism, justice advocates actually comprise a large majority. More typically they form a minority, sometimes laboring in relative isolation and with little in the way of local peer recognition. Social Justice Studies mobilized these pockets of the activist-oriented professorate as a network: we invited progressives who we thought would be interested in

participating to be listed in the proposal as SJS participating faculty, and asked them to take our proposal to a department meeting, to gain approval. By the summer of 2008, all the units had signed on, and we had begun to develop an SJS community of practice, among professors – a sense of we-ness and of common commitment to SJS as a pedagogical and political project. By the time the program was approved in the fall of 2008, 40 faculty members had agreed to participate.

Program Design and Implementation 2009-2014: Social Justice Studies as a Bridge

What participating faculty members and departments, and ultimately the university, signed onto is a hybrid program, occupying a liminal space between various disciplines, which is open not only to regular undergraduate students pursuing Bachelor's degrees, but to community members and adult learners, through UVic's Division of Continuing Studies. The latter is an important aspect of the program's architecture. In collaboration with colleagues at Division of Continuing Studies, whose mission is centred upon adult education, we created the program as a hybrid – bridging between standard degree-oriented programming (within which SJS appears as a Minor that can be paired with any Major one chooses) and continuing education programs that offer certificates and diplomas typically to mature students who may or may not have postsecondary educational experience. To serve the diverse needs of these students (some of them seasoned activists with completed Bachelor's degrees, others lacking post-secondary education but with a wealth of practical, relevant experience), we proposed to offer a Diploma in Social Justice Studies, requiring a couple more elective courses than the Minor.[1]

The approval process was surprisingly straightforward, and without any significant opposition, in part because of our bottom-up organizing efforts, which meant that the proposal had explicit support from many departments in three large faculties (and from the deans of those faculty) before it made

its way onto the agenda of the Senate Planning Committee in September 2008. It is worth mentioning that UVic incorporates within its own vision statement elements that articulate nicely with justice curricula. In our proposal, we drew upon this discourse, noting that the new program would help advance UVic's vision, which includes "employing our core strengths to benefit our external communities," "promoting civic engagement and global citizenship" and valuing "equal rights and dignity of all persons". We also made it clear that concerns flagged within the Plan – "protection of the environment, health, social well-being, the special challenge of reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous Peoples, and other such issues" (UVic Strategic Plan 2007, p. 9) – so fundamental to the sustainability of our society and so in need of interdisciplinary solutions – would be featured within the SJS program.

The final factor that smoothed the way to approval was the program's light weight. It would require no new appointments, but simply five one-term course releases each year, so that a Director could administer the program and permanent faculty could be replaced in their home departments by sessional instructors, as they taught the four core courses in the new SJS curriculum. On the revenue side, we argued in our proposal that SJS could be an effective recruitment device, attracting justice-oriented students to UVic, particularly along a pathway enabled by the introduction in 2008 of Social Justice 12 as an elective course in BC secondary schools (http://www.bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=17508).

There were other, less instrumental reasons for this program structure. We wanted SJS to be an open space, bringing both students and teachers together across disciplines. In practice, this has worked well. Students enter the program through SJS 100, Theories of Social Justice and SJS 200, The Practice of Social Justice, which they can take in either order. These courses, which always have long wait lists, are taught by teams of three participating professors from different disciplines, many of whom elect to teach one-third of the course

three times, in exchange for a course release. This has enabled the program to draw upon the expertise of many of the participating faculty (who now number 55), and to build interdisciplinary perspectives directly into the core courses. For instance, in the first few outings of SJS 100, when Laura Parisi of Women's Studies and Dennis Pilon of Political Science joined me on the teaching team, the course took up issues of justice and democracy, identity, agency and social change, development and international relations, intersecting forms of oppression, and the political economy and political ecology of globalizing capitalism. Students in these introductory-level courses typically combine reflective journaling with group projects that are presented to the class, at times in the form of an end-of-term symposium.

The core introductory courses in the program not only impart needed theoretical and practical background; they help form communities of SJS students, who go on to take theoretical/methodological and substantive electives – courses offered by participating departments, some of them in the field of criminal justice – before finishing their programs with SJS 400A, the advanced seminar, and (if they wish) SJS 400B, Practising Social Justice in the Field. The latter, organized as a practicum, emphasizes experiential learning combined with reflective journaling, biweekly seminars and a major term paper, to promote both personal growth and development of practical skills. Within the practicum, individual SJS students are mentored by justice activists in community settings. A wide range of activist and community groups participate in the practicum, enabling SJS students to experience and reflect on diverse practices of activism, and in the process to support locally-based justice initiatives.

Indeed, Social Justice Studies at UVic has consciously endeavored to build strong ties into activist communities both within its curriculum and without. Courses regularly feature as guest speakers local activists, and an extra-curricular public lecture/forum series, 'Conversations with activists', brings together students, community members and panels

of grassroots leaders and justice proponents. These series have spurred dialogues that inform and inspire students. But activists also come away with enhanced understandings of how politically-conscious university students view justice issues today. The program also sponsors a wide variety of public forums, lectures, panels and films (typically in collaboration with other academic units or movement groups, to strengthen solidaristic relations), as well as an annual lecture that draws large crowds. Finally, a Community Advisory Council has played an active role in identifying priorities for the program and suggesting ways of bridging the community/academe divide. The Council has included representatives from the harm reduction movement, anti-poverty activists, trade unionists, North-South solidarity protagonists, feminists, ecologists, food sovereignty proponents and anti-racism activists, as well as representatives from on-campus units such as the Centre for Co-operative and Community-Based Economy and Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group.

Ongoing Challenges

As UVic Social Justice Studies completes its first half-decade, four ongoing challenges stand out. First, and most salient, are the limited and precarious resources on offer, which threaten the program with eventual marginalization. SJS was informally promised base-level funding when it was first approved; instead, it exists on the basis of 'soft money' and a lot of sweat equity by Margo Matwychuk, who was appointed SJS Director when I stepped down in the summer of 2012. The University no longer provides the one-course release I received as founding director, and there are in any case some ambivalences around the practice of staffing core SJS courses by granting release time to permanent faculty, a practice that contributes to the growing tendency to replace permanent, well-paid instructors with sessional instructors. Sustaining the network of participating faculty as a community of progressive academics is also part of this practical challenge.

The program is dispersed across many fields, with primary disciplines claiming most of the attention of its participants. SJS's continuing relevance to its participants as a collective project is hardly guaranteed.

Second, there is the challenge of integrating knowledges. Should SJS aspire to be multi- inter- or trans-disciplinary – is its approach to working across disciplines additive, inter-active or synthesizing? These terms are often used inter-changeably, yet they carry distinct meanings, as explained by Stember (1991).

- Multidisciplinarity brings people from different disci-plines to work together, each drawing on their disciplin-ary knowledge.

- Interdisciplinarity integrates knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a combination of ap-proaches.

- Transdisciplinarity creates a unity of intellectual frame-works beyond the disciplinary perspectives.

Although SJS defines itself as interdisciplinary, in practice our efforts have tended to be multidisciplinary, partly due to resource (including time) constraints that make it perennially difficult for individual faculty to collaborate deeply and think outside our own boxes. To design and implement truly inter-disciplinary (to say nothing of transdisciplinary) curriculum requires considerable dialogue and reflection. In our team-taught courses, students tend to get a smorgasbord (with each team member teaching a month of the course) rather than a fusion.

The third challenge centres upon how social justice studies can be most effectively linked to and active in social justice struggles. During the program's first few years, activists on the Community Advisory Committee voiced the paradoxical concern that a full menu of SJS public events might divert energies and audiences from their own community-based initiatives. Rather than help catalyze grassroots activism, SJS risked colonizing it. What emerged from these discus-

sions is a *modus operandi* in which SJS works with activist groups, co-sponsoring events that are not necessarily held on campus. This is not to deny the continuing importance of on-campus events, which attract students into activist communities and bring activists to a campus that, prior to SJS, was viewed by some as elitist and irrelevant. Meanwhile, the SJS listserv reaches hundreds of activists and students in the Victoria area, informing them of a wide variety of events, whether on-campus or off, each week. Another side of the SJS-movements relation poses the challenge in a different way. The pedagogical goal of Social Justice Studies is to promote critical thinking and action. This means analyzing and critiquing practices and relations of injustice, but also reflecting critically upon the practices and ideas of activists and movements, and not simply cheerleading for them. A program committed to critical justice pedagogy must avoid becoming instrumentalized by the movements with which it is in solidarity. Community engagement needs to be constructed within an ethical relationship that helps enable justice activism while retaining a capacity to provide what Marx (1843) called 'ruthless criticism of all that exists' – including where appropriate elements of contemporary activism.

Finally, I see a continuing challenge posed by individualism as a hegemonic mode of subjectivity within neoliberal communicative capitalism. The millennials we teach today are wired into a way of life 'from which escape seems impossible: participation is personalization; the more we communicate the less is communicated; expansions in expression and creativity produce the one rather than a collective of the many' (Dean 2012: 135). Understandably, many young activists who take up Social Justice Studies (and a good number of SJS faculty and SJS community mentors) view the world and their own agency through a post-new left lens that trades new left keywords like 'oppression', 'exploitation', 'solidarity', 'the people' and 'liberation' for (respectively) 'privilege', 'classism', 'positionality', 'folks' and 'safe spaces' (D'Arcy 2014). These terminological differences mark a shift in how injustice is understood and opposed. The post-new left discourse informs

student interests in food, survivalism and voluntary simplicity, committing many to a localism that promotes 'small lifestyle choices and a proper moral outlook' within local spaces where people 'make their own world' (Sharzer 2012: 120, 137). The challenge is to help these students develop more radical-structural analytical styles that enable them to scale up their politics from local to extra-local and global justice issues (without losing any post-new left insights on how processes of subjectification make us what we are). As students hone these political sensibilities, the SJS community offers them an escape hatch from the cynicism that can result from a radical structural analysis unaccompanied by practical action. Here, the (Gramscian) challenge is to help students develop an optimism of the will that can complement their well-founded pessimism of intellect. A vibrant community of activists, students and academics, working across a number of justice issues and modalities, is a necessary condition for the success of justice studies, but also a consequence of that success.

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Endnotes

1   We also took advantage of a situation perhaps unique to UVic – the possibility for a student to earn a Bachelor's degree and a Diploma concurrently, nesting the latter within the degree requirements for the former. In a credentialized world, such a combination works to the advantage of SJS students, who can graduate with both a degree in their Major discipline and a Diploma in Social Justice Studies.