

The Future of Regenerative Studies as an Area of Inquiry

As we approach the 15th year of the Center for Regenerative Studies, it is clearer to me than ever before that we are on to something with this idea. Certainly everyone tells me we are on to something, anyway. Nevertheless, students and faculty remain uneasy about what constitutes regenerative studies, and whether or not we share a common identity. Identity represents a growing concern for students as we approach the holiday season and family will inevitably ask: What are you studying at school? If we remain uneasy about the nature of our work and our identity, it is fair to ask: Will regenerative studies persist as a distinct area of inquiry over time? This paper examines this question, considers aspects that commonly characterize distinct areas of inquiry, and hopefully fosters discussion around the purpose, identity and contribution of regenerative studies.

Boundaries of Regenerative Studies

When does an issue or topic fall under the purview of regenerative studies? This question has as much to do with crafting identity as it does for understanding what we should and shouldn't know. Drawing upon literature on professions and academic fields, it may be useful to consider four aspects: The central problem or question, the common knowledge base, the common method or approach, and the theoretical intent of the work.

Central Problem or Question

One way of characterizing the boundaries of an area of study may be in response to a central problem or central question. For regenerative studies, a central question may be: *How can we sustain life on this planet for ourselves and future generations?* I think most of us would agree that this is a central

question that brings us together in regenerative studies. Yet this is far from an exclusive or even unique concern. There are many professions, fields, and disciplines that would also claim this concern as being central, or at least critically important.

Secondly, this concern is so broad that it might not be helpful in fostering common identity, vocabulary or discourse. It could be argued that virtually any activity falls under this broad *umbrella*, and as such it ceases to be seen as something that suggests boundaries. For example, we might not think of baking cookies as an act under the purview of regenerative studies. But what if we use locally-grown, organic produce in the recipe? What if we use a solar oven to bake the cookies? What if the cookies are served at a function intended to build community toward the goal of sustainability? And if baking cookies is an activity that should be within the boundaries of regenerative studies, what does it have in common with other topics more readily accepted as being within the purview of regenerative studies, such as biofuels or wastewater treatment? We say in our program literature that regenerative studies are important for people with a wide range of backgrounds and interests. This suggests that establishing boundaries around a central problem or question may not be useful, particularly in terms of providing identity.

Third, is there really agreement amongst us about the true problem or the sub-text of the central question? Or do we all draw upon our assumptions and views inherent in our own "home" disciplines in framing the question as being fundamentally ecological, biological, chemical, technological, societal, behavioral, or political?

Finally, what if we actually solve the problem or answer the question? If sustainability is effectively embraced across the curriculum of the university, as many are advocating, will regenerative studies have accomplished its purpose, and no longer be needed? Certainly this would be a logical conclusion if we organize ourselves around a central problem or question.

Common Knowledge Base

A central or common knowledge base is a second way of suggesting boundaries for a field, profession, or discipline. Our regenerative studies curriculum offers a core set of classes in the first term that emphasize three dimensions: Technology, Natural Processes, and human/community behavior. This had led me previously to suggest a multi-dimensional intellectual space defined by these three components of regenerative knowledge (**Figure 1**). I've also attempted to "map" regenerative studies thesis projects onto this space, suggesting that while the consummate regenerative studies thesis might be situated in the center of this space, it is an illusion – theses need to recognize all three aspects of the knowledge base, but should be grounded in one aspect more strongly, to aide in framing the question and inform selection of appropriate methods.

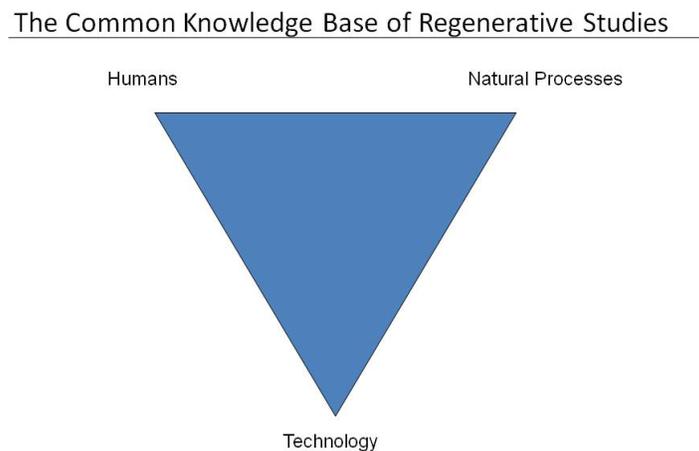


Figure 1. Common Knowledge Base of Regenerative Studies

As with the central problem or question definition, this knowledge base is so broad that it raises questions about how useful it is in delineating boundaries or providing identity. This is not a unique situation. I can think of many disciplines, professions and fields where there is great internal

differentiation and disagreement about critical knowledge. For example, Patrick Miller has written about my own field of landscape architecture:

“...the profession has become so broad that different members of the profession have philosophically different ways of knowing things and thus define landscape problems differently....the breadth of the profession...presents problems in the fundamentally different ways in which certain segments of the profession view the landscape and approach design.” (Miller, 1997, P. 69).

This challenge to providing identity through the regenerative studies knowledge is further compounded by the fact that the knowledge base is drawn primarily from other disciplines, and my advising and our curriculum may be reinforcing this notion of no unique or identifiable knowledge base by emphasizing a focus discipline to support thesis investigation.

Common Method

A third unifier of common areas of inquiry is an agreed upon method or set of methods for research that adds new knowledge, or commonly accepted methods of practice. Certainly the breadth of the regenerative studies knowledge base suggests similar breadth in terms of research methods, and we see that in student thesis work to date. So here again there may be nothing distinct about regenerative studies that would lend it common identity, or identity with broader constructs such as physical science, social science, or humanities. And this has created challenges for our curriculum as to what methods we should require of regenerative studies students.

However, the systems thinking integrated into regenerative studies by John Lyle and others, is a methodological directive that may offer some promise in crafting not exclusive, but somewhat unique, identity and commonality for regenerative studies practitioners. Indeed the title of Lyle’s book

“Regenerative Design for Sustainable Development” suggests that regenerative studies is really about a means (or method - grounded in systems thinking) to an end (sustainability). If there is agreement about this potential, the question is to what extent are we effectively instilling this as a central characterization in our students?

Theoretical Intent

I wish to discuss one more aspect that can contribute to delineating boundaries for an area of inquiry; that is the theoretical intent of the scholar or practitioner. Is the intent to generate knowledge for the sake of understanding? Is it to lend technical expertise to the world so that actors can make informed decisions? Or is it to proactively shape the world for the better? I would argue that since its inception, regenerative studies have been action-oriented. As Lyle states, many practices and technologies existed before the Center was formed. What was unique was the application of them in a comprehensive, systematic, and rigorous way. So while regenerative studies students may engage in foundational science research, it is always with an eye towards applying it to solve some real-world problem. I believe that our curriculum takes this action-orientation as a given, but the question of whether regenerative studies is about technical expertise or effective shaping of decisions may be less examined.

For those of us who come from applied fields, this question of theoretical intent is often central, as we struggle to understand our role in society - be it objective expert or deliberative practitioner. In the case of Planning, John Friedman (1993) argues that contemporary planning, what he calls “Non-Euclidian Planning,” should be normative: That planners should explicitly recognize their values, develop a construct of how the world should be, and work towards that theoretical concept. This is a far cry from the old days where the role of the expert was thought to be a neutral provider of fact. However as Lyle pointed out, this objectivity of the old days was always a myth. He wrote:

“No one who has participated in landscape design is likely to hold to the notion, once so naively prevalent, that design can be an entirely objective process, free of values, dealing only with facts....If we do not lay claim to an ethical position, then it will be defined implicitly by the work we do. It is thus best to state our position early and then base our actions on it.” (Lyle, 1985, P. 139)

In my experience, regenerative studies students have by and large been highly normative in their views of the world and the work that they do. This is one thing that has always struck me about them, and it has manifested itself in a myriad of ways. I think our curriculum in some respects has cautioned against this normative view, as we challenge students to be rigorous in their assessment of situations and recognize multiple points of view. This is essential in order to be effective in shaping outcomes, but it may be that a normative approach to our work may hold significant promise in developing identity for regenerative studies.

Being Something

It seems clear (to me anyway) that the contribution of regenerative studies has been important to date, and is capable of growing in importance in the coming years. The central questions and knowledge base are broad, suggesting contested terrain with other fields, professions and disciplines. This certainly raises questions about whether regenerative studies can and should remain a distinct area of inquiry. However, the relatively unique emphasis of systems thinking and the action-oriented normative perspective suggest that there may be a critical role for a distinct field of regenerative studies in the coming years.

But it is also worth revisiting the notion of identity as we consider the future of regenerative studies.

Some have been critical of the traditional concepts of identities for professions and fields, based on common knowledge base and/or methods. As Garry Stevens writes:

"...all conceptions of 'profession' take the deployment of specialized knowledge as central to its definition. This rules out of court the notion that what may be most important is not knowing something so much as being something." (Stevens, 1998, P. 34).

If "being something" matters as much as Stevens suggests, in terms of gaining cultural authority for some types of work and areas of academic inquiry, then I'd suggest that we begin serious discussions about what it means to be students and faculty of regenerative studies. Hopefully this paper has stimulated some thinking in this regard.

References

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