

The Serendipity of Synergy

MIKE EVANS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIT HEAD of COMMUNITY, CULTURE and GLOBAL STUDIES
LAWRENCE BERG, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, HUMAN GEOGRAPHY, CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR in HUMAN RIGHTS, DIVERSITY and IDENTITY
JON CORBETT, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

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It's surprising what can happen when you bring researchers together from different disciplines, and provide an environment for chance encounters and conversations to spark new ideas.

UBC Okanagan's Centre for Social, Spatial and Economic Justice (CSSEJ) focuses on issues of justice, uniting researchers from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, including Anthropology, Gender Studies, Indigenous Studies, Health Studies, Human Geography, Nursing, Social Work, and Sociology. It's a unique model for interdisciplinary research, designed to create—and take advantage of—moments of serendipity.

The free association of ideas from across traditional disciplinary boundaries may seem odd in an academic setting, but to Mike Evans, Jon Corbett and Lawrence Berg, three researchers at the core of CSSEJ, it provides invaluable experiences and opportunity.

Collaborations among the researchers “are not just ones of emphasis,” says Mike Evans. “They are radically interdisciplinary in nature. It is quite amazing in what it does, having social scientists together in a space like this. It is quite unusual.”

Researchers operate with a shared, progressive vision of society that allows for—and indeed encourages—diversity, while ensuring that all people are able to live free from oppression and marginalization. Likewise, their projects seek to identify social, spatial and economic structures that underpin the marginalization of people, especially those belonging to identifiable social groups.

“A lot of opportunity flows through the Centre and again, it's not common in the social sciences,” says Lawrence Berg. “We have replicated the strengths of the social sciences model, and are learning a few things from our science colleagues in terms of teams, collaborative action, pooling resources and publishing and researching together.”

The cooperation that is a fundamental component of many CSSEJ research projects is a product of the researchers' teamwork as well as community involvement. Research projects are commonly participatory-action projects that involve strong connections to communities.

“We are working with seemingly marginalized communities with the hope that by following this action-based research program we are having an impact, a fundamental change, on the people we are working with,” says Jon Corbett. “This is a significant part of what we do.”

In addition to working with communities, part of the CSSEJ's mandate is to act as a catalyst for graduate student collaboration.

“One of our goals is that our graduate students will get interdisciplinary very quickly and profoundly so,” says Evans. “They overlap in various ways through our networks, but hopefully they will build their own synergies, too. If you have enough people in a close proximity with close-enough interests, then hopefully they will build that critical mass for themselves, socially, which turns into an intellectual engagement as well, or vice versa.”



Left to right: Mike Evans,
Lawrence Berg and Jon Corbett