Askö: Building Cognitive and Non-cognitive Capital in the Public Interest

Over 40 years ago when I entered graduate school I was told, along with the other new students, about the academic life. The message was roughly the following:

Faculty are barnacles on the ship of productivity. They are privileged to enjoy the luxuries of the academic life.

A few years later John Krutilla put things in a different perspective. Academics who work for tax exempt institutions, in his view, had a social responsibility to contribute to public well being. Over the intervening 4 decades I have encountered more academics who feel like John than those who view their positions as a privilege without social responsibilities. Most of us try to contribute and hopefully our results do, in muddy and meandering ways. This volume presents the results of a group of academics who really did make a difference!

There is widespread recognition that much important research starts at the boundaries of the existing disciplines. University administrators and research foundation staff have coined a number of terms to describe these activities. Interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary are three that come to mind (I won’t attempt to explain perceived distinctions between them). These academic leaders increasingly want authentic efforts on important boundary research questions to happen but don’t know how to get started. Nowhere is this need more apparent than in the global environmental challenges we face today.

Karl-Göran Mäler discovered the secret for ecologists and economists. He recognized that real collaboration requires not simply the physical proximity of exceptionally talented scientists from these disciplines. Their cognitive skills are important but not enough. Genuine collaboration needs a culture that encourages these academics to be adventurous and think outside the domain of their expertise. It must be tolerant and constructive. In such a setting, respect and admiration build trust and friendship. He established a process that built a culture for the development of non-cognitive skills in groups. These skills relate directly to research at the boundaries of these disciplines. They reminded me of the recent research on why
learning and ability depend in complex ways on an individual’s genetic endowment and environment.

More specifically, Heckman (2007) has argued that the formation of cognitive and non-cognitive skills is important to the development of human capital and ability. He describes a dynamic model for children’s development and extensions to the early human capital literature on learning and ability that distinguishes “self productivity” and “dynamic complementarity”. The former describes a process for how an individual’s capabilities produced at one stage enhance the capabilities attained in later stages. His concept of dynamic complementarity refers to the synergistic role of capabilities achieved at each stage of an individual’s life in promoting future accomplishments.

It seems to me that Heckman’s model is an ideal metaphor for what the group of ecologists and economists has achieved at Askö. In the years since the meetings began in 1993, they have demonstrated it is possible to transcend disciplinary limitations and exploit the joint insights of both disciplines. These meetings and the set of researchers that shared those experiences provide an example of how groups can create non-cognitive capital that allows them to learn outside their disciplines. The results reported in this volume clearly confirm that judgment.

What lessons can we draw from the experiences for new initiatives that seek to create group cultures that support and sustain research bridging disciplines sharing common boundaries and facing the need to work together for genuine progress? Here are few:

- Select senior scholars with outstanding credentials who are intellectually adventurous.
- Commit to a sustained sequence of meetings and be patient for results.
- Assign responsibility and authority to leaders in each discipline to launch the annual discussions.
- Use annual outputs to track progress.
- Isolate the group while they meet.
- Keep logistics of meetings seamless for all who participate.
- Clone Karl-Göran Mäler!

V. Kerry Smith

Reference

Bringing Ecologists and Economists Together
The Askö Meetings and Papers
Söderqvist, T.; Sundbaum, A.; Folke, C.; Mäler, K.-G. (Eds.)
2011, XX, 246 p., Hardcover