BROADENING THE DISSERTATION
WHY?
HOW?

Susan Porter

DEAN & VICE-PROVOST, GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

PRESIDENT, CAGS

# UBC - *Public Scholars Initiative*
- 2015-present

grad.ubc.ca/psi

CAGS Task Force on the Dissertation
- 2018

cags.ca

Broadening the dissertation - why now?

	19th-20th C	21st C
Knowledge creation, mobilization	Mode 1 (linear)	More Mode 2 (contextual, multi-sectoral, iterative)
Role of university in society	'Ivory Tower'	'The Engaged University'
Societal, environmental problems	Approached through disciplinary lenses	Not solvable by single disciplinary or epistemological approaches
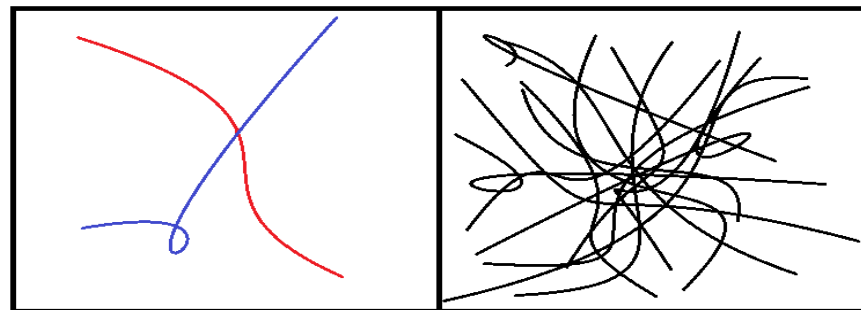
Traditional Problem   **Wicked Problem**

Broadening the dissertation - why now?

	19th-20th C	21st C
PhD employers	Academy	Academy plus private & public sectors, NGOs, self
PhD careers	One / lifetime Job-based	Many / lifetime Portfolio-based
PhD modes of work	Often alone	Usually collaborative
PhD breadth of focus	Single discipline	Disciplinary and transdisciplinary
PhD communication modes	Scholarly papers	Scholarly papers Public/multi-media Technical reports…
PhD scholarship	Mostly discovery	Discovery, integration, applied, engaged, teaching

21st century graduates therefore need to be able to:

- Discover, synthesize, and critically assess knowledge
- Communicate to peers
- Ask important questions

- Create and mobilize knowledge in the context of problems
- Integrate knowledge and practice across disciplines
- Communicate to and with diverse audiences for diverse reasons
- Adapt to different ways of working, different types of questions, different approaches, different environments
- Perceive and understand diverse perspectives
- Engage and collaborate across sectors and disciplines

21st century graduates therefore need to be able to:

- Discover, synthesize, and critically assess knowledge
- Communicate to peers
- Ask important questions

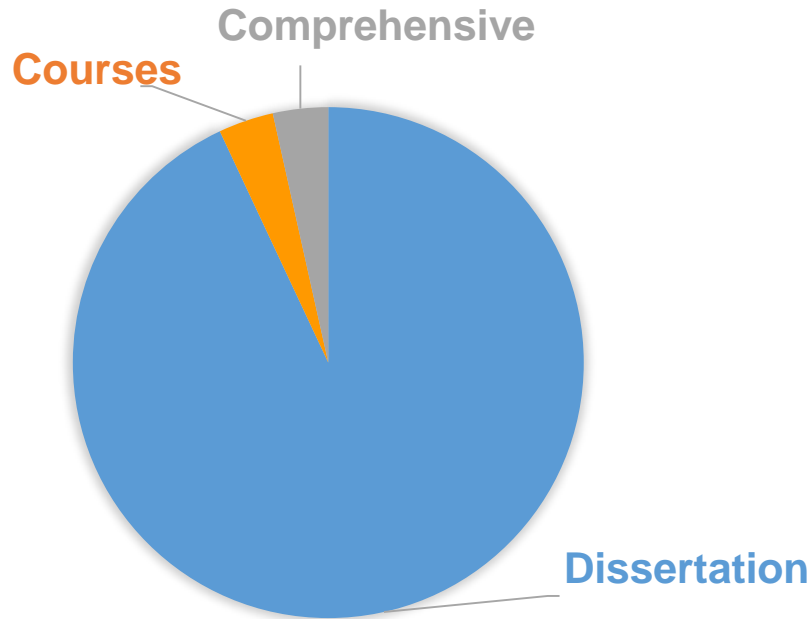- Create and mobilize knowledge
- Integrate knowledge and practice
- Communicate to and with diverse audiences
- Adapt to different ways of working, different approaches
- Perceive and understand diverse perspectives
- Engage and collaborate across sectors

Higher order cognitive, emotional, ontological, practical attributes

- Not generally taught, facilitated, valued, assessed; don't 'count' as contributing to PhD
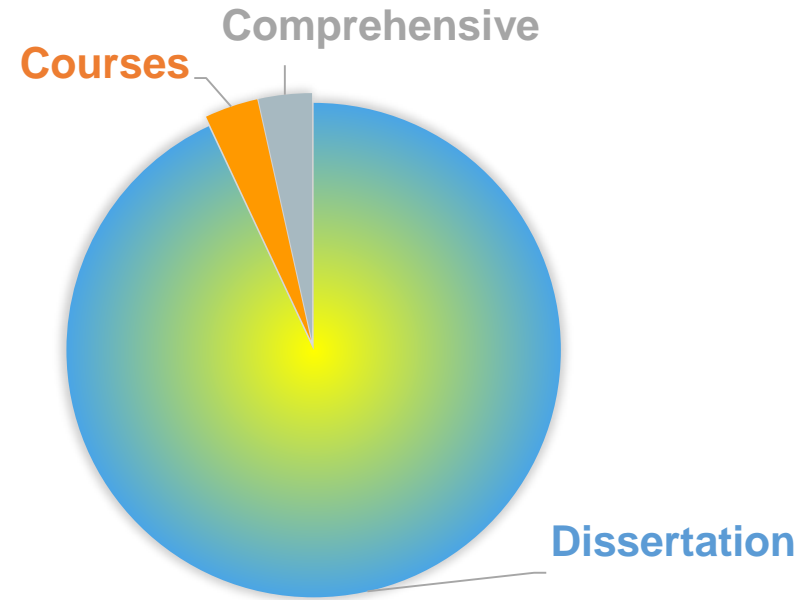- Distinct approaches required to develop these

The PhD

Reimagining the PhD

Courses

Comprehensive

Dissertation

New knowledge → academic papers

Courses

Comprehensive

Dissertation

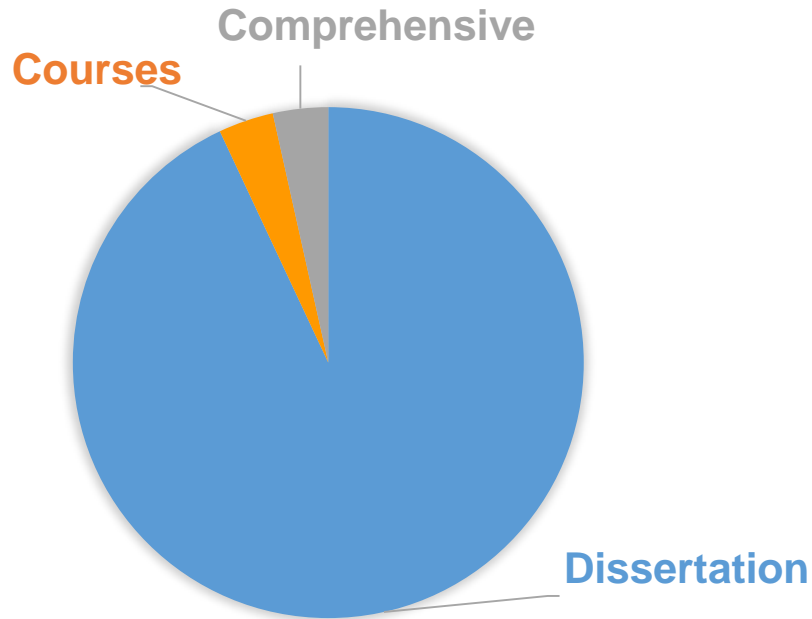New knowledge(s)
Mobilized/implemented
Interdisciplinary   →
Contextualized
Collaboratively-gained

academic papers
other - multiple audiences
policy papers, syllabi, art,
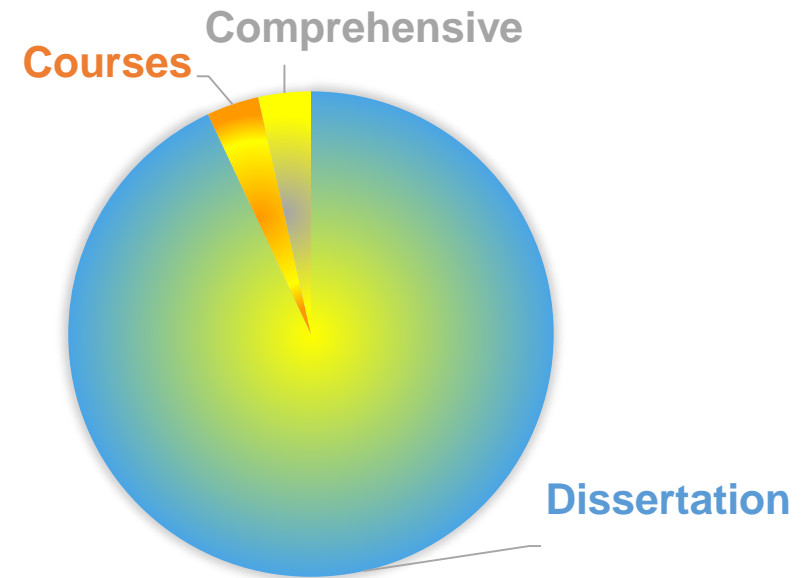reports…

The PhD

Courses
Comprehensive

Dissertation

New knowledge → academic papers

Reimagining the PhD

Courses
Comprehensive

Dissertation

New knowledge(s)
Mobilized/implemented
Interdisciplinary   →   academic papers
Contextualized   other - multiple audiences
Collaboratively-gained   policy papers, syllabi, art,
                                 reports…

Reimagining the dissertation at UBC

- Is it possible? Across all disciplines?
- Will it be acceptable to the broader academy?
- Can the grad school lead? How?
- How to ensure quality? (and what *is* quality?)
- How to overcome barriers? e.g.
  - Master-apprentice paradigm (esp. sciences)
  - Practical considerations
  - Conservatism

$$ Scholarly approach, pilot

Reimagining the dissertation at UBC

- Idea proposed to provost, deans – 2014
- 'Reimagining' symposium (national/international speakers) – 2014
- Pilot: *Public Scholars Initiative* – 2015
  - Support for PhD students to undertake multisectoral, multidisciplinary <u>dissertation</u> research & mobilization for the public good
- Tweaked dissertation guidelines and examiner instructions
- Sought continuing culture change: exemplars, news pieces, scholarly arguments, presentations, publicization of leadership buy-in, integration with other activities/initiatives
- CAGS task force consultations – 2016
- Follow-up symposium – 2017
- PSI embedded in UBC Strat Plan – 2018
- 2 new grad programs planning 'reimagined' dissertations from start; recruitment tool

> *Reimagining the PhD will require imagination from all of us, and an openness to new ideas*
> *– UBC President*

- ## Tweaked dissertation guidelines and examiner instructions

Dissertation body:

1. Introduction
2. Research/Scholarship Chapters
3. Conclusion

One or more chapters may consist of material published (or submitted for publication) elsewhere, *or other artifacts (e.g., film, application-oriented documents) placed in a scholarly context.*

On non-traditional work and products*: UBC values all forms of rigorous scholarship, including those oriented to discovery, to application, to teaching and learning, and to integration. All should be assessed as described above, with the understanding that the forms of knowledge contributed by the work will vary by the scholarly approach used. Doctoral students may include diverse scholarly products such as film or other recordings, policy papers, professional reports, websites, curricula, etc., as integral components of their dissertations. Such components are expected to be properly contextualized and analyzed within the overall scholarly arc of the dissertation. As much as you are able, please evaluate these components using the above criteria for rigor and integrity, with a focus also on potential implications and limitations for the intended applications.*

Public Scholars Initiative

- Research allowance or stipend for (preferably) intersectoral, broadened scholarship
- Professional development (e.g. communication, policy, ethics)
- Community, peer mentors
- Talks for the general public
- Profiles and blogs
- Academic support for non-traditional dissertations

150 PhD students
>100 partners outside the academy
>20 defended dissertations

Non-traditional dissertations (or plans)

- Applied scholarship
- Community-engaged scholarship
- Collaborative scholarship
- Teaching and learning scholarship
- Participatory action scholarship
- Interdisciplinary scholarship
- Art-based scholarship

In fields where they aren't the norm

- Film
- Websites
- Policy briefs
- Community reports
- Syllabi
- Exhibit material
- and others

In fields where they aren't the norm

PSI Grads

Environmental values and financial incentives in conservation efforts
Non-traditional content: 'Grey literature' NGO report as a chapter

Paige, Environ. Sciences

Xylan synthesis in Golgi and teaching problem-solving in the undergraduate classroom
Non-traditional content: Teaching and learning research in a science dissertation

Miranda, Botany

Decision-making for births after caesarean
Non-traditional content: Knowledge mobilization - collaborative policy paper

Sarah, Interdisciplinary

*The report…is in line with UBC's policy (which **I support) that applied publications aimed at a wide audience can be valuable components of a dissertation**…its insights are… **important** to real-world applications*

***I really appreciated the chapter on the evaluation of various instructional practices** for developing problem solving skills…the findings are/will be significant*

*This thesis is an example of integrated knowledge translation, which is, to **my knowledge, a novel (and commendable) approach for a doctoral thesis** and is likely to have an impact.*

14

PSI Students

Experience of place in Russian émigrés
Non-traditional content: art installation (shown in 3 cities)

Gregory, Anthropology

Film as research: women organizers of the farmworkers movement in B.C.
Non-traditional content: documentary film

Ajay, Asian Studies

From Graphic Violence to Graphic Novel: Engaging Art as Public Pedagogy to Disarm Public Mass Gun Violence
Non-traditional content: graphic novel

Stephanie, Education

PSI student development

Higher order cognitive gains:
- *gained new perspectives on my work*
- *now I understand what my research is really about*
- *inspired me to make new [intellectual] connections*

Moral development:
- *increased my awareness of societal responsibility as a researcher*
- *made me think critically about my responsibilities as a researcher*

Identity development, excitement:
- *gave me the courage to approach more difficult problems*
- *provided a sense of backing and seriousness - I become something more than just a student*
- *helped me take ownership over an academic identity that I was shy or reluctant to admit to*
- *the 'crowning jewel' of my PhD*

New skills:
- *profoundly changed the way I communicate my research*
- *allowed me to develop innovative methods in my research*

Career development:
- *allowed me to imagine possible career paths*
- *my career will have multiple dimensions as a result of being part of the PSI*

PSI research

Deepened/broadened research:

- *has opened up a vast and rich research terrain that I never anticipated*
- *took my previous work to the next level*
- *brought a tremendous deepening of what I can bring to my dissertation*

Increased research impact:

- *it is directly impacting policy*
- *my work is really emerging in a public sphere in new unprecedented ways!*
- [95% of partners agreed that the work has significant impact]

"Keep pushing – this is gold. This is the future."

CAGS task force on the dissertation

Susan Porter (co-chair) UBC — *Pathology*
Lisa Young (co-chair), U of Calgary — *Political Science*
Lonnie Aarssen, Queen's University — *Biology*
Robert Gibbs, University of Toronto — *Philosophy*
Raymond Klein, Dalhousie University — *Psychology*
Anthony Paré, UBC — *Education*
Anna Ryoo, PhD student, UBC — *Education*
Paula Wood-Adams, Concordia — *Engineering*

Green Paper → Consultations across Canada → CAGS → Draft report → CAGS → Final report → CAGS

2016

2018

What did we ask?

Given the dissertation communicates an *original and significant contribution to new knowledge*:

1. Unified?
2. Acceptable forms of scholarship (beyond disciplinary norms)? What is 'original', what is 'new knowledge'?
3. Acceptable forms of communication?
4. Criteria for inclusion, assessment?
5. Concerns?
6. Recommendations?

What did we find?

Students > Graduate Deans > Faculty
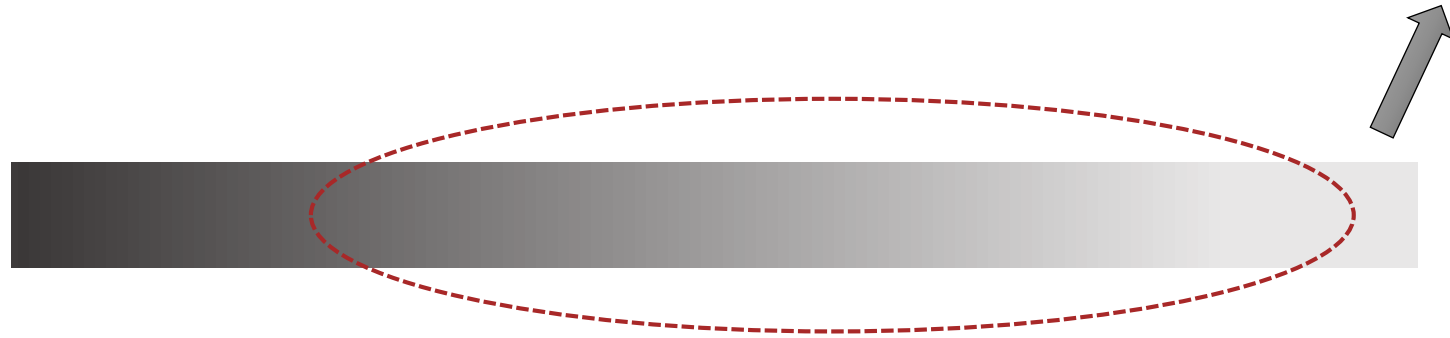
"It's tried & true – don't change it!"

"Maybe we should think about it…"

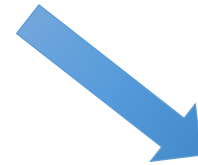"Let's do this!" (or "we're already doing it")

What did we find?

Excited but nervous

- ↑ breadth
- ↑ creativity
- validation/use/greater understanding of knowledge
- expands a 'privileged way of knowing/communicating'
- multidisciplinary, collaborative
- relevant to world, careers

- ↓ depth
- apprentice paradigm
- mentorship & assessment
- risk to students
- 'not how it's done'
- 'dumbing-down the PhD'

Recommendations

- Encourage broadening of the dissertation – move towards perspective of 'actual anticipated needs of the student, the workplace, and society'
- Continue to value traditional/basic scholarship
- Encourage expansion of mentors as appropriate
- Provide learning support as needed
- CAGS should coordinate activities, resources, support; grad schools can provide support
- Encourage recognition of alt-scholarship in faculty reward systems and hiring practices
- Keep talking!

It is not enough to rethink the doctorate. We have to rethink the faculty.   - Yehuda Elkana, 2006