

Uncertain times

A reflection on career progression

The theme of this chapter is *Professional development: Post fellowship on a personal and professional level*, which I have taken the liberty of re-interpreting slightly. This poetic license reflects the way in which I have come to think about academic career progression since starting the SAFRI Fellowship in 2010.

As the context of higher education becomes increasingly ambiguous and uncertain, we need to explore different models for understanding the academic and intellectual project of nation building. This small contribution to the 10 year SAFRI celebration is my attempt to do something like that.

Michael Rowe
23 February, 2018



The world breaks everyone. Then some
become strong at the broken places.

Ernest Hemingway

1.

Spaces

liminal | uncertain | complex

If professional practice were stable, repetitive and predictable, we would only ever need to follow rules. However, the nature of practice is that it is uncertain and unpredictable.

Complex systems have many rich, nonlinear interactions between agents that feed back into future interactions in uncontrolled ways, making prediction of outcomes impossible. The boundaries of these systems are difficult or impossible to define and they require a constant flow of energy to maintain the organisation within them. Complex systems evolve over time and their history is co-responsible for their current behaviour.

Higher education is a **complex space**.



Move into spaces that increase your options.

Kevin Kelly



2.

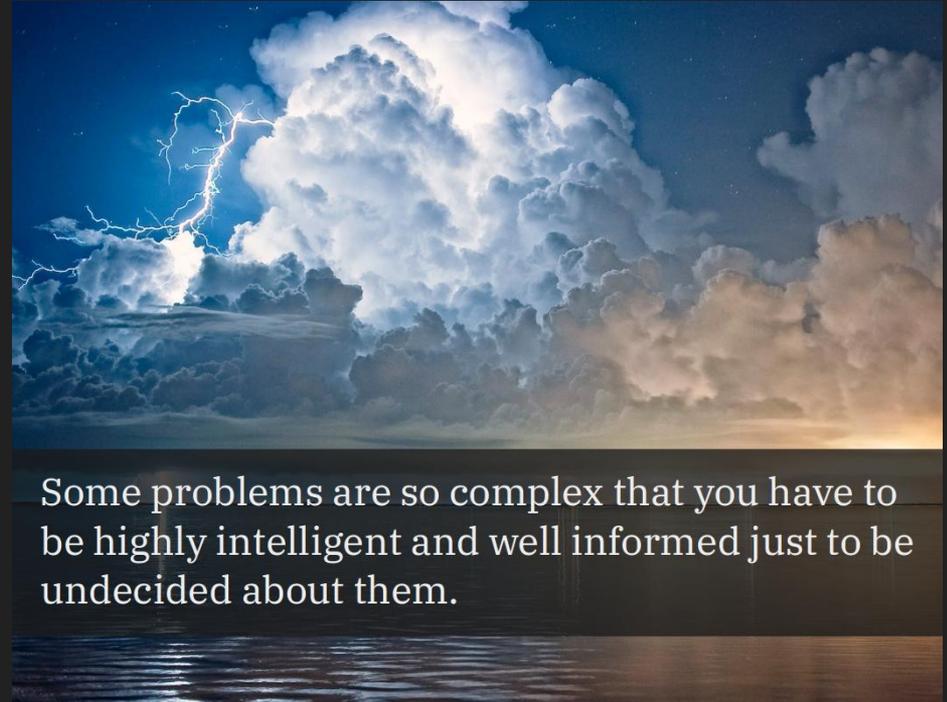
Problems

subjective | wicked | social | interactive

"Normal" problems have well-defined and stable problem statements with clear solutions that can be evaluated as being right or wrong.

Wicked problems - the kinds of problems we find in complex systems - are poorly defined and ambiguous, and often associated with strong moral, political and professional issues. Since they are strongly stakeholder dependent, there is often little consensus about what the problem is, let alone how to deal with it. They include dynamic sets of complex, interacting issues that evolve over time in a social context.

Career progression is a **wicked problem**.



Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.

3.

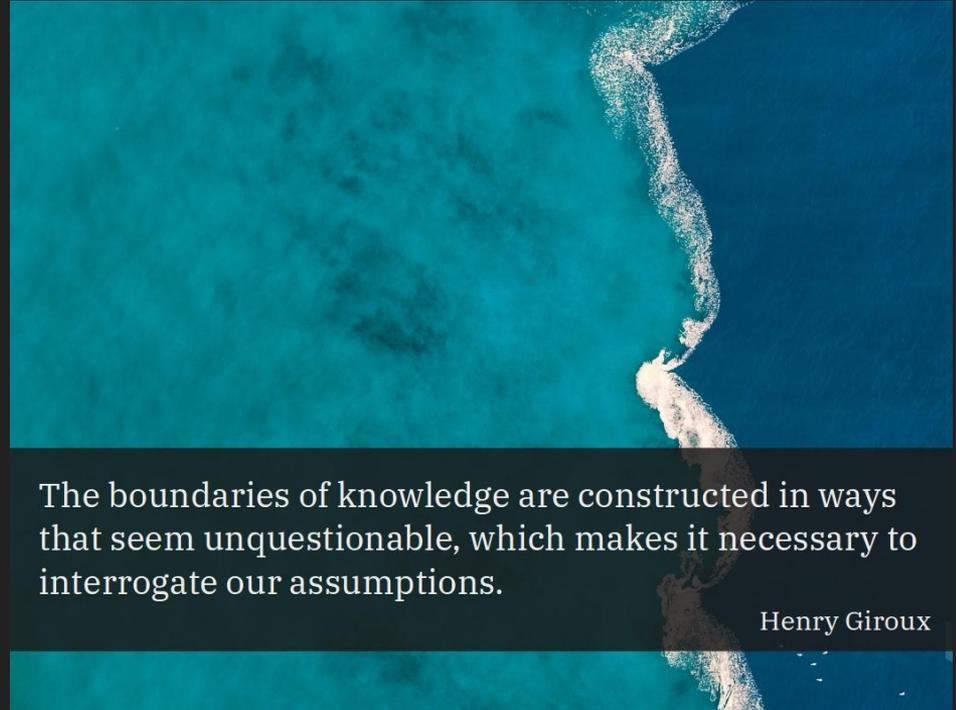
Boundaries

porous | ambiguous | imagined | bridge

If we want answers to the really big questions we cannot remain confined within a single discipline because reality isn't confined to a single discipline. In fact, single disciplines are defined more by university architecture and budgets than anything else.

Once we see that the hard boundary of the discipline is really just a misguided suggestion, we are free to explore outside of that space. The boundary becomes porous, allowing us to move into the adjacent possible spaces. Boundaries, whether professional or epistemological, serve to constrain, rather than expand, our thinking.

Work outside the **boundaries** of the discipline.



The boundaries of knowledge are constructed in ways that seem unquestionable, which makes it necessary to interrogate our assumptions.

Henry Giroux

4.

Edges

adjacent | direction

Innovation is more systematic than we may think. New ideas in any field are found just beyond the current cutting edge, in the adjacent space that contains the possible new combinations of existing ideas.

We need to grind away in order to expand the cutting edge, thereby opening up new problems in the adjacent possible space. Innovation happens as we keep working at edge of what is possible, expanding the boundary of what we know and understanding into new spaces, thereby creating new edges.

We need to do difficult intellectual work at the **edge** of our understanding.



I want to stand as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you can see all the kinds of things you can't see from the centre.

Kurt Vonnegut

5.

Networks

node | distributed | social | value

No matter how good you are, you can't do it all yourself. So you need to be embedded as a node within a network that you can contribute to; that you can provide value for.

In order to understand networks and their participants, we can evaluate the location and grouping of actors in the network. This gives us insight into the roles and groupings in a network – who are the connectors, mavens, leaders, bridges, and isolates? Where are the clusters and who is in them? Who is in the core of the network, and who is on the periphery?

Understand your role in the **network**.



Lever points are those points in a network where small directed actions may cause large changes in aggregate behaviour.

6.

Perspective

quiet | values | space | family | calm

We would do well to remember that life is what we spend our time on, and that it would be a great pity to wake up one day and realise that we've missed out on all the things we say we care about.

For myself, I imagine that my regrets won't include the papers I didn't publish and the grants I didn't win. Instead I worry that I'll have missed the countless small moments of connection that make up a life. So at the end, this is where I find myself:

Work hard on difficult problems at the cutting edge, add value for others; but remember to keep some space at the core that is just for me.



Everybody should sit quietly by a little stream
and listen.

Maurice Sendak