



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

August 14, 2013

Plan & Terrain: [A recent story on NPR](#) reminded me of the saying, “when the map conflicts with the terrain, you go with the terrain.” While the landing was perfect, a last minute problem before the landing forced the engineers to make a very tough decision. “There’s a box inside the rover Curiosity that tells the onboard navigation system how fast the rover’s going and what direction it’s headed in. These measurements are so precise that the navigation software needs to know exactly where the box is inside the spacecraft. That location effects all the other calculations the navigation software makes. Now, just four days before landing, the mission manager says engineers at NASA’s jet propulsion laboratory in Pasadena discovered something disturbing. The navigation system had slightly wrong information about the box’s location inside Curiosity. Engineers hate, hate, hate to make last minute changes to software. Once you’ve thoroughly tested something in one configuration, you don’t want to make any changes. Ultimately the decision whether to send the correct information to the rover fell to the mission manager, Pete Theisinger, who assembled his team to study the problem. The team was divided on what to do, and it came down to Pete who decided to send the command. With no certainty from his team, he decided to risk changing what had been planned and meticulously tested.” As we now know, that was the right decision, but it could have gone the other way.

We Measure What We Value: For 70 years, Gallup has been surveying people around the world about what is most important to them, asking them to rate their happiness, and attempting to measure their wellbeing. Gallup found five essential elements of wellbeing: career, social, financial, physical, and community. It turns out that career wellbeing is the best predictor of wellbeing across the board. What is important, however, for career wellbeing is not how much money you make, but rather that you like “what you do, that you do what you’re best at every day, and to have a good manager.” A recent Trusteeship magazine article (available only by subscription) uses the above research to suggest that a meaningful outcome of higher education may be obtained by measuring whether our graduates are “engaged in their jobs, doing what they are best at, contributing to their communities, and generally achieving a high quality of life.”

Who is Afraid of MOOCs? It turns out that massive open online courses (MOOCs) are not going to put universities out of business after all! In fact, [a recent article in *The Chronicle*](#) discusses how MOOC providers are “essentially going to be competing, directly or indirectly, with Blackboard and Desire2Learn and Instructure.” In fact, “The MOOC providers may soon also find themselves competing with publishers; textbook giants like Pearson and McGraw-Hill in recent years have expanded their product lines to include automated coaching and grading software, as well as pre-assembled course modules. Those products resemble the goods that Coursera and Udacity might sell to colleges for use in their credit-bearing courses.” At UNM, we continue to experiment with various platforms (Coursera, Udacity, Blackboard) as well as to monitor how public universities and their students may benefit from new technologies and delivery systems.

Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind: The book by Hurley, Dennett, and Adams explores the questions, “Why does humor exist in the first place? Why do we spend so much of our time passing on amusing anecdotes, making wisecracks, watching *The Simpsons*?” The authors provide “an evolutionary and cognitive perspective” to humor. One reviewer aptly summarized the main argument in two sentences found in the book: “Mirth is the pleasure in unearthing a particular variety of mistake in active belief structures” and “Humor is any semantic circumstance in which we make such a mistake and succeed in discovering it.”

In Memoriam: Professor Keith Basso died on August 4, 2013. “Keith Hamilton Basso was a cultural and linguistic anthropologist noted for his study of the Western Apaches, specifically those from the community of Cibecue, Arizona. Basso taught at UNM and was also professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of New Mexico and earlier taught at the University of Arizona and Yale University. After first studying Apache culture in 1959,

Basso completed a bachelor's degree at Harvard University and his doctorate at Stanford University. Basso was awarded the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing in 1997 for his ethnography, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. The work was also the 1996 Western States Book Award Winner in Creative Nonfiction.”

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