Editorial comment

Action research or transdisciplinary research?

Is there indeed a difference between action research and transdisciplinary research? This was the subject under consideration in the closing panel discussion at the September 2010 conference of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences on "Transdisciplinarity: implementation in inter- and transdisciplinary research practice and teaching" held in Geneva, Switzerland.

Researchers in all parts of the world have discussed the matter extensively in recent years, especially in the fields of biological science, technology, management studies and health sciences. In some quarters, there have been arguments to the effect that transdisciplinarity is merely another nuance of action research, which emerged for the first time in 1946 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) coined the term in a study dealing with minority problems.[1]

In view of the ongoing debate, it was an appropriate theme to take up at the international conference annually attended by some of the world's top practitioners in the field of transdisciplinarity.

The keynote speaker of this session was Prof. Morten Levin,[2] who spoke on "Action research and transdisciplinarity – implementation as the knowledge creation process". Levin, a specialist in the field with many years of practical research experience, was of the opinion that there is little difference between the two and that everything basically revolves around the issue of implementation. From that end, he explained, the real sense of knowledge emerges. This implies that there is the need to identify real life problems, devise appropriate action and find proactive solutions.

The core concepts of action research, he went on, involves: understanding the activity cycle and using social science techniques to determine the data and how to analyse it; establishing appropriate workforms by means of constructing arenas for problem solving and learning; and developing an action research strategy with the aim of solving the pertinent question or questions.

For him, the controversial aspect of transdisciplinarity is that real life problems (issues) are in fact multifaceted, contextual and holistic. At the same time science tends to be particular, specialised and compartmentalised into professions. This, he explained, presents major problems

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1. K Lewin, "Action research and minority problems" in *The Journal of Social Issues,* 2(4) 1946, pp. 34-46; GI Susman and RD Evered, "An assessment of the scientific merits of action research" in *Administrative Science Quarterly* 23(4), December 1978, pp. 582-603.

2. Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

for efficient research activity, whereas action research tends to face the real life problems and accordingly gives priority to relevance of knowledge and confronting rigour as the next challenge.

Apart from a lively conference audience who had many questions and comments, there was also a panel of prominent TD practitioners and research leaders, including Professors Aant Elzinga,[3] Larissa Krainer,[4] Carol Deprés[5] and Roland Scholz,[6] all of whom articulated their views on action research and transdisciplinarity.

On the whole, the panellists and members of the audience were favourably disposed towards action research – but only as a subsidiary form of transdisciplinarity. For most TD practitioners, a strong corpus of theoretical and methodological knowledge has been formulated on the approach since the 1970s. Academic and research managers in many countries have invested much of their time and effort in strengthening transdisciplinarity and have secured a significant reputation for the approach in the research and science environment. They also expressed some concern about the fact that Mode 1 research does not necessarily feature in action research. It tends to be more inclined towards Mode 2-type research. There seemed to be consensus in the audience that transdisciplinarity could pride itself on having made considerable inroads. It has gained both depth and identity, especially in diverse fields of philosophical discourse. This trend, it was argued, has been one of the major strengths of transdisciplinarity in recent years.

From the lively discussion and exchange of ideas it was evident that the jury is still out on this matter. On the whole, it would seem that there are a variety of routes to creating knowledge. The fact that action research and transdisciplinarity tend to overlap in some areas suggests that we find ourselves, at the dawn of the 21st century, in an invigorating era of scientific thinking where many elements of the whole of reality still need to be understood in comprehensible chunks of consciousness.

Of special interest

In this issue of *TD* we are privileged to stimulate the thinking of our readers in the fields of philosophy and management studies with contributions by Prof. Fanie de Beer of the University of Pretoria[7] and Prof. Aant Elzinga of Sweden.[8]

In terms of empirical research there are some interesting contributions in the fields of environmental studies, psychology, counselling, education and military studies.

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3. Gothenburg University, Sweden.

4. University of Klagenfurt, Austria.

5. University of Laval, Canada.

6. Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

7. Meervoudige denke: Versmoor/vermoor inmstellings denke?/ Multiple thinking: Do institutions smother/kill thought? pp. 291-306.

8. New Public Management, science policy and the orchestration of university research – academic science the loser, pp. 307-332.