

A Space for Taking a Culturally Sensitive Look at Transdisciplinarity

Report of the *ITD Conference 2017*

Ulli Vilsmaier

The International Transdisciplinarity Conference 2017 brought together representatives of different world regions, institutions, cultures, and communities. This conference served to strengthen transdisciplinary research and education, and fostered the potential of transdisciplinarity to deal with heterogeneity and difference.

A Space for Taking a Culturally Sensitive Look at Transdisciplinarity. Report of the *ITD Conference 2017* | GAIA 26/4 (2017): 352–354 | **Keywords:** communities, difference, heterogeneity, interculturality, transdisciplinary research and education

During the *International Transdisciplinarity Conference (ITD) 2017 Transdisciplinary Research and Education – Intercultural Endeavours* from September 11 to 15, 2017, more than 300 scientists and practitioners dealt with transdisciplinarity worldwide. The conference took place at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany, and connected with four co-conferences in New Zealand, Mexico, Chile and Uruguay (see box 1). It was co-organized by Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany, and the *td-net* of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences and involved the following partnering networks and institutions: *Integration & Implementation Sciences (I2S)*,

Science of Team Science (SciTS), *Association of Interdisciplinary Studies (AIS)*, *International Social Science Council (ISSC)*, *USYS Td-Lab* of ETH Zurich, *Intrepid Cost Action*, and the *KLASICA Alliance*. The overall objective of the conference was to contribute to the consolidation of transdisciplinary research by taking a look at different conceptualizations of transdisciplinarity and related research practices, involving researchers and practitioners from around the world, and to strengthen ties between neighboring communities.

The Motif

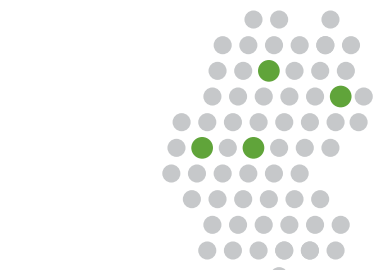
We have been observing over a long period of time that there is a high variety of discourses on transdisciplinarity and research approaches with similar motifs. We identified research communities that have contributed significantly to transdisciplinarity's theoretical, epistemological and methodological foundations, and others that emphasize the praxis of collaborative research on the ground; communities that are more focused on integration, and others on implementation. And we observed that there are more politicized discourses and more pragmatic ones; more academic and more action driven ones. We thus decided to focus on heterogeneity and difference during the *ITD Conference 2017* by taking a cultur-

ally sensitive look, and explored transdisciplinary research and education as intercultural endeavors.

The Concept

In order to create a basis for dealing with heterogeneity and difference in transdisciplinary research, we set up a program that was itself characterized by diversity. But it wasn't homogenization we envisioned. By connecting researchers with heterogeneous conceptualizations of transdisciplinarity and research practices, we did not seek to create a single discourse. On the contrary: by creating visibility and dialogue between diverse and diverging approaches that have been developed in culturally heterogeneous epistemic, institutional and place-based contexts, we aimed at establishing a space for dialogue and integration that is based on difference.

During the five conference days, theoretical, empirical and transformative advances were presented in a series of workshops and sessions. Plenary discussions and presentations explored different understandings and practices of transdisciplinarity. Scholars from different transdisciplinarity discourses considered commonalities and differences with representatives of related research approaches including *interdisciplinary studies*, *action research*, *sci-*



NaWis

Verbund für Nachhaltige Wissenschaft



LEUPHANA
UNIVERSITÄT LÜNEBURG

U N I K A S S E L
V E R S I T Ä T

IASS
POTSDAM



Wuppertal
Institut

Contact author: Prof. Dr. Ulli Vilsmaier |
Leuphana University of Lüneburg |
Methodology Center | Lüneburg | Germany |
E-Mail: vilsmaier@leuphana.de

Contact NaWis-Runde: Prof. Dr. Uwe Schneidewind |
Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and
Energy | Döppersberg 19 | 42103 Wuppertal |
Germany | Tel.: +49 202 2492100 |
E-Mail: uwe.schneidewind@wupperinst.org |
www.wupperinst.org

© 2017 U. Vilsmaier; licensee oekom verlag.
This is an article distributed under the terms
of the Creative Commons Attribution License
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>),
which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction
in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ence of team science, and integration and implementation sciences. In addition, training workshops on methods for research and teaching offered particular learning opportunities, and several international networks, among others the *Association of Interdisciplinary Studies* and the *KLASICA Alliance*, held meetings that were open to all conference participants.

Why Interculturality?

The focus of the *ITD Conference 2017* was on interculturality. We created a space for people coming from different world regions, working on different subjects and in heterogeneous types of institutions, having different understandings of research and of what is considered to be solid, robust, relevant, powerful and what ultimately, makes a difference. Participants explored transdisciplinary research and education as intercultural endeavors considering place-based differences, as well as different cultures of knowing, acting, and being by referring to epistemologies, world-views and practices. Our overall objective was to take the question of “what is?” towards the question “why?” by taking convictions, the immanent logic and the context of a certain position into account. We sought to create a space for a “polylog”. A polylog is an attempt to radicalize dialogue by explicitly navigating plurality and heterogeneity. For the praxis of polylogs, [Franz Wimmer](#) formulated a minimum rule that we aimed to practice throughout the conference: “Whenever possible, look for transcultural overlapping of philosophical concepts, since it is probable that well-founded theses have developed in more than one cultural tradition” (Wimmer 2004, p. 67, own translation).

Results

Bridging communities: We attracted contributions from diverse fields and communities, applying a variety of methodologies, alongside the traditionally dominant group of researchers from sustainability science and social-ecological research. Representatives of the fields of arts and design enriched the intercultural endeavor and created awareness of the potential of visual, performative and artifact-based methods

BOX 1:

Co-Conferencing

The co-conference format aimed to create a virtual space for discussion and engagement with the topic of the *ITD Conference 2017*. Co-conferences in four countries connected the main conference via livestream with plenary talks, short reports, and discussions. The goal of this novel conference format is to overcome distance, to reduce conference travel, to avoid discrimination for economic reasons, and ultimately, to connect people from all over the world. Institutions organizing a co-conference designed a program with face-to-face activities on site. The local events were organized around the conference streams and categories, with a particular focus related to the local interests of each institution. The following co-conferences were organized:

Co-Conference Chile, August 31, 2017

Trans-versions: Inter- and Transdisciplinary Dialogues from Latin America

Organizers: Doctorado en Estudios Interdisciplinarios sobre Pensamiento, Cultura y Sociedad, Universidad de Valparaíso and Colectivo 360°

Co-Conference Mexico, August 31 to September 1, 2017

Interdisciplinary and Interinstitutional Dialogues in the Face of Global Mercantilization of Socio-environmental Spaces

Organizers: Centro de Estudios Interdisciplinarios/Lab for Multidimensional Problems and Doctorado en Estudios Interdisciplinarios sobre Pensamiento, Cultura y Sociedad, Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro

Co-conference Uruguay, September 6, 2017

La Trans-disciplina como Catalizador del Desarrollo Local Sostenible: El Caso de Tacuarembó

Organizers: Centro Universitario de Tacuarembó, Universidad de la República Oriental del Uruguay

Co-conference New Zealand, September 13, 2017

Transdisciplinary and Intercultural research: Insights from the Our Land & Water National Science Challenge and the Primary Innovation Programme

Organizers: Landcare Research – MANAAKI WHENUA

for integration and transformation, and the difference made by approaching phenomena from multiple ways of knowing. A large group of scholars acknowledged the need to expand the discourse on transdisciplinarity by creating new alliances between communities such as action research, science of team science and integration and implementation science, among others.

Dealing with heterogeneity and difference:

It became very obvious throughout the panels and sessions that the discourse on transdisciplinarity is not a homogeneous one and that it is difficult to stick to heterogeneity and differences instead of immediately turning to seek commonalities or – even worse – a lowest common denominator. Sometimes it was difficult to create a coherent conversation, and at some stages participants of the conference had more questions than answers. But differences, even if they remain as loose ends, open up a space that has only begun to be explored, in particular between neighboring research

fields. Creating visibility for differences and identifying categories for their analysis can be considered an important outcome of the conference.

27 mother tongues, shared objectives, but

no common language: Language, multilingualism and concept work turned out to be a core topic. In her keynote, [Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn](#) dispelled the myth of a common language in transdisciplinary research and elaborated on the constitutive meaning of different ways of knowing. Instead of envisioning uniformity, working with differences should be considered a key potential of transdisciplinary research. [Jakob Zinss-tag](#), president of the *td-net*, made a similar argument in his welcoming note. Based on an example of research with nomads in Chad he highlighted the potential of conceptual work that leads to tackling the challenge of a disease from both sides, from its causes and its effects alike. However, the 27 mother tongues that were represented at the *ITD Conference 2017* were only heard



once, when *Rebecca Freeth* welcomed the conference participants with a South African welcome: “sanibonanani” (“I see you”) that is followed by a “yes” (“I am seen”), a response that was vocalized in our mother tongues.

Towards diversification: insights into transdisciplinarity in different world regions: The contextual specificities of how to successfully realize transdisciplinary research became apparent in various sessions and plenary contributions. Some envisioned south-north differences, focusing on phenomena such as marginalization or hegemonomies in international research collaboration. Others took a particular look at transdisciplinary research in specific thematic fields such as water policies or climate change and elaborated on context dependent differences in heterogeneous socio-political and cultural environments. From

domains. The urgently needed debate on quality criteria of transdisciplinarity has been moved forward, also taking into consideration the need for negotiation on what is considered to be a legitimized way of producing knowledge. In this context, participants explored control as both a social and epistemological phenomenon with high relevance in transdisciplinary research, and they advanced questions of evaluation and quality enhancement. Also the challenge of institutionalizing inter- and transdisciplinarity was tackled in several sessions, especially with regard to ways in which historical and political conditions have shaped institutionalization in different countries. Not surprisingly, no single formula for institutional change could be identified, but a series of very interesting research and educating institutions operating in-between traditional knowledge domains and societal fields were introduced.

and the particular challenge of transdisciplinary qualifications within institutional boundaries.

Outlook

The *ITD Conference 2017* opened up a global dimension to the former dominantly European community and strengthened collaboration between partner institutions. The dominance of a north/western perspective on transdisciplinarity led to the desire to create a south-south network among researchers from Africa, Latin America and others. It became obvious that there is a need to learn more about transdisciplinarity in young democracies and societies with strongly uneven development and poverty.

As organizers we are very impressed by the openness of all participants and the willingness to contribute to create conditions for dialogue and mutual learning. We could feel this attitude throughout the confer-

It became obvious that there is a need to learn more about transdisciplinarity in young democracies and societies with strongly uneven development and poverty.

another perspective, *John van Breda* highlighted the difference working in socially fluid environments such as the Enkanini informal settlement in Stellenbosch, South Africa, and compared it to transdisciplinary research in institutionally well consolidated societies. And from a Maori community we learned from *Ra Smith* how the importance of every single person is expressed and enacted in the establishment of a research collective. The Maori word “mana” (which expresses the importance associated with a person) appeared as a quite radical contrast to “stakeholder”, where the person is reduced to a certain role and function.

Towards consolidation: institutionalization, quality criteria, legitimacy, and control: A large number of sessions and workshops dealt with aspects that are directly related with the objective to consolidate transdisciplinary research. Several contributions tackled the challenge of hegemonomies in knowledge systems and between societal

Re-thinking teaching, learning and young researchers' pathways: *Machiel Keestra's* introduction to the panel on teaching and learning was a focal point for a series of sessions and workshops that focused on various dimensions of teaching and learning, such as capacity building to address complex societal challenges, interculturality in higher education, and effects of transdisciplinary graduate programs, among many others. Voices from different educational institutions and world regions contributed to the discussion on the preparation of the next generation for navigating between different environments. In particular, young researchers were engaged in sharing experiences and concerns with inter- and transdisciplinarity, and they organized a series of workshops. At the *Young Researchers Forum* over 50 transdisciplinary researchers, practitioners, activist, artists and PhD students discussed key questions related to transdisciplinary career path, opportunities, boundaries and innovations to get transdisciplinary research funded and published,

even on the last conference day, vibrant discussion continued in workshops and the Forum of Leuphana's new central building. Many thanks to all contributors and collaborators who made the *ITD Conference 2017* a place for critical engagement with transdisciplinary research and education!

We thank Eawag, Volkswagen Foundation and Leuphana University of Lüneburg for financial support and *Rebecca Freeth* for commenting and proofreading the text.

Reference

Wimmer, F. 2004. *Interkulturelle Philosophie*. Wien: Facultas.

MORE INFORMATION:

- For videos from plenary talks and discussions as well as summaries from various panels, special meetings and sessions visit www.leuphana.de/itd-conference-2017.
- For further information, on upcoming ITD conferences, other transdisciplinary related events, literature and information from transdisciplinary communities visit www.transdisciplinarity.ch.