Trans-disciplinary Research Collaboration
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Participants

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e-Focus Group

Ann Dale

This is a follow-up to our series of e-Dialogues on research outcomes from a SSHR/RDI grant under my leadership. The research was to determine the effectiveness of on-line research collaboration for three outcomes: a trans-disciplinary peer review of a journal article; the interdisciplinary drafting of a book chapter, and leading an international research meeting. Francois Guillemette and Jason Luckerhoff, grounded theory experts from the University of Quebec will be leading this on-line focus group of four of the participants from the first three outcomes to critique the process.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Thanks for the introduction Ann. Hello everyone. Thanks for being here.
As Ann mentioned, we will lead an online focus group on what you think of the e-Dialogue platform and how you use it.

Please let us know when everyone has arrived. Could every participant introduce himself/herself briefly?

Lenore Newman

Hi everyone. I am online.

Chris Ling

Hi, this is Chris here.

Jim Hamilton

I'm here, Jim.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Let's begin with a large question to start the discussion.
Chris, Lenore and Ann, could you talk briefly about your experience of trans-disciplinarity in sustainable development?

Lenore Newman

That's a big and very interesting question! I see transdiciplinarity as a difficult but necessary element of the process. Community involvement is often a necessary element as theory really needs to be iteratively applied in practice if it is to evolve and grow. However involving the community makes the process much more challenging, as all of the realities of human interaction come into play.

Ann Dale

Transdisciplinary dialogue is both incredibly frustrating and wonderful. Much of my experience has either been in very large research team research projects and building proposals (at least 20 researchers) or the smaller teams I lead around my own research projects, for example, the Board of Directors for my CRC and Advisory Committees for social capital and agency. The same issues apply with some greater traction that apply to all relationships, namely, trust, learning how to communicate. What complicates this kind of research, however, is language that acts as a barrier to effective communication,

but more importantly, differing theoretical frameworks that are so unique to a discipline. It is almost as if you have to learn their 'literature' in order to communicate, even though you are talking about the same subject. Revealing these differing frameworks and more critically the values that underpin them is critically important to meaningful dialogue.

Lenore Newman

That communication piece is huge, particularly between the academy and the outside. Everyone has very different goals and motivations, and different backgrounds and traditions they are drawing upon.

Chris Ling

From work I've done/seen transdisciplinarity is the only way sustainable development can be achieved. Without transdisciplinarity the (normally unsustainable) assumptions of discipline and dogma obscure what actually is needed. This is true of both the economists and the environmentalists, of both the left and the right.

Therefore open and neutral forums of dialogue are essential for sustainable development. As is a realization of all disciplines that single disciplines do not have all the answers.

Ann Dale

Chris put it in a nutshell, if you want to do sustainable development research, and make a difference with your research, it needs to be trans-diciplinary. And Lenore, I agree, as we have talked about, there can be too much diversity sometimes, there is functional diversity, and how to achieve that and yet, get all the necessary expertise around the table that one needs for a domain such as sustainable development is difficult. In some fora, until the team starts working effectively, I have felt like such a simpleton, so what does that mean for team members outside the academy?

Lenore Newman

Great point Ann. Sometimes the required diversity to solve the problem can overwhelm our social abilities to work together in a group. If sustainability was just a technical issue things would be much easier, but between the drawing board and implementation the interests of multiple stakeholders must be addressed, and when they come from different backgrounds that gets really tricky

Jim Hamilton

Ann has an exceedingly valid point when referring to communication. In my opinion the biggest drawback in trans-disciplinary work is exactly that. I will give an example. I am presently doing work for Health Canada regarding public and private sector funding. Because I was in medical school years ago before I realized I wasn't made out to be a doctor, I understand Health Canada, I understand the language of Health Canada. Because I worked at Treasury Board, I understand the language of accounting and governance. Because I have private sector experience, I can talk to business people. The problem in all of this is that possession of the necessary tools to communicate transdisciplinarity is almost by happenchance. (I may have invented a new word back there.)

Chris Ling

There is a balance between quantity and quality. For community engagement process the traditional open forum or town hall meeting doesn't really work. It may be trans-disciplinary but it is not a suitable space for dialogue and collaboration. Better is a selected group that is representative of views--these groups then build the trust over time and develops a working relationship.

The convener of the group of course has a great responsibility not to discount potential sources of membership and to act as a neutral moderator of the process whilst those bonds of trust are developing.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Your answers are very interesting... and will be very useful for future research.

Ann, in what ways does the e-dialogue platform help remove communication barriers?

Ann Dale

I think the e-Dialogue platform helps in several ways. First, if gives the less dominant members an equal voice (unless they are slow at typing). Second, it allows for more anarchy independent of power and control by who are perceived to be more senior. Third, the absence of physical cues, I do believe, makes the users who are more open personalities bring in 'other' senses to try and communicate. And lastly, it makes one think more laterally.
And I guess more importantly, it allows people to connect and come together who would

not ordinarily be able to, for example, you and Francois can lead an e-focus group with all of us, and it doesn't cost a cent, other than our brilliant time:) Thus, it facilitates greater transdisciplinary. What do Jim, Lenore and Chris think?

Lenore Newman

The neutrality of the dialogue space is important. It also allows logistically for people to come together despite busy schedules, and let's not ignore the carbon footprint savings over face-to-face communication! However I would also say it is harder for one voice to dominate the e-Dialogue...it is a little more cerebral.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Lenore, what do you mean by «it is a little more cerebral»? Can you elaborate?

Lenore Newman

What I mean is that it is what McCluhan would call, to some degree, a "cool medium". People can't use vocal volume and body language to dominate the conversation. It is a meeting of minds rather than a meeting of bodies, and I really think we underestimate the impact of that.

Chris Ling

Ultimately, however, it is currently limited by the same networks as in the real world. It doesn't increase the reach except by overcoming geographical challenges. It is also that typical beast of sustainability - something that needs high capital expenditure to develop the platform before you can use it. That isn't free.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Thanks for your interesting answers. Your last interventions lead us to focus on the e-Dialogue platform.

What are the favorable conditions in using the E-dialogue platform?

Chris Ling

Good moderation and an engaged and knowledgeable panel discussing a topic that excites deep thinking.

Jim Hamilton

My experience as a negotiator tells me that you have to go beyond just having equal opportunity. Different languages (if that is the right word) such as that related to the health profession, an accountant, a lawyer, an economist etc, too often imply a different way of thinking about something, and somehow e-dialogues have to take that into account. For instance, a social scientist (an economist etc.) is trained to look at the big picture and to discount imponderables such as changes in values. A lawyer, again because of training, will focus on adherence to existing statues and cases. They will go to the details. Somehow all of this implies that e-dialogues have to bring these different groups together using a common language and identifying different and often conflicting thought processes.

Someone mentioned 'neutral territory". Shouldn't we explore how that can be developed in an e-dialogue?

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Ann and others, could you elaborate on the absence of physical cues and the use of the e-dialogue platform?

Jim Hamilton

As an example consider your hands. In negotiating, a good negotiator always places their hands under the table unless writing something down on a piece of paper.

Ann Dale

Jim raises another barrier/opportunity, don't know what it is, that is, some people are far more detailed than others who think more broadly, I would suggest that the medium favours/encourages/necessitates more lateral thinking, thus creating space for more middle ground between the two. Another feature perhaps contributing to 'neutrality' is the ability to embed references, that is, ppts, journal articles, to support your points?

And of course, Chris, I forgot, it took us five years to develop what appears on the surface to be a very simple program.

Lenore Newman

And cues to social status such as clothing are removed, and the physical size difference between men and women is mitigated. Mind you writing style does still impact the conversation.

Jim Hamilton

So we all become androids ... yuk.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Could you all tell us more about the comparison of an online e-Dialogue to a traditional focus group?

Lenore Newman

Well the difference between the e-Dialogue and a face to face focus group begins with the basics. Costs are lower as there is no travel, and so is environmental impact. People with busy schedules might be able to fit in an electronic forum, and people from remote areas might have time to attend. I would say the maximum numbers that work are about the same...too many people on line and the conversation breaks down just as it would in a room...

Ann Dale

Difficult question. Jim, I am thinking here of the modified Delphi Group technique that we refer to often, for me, I find the e-Dialogue so much more relaxing and fun, user friendly, I am sitting here in my log home by the lake, conversing with wonderful people, having a lovely cup of tea, so for me, the transaction costs are so much more reduced and allow me to participate in a lot of projects I would not ordinarily participate in. As well, I find it a safer space, not as much dominance, particularly, with all due respect by

men of my generation, who tend not to be very efficient at typing. There is more time for reflection, and I feel because the medium is still so novel, the old rules don't apply.

Jim Hamilton

I hear you, but when we did the Delphi stuff, we never had sessions consistently solely of city business managers, or solely of lawyers or whatever. We also never really tested the results of one group against another, such as the citizens of Vancouver and then the citizens of another community. I guess what I am saying, we have not really used the Delphi approach to its fullest potential, probably because of costs.

Lenore Newman

I agree with Ann that the pace is very relaxed. I too am drinking coffee as I look at the mountains. I don't know if that is intrinsic to the software or what. However I think that slower pace helps to sooth the differences that can arise when a group is very diverse. Hmmm. Maybe as we have Slow Food we can have Slow Dialogue?

Jim Hamilton

Ann; what I am trying to say is that the choice of words people use goes beyond the professions they are in. The words we use also reflect the culture we buy into, and the various professions that you meet in trans-disciplinary work carry with them cultural baggage, such as how problems are looked at, and how solutions are developed and weighed. Trans-disciplinary work has to accept that.

For instance, if you were to involve business people, i would not even dream of using the word 'transdisplinary'. The use of multi-syllable words turns them cold.

Ann Dale

As does paradigm:)

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

What about the comparison in the moderation/participation/interaction perspective?

Ann Dale

Due to my bias, I will not comment on moderation, however, I believe the interactivity is even greater on-line, the speed of communication is faster, perhaps, at the expense of flow?

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Ann, we are interested in your experience as moderator. (There is no such thing as bias in Grounded Theory! Only participants grounded in their experience!)

Ann Dale

With respect to moderation, it is one of the most difficult tasks I know, it takes all my skills learned as a civil servant, as a teacher, and it has taken me about five years to perfect the art. It depends critical literacy skills, especially being able to read very fast in order to link (thread) people's ideas together, to compensate for the 'flatness' of the medium. As well, to provide better flow, and yet, I feel my mind is sharper after each session I have moderated. Also thought of the technique of asking what appears to be 'dumb' questions to facilitate, to enhance the dialogue, but it is a very unforgiving medium, you are so much in the public sphere, the communication/publication is immediate. Interesting observation, many older academics, although I am older, my experiences are still novel in the academy, are loathe to participate as the written word is seen as so sacred. But I love the anarchy, the dance, the play of it all, and the novelty.

Jim Hamilton

I have one major criticism of e-dialogues. They go too fast. Can we not have a dialogue that extends over a longer period, such as a week so people can think through responses.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Jim: can you tell more about this criticism?
All: what do you think about this criticism?

Ann Dale

Jim, we have experimented with keeping the dialogue open for 24 hours or more, and find that with the caliber of people we are asking to participate, that it is difficult enough to get them to participate for an hour or two, see even the problems getting all of us together, but maybe, with different stimulation efforts to come back, the internet is so 'noisy' now, people are so distracted, and of course, attracting younger people is another kettle of fish entirely, they seem to use the internet more relationally rather than professionally, but that is another subject entirely. What do you think, this does reveal a paradox, a tension, I think the real time contributes to its attraction, knowing Lenore is staring at mountains, while we in the East are the much harder workers:)

Lenore Newman

Yes we haven't had much success with long dialogues...the synchronicity is lost and they are rather like forums. They just don't seem to work very well as people are too busy to maintain interest.

Jim Hamilton

I have a feeling that the present model tries too hard to stimulate a conversation in a room. But look, when you do have a conversation, they are generally of two types: One, they are accidental and, unless between people of the same profession etc., rarely lead to something profound, unless the conversation is at a personal level. Or two, they are designed, such as a business meeting, are focused to a certain result, but where people well prepared before the meeting. I find with e-dialogues there is too much of the former in that they do not demand enough preparation on the part of participants beyond being an expert in their field. We can resolve this either by demanding more preparation on specific topics (yeah sure) or by giving experts more time to consider their responses. Put differently, if a client asks me for opinions on something, unless it is truly urgent, I refuse. People need time to analyze, and I feel e-dialogues should be re-designed to enhance that.

Ann Dale

Very interesting point, we need to discuss this further, when we build websites around an e-Dialogue it is to prepare, but maybe I should send out an executive briefing note, Jim, for a guy, you do have a good mind:)

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Interesting. Could you tell us more about the difference between the e-dialogue platform and a forum with respect to synchronicity?

Ann Dale

Forums are normally held over a period of time, a week, I led a year-long forum on climate change (archived). They are asynchronous, people post when they feel like it. You know what e-Dialogues are, my team no longer holds e-forums, the participation rate is far too low, given the 'noise' of the internet.

Lenore Newman

It is interesting- it is the back and forth of synchronous dialogue that I like. I enjoy a conversation where ideas evolve iteratively "on the fly" as it were. Perhaps it is generational; many of my cohort don't use email or have a home phone anymore as it is too "slow". They communicate by text, or "txt" I suppose I should say! My younger students, though capable of advanced writing, will still toss me a message that says "Cn i tlk 2 u l8r?" ?It makes me wonder what sort of business meetings they will have- maybe 15 people typing on their phones with their thumbs?

Chris Ling

[Returning after 30 minute departure] Regarding preparation I think Jim gets to the root of the problem - people in general will not read preparatory material as to them the dialogue is probably not a priority. BUT I think the lack of preparation and analysis time is an advantage in trans-disciplinary work. Preparation and analysis tends to reinforce conventional bias and a retreat into comfortable paradigm.

By contrast the reactive pace of an e-dialogue forces people to introduce a bit of instinct

and engage more with the subconscious. This is often lost in western methodologies - to the detriment of debate I think. One can be over analytical.

Jim Hamilton

Maybe an answer to this is what I will call 'cascading'. If we considered the design of future e-dialogues in terms of groups of three where the results of he first are fed into the second and the second into the third, then we could also consider time limits. The first dialogue could run as we now do it, but the second and/or third, which would be limited only to analysts (such as the group now on line, grad students in the appropriate disciplines etc.) could run on an extended time basis. The first dialogue would focus only on accumulating good ideas, while the second would focus on analysis.

Ann Dale

Welcome back, Chris. So, we have two opinions, what about the third option, I guess, particularly for people coming in from outside the academy, to have a one-page briefing note, to provide greater overall context?

Jim Hamilton

I am going to write this before Ann does. Yes Chris has just accidently put flesh on one of my earlier points. Economists are too analytical. No emotion whatsoever.

Chris Ling

And of course economists are always right....;-) .

Although our model is to use experts - couldn't we expect these people to have sufficient working knowledge of the issue under discussion already?

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

One last specific question before we close: what can you say about the fact that the questions and answers are written and not spoken?

Chris Ling

Writing gives people that time to think in a reactive conversation that is usually lacking - if you record interviews etc much of what is said doesn't actually make much sense when you listen to it on playback - you get the sense at the time, but can struggle when revisiting the conversation in the future. With writing responses are a little better thought out as you have to engage more of the brain to write than to speak. You are also reading as you type - which helps spot things that don't make sense.

Jim Hamilton

I generally find that writing as a process forces me to be more logical and reflective; I am more ready to change my mind when I am writing something or reading someone else's comments on my ideas. I have time to think.

Ann Dale

Writing also reflects direct voice, our words are not interpreted by the researcher, thanks, Jason and Francois.

Luckerhoff / Guillemette

Thank you very much for your participation. Your answers will be very useful to us. We found them very interesting and intellectually exciting.

We hope to meet with you when/if possible! Especially if transportation pollution costs diminish with new technologies...