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Transdisciplinary Creative Practices

Cedric van Eeno

ABSTRACT: This study explores the dynamic relationship between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinarity, describing how these approaches can enhance creative practices. In an increasingly interconnected environment, and rapidly evolving global landscape, the intersection of disciplines has become a vital space for fostering innovation and driving meaningful change. By blending expertise from diverse fields—from literature, poetry, visual arts, design, and social studies to new media—professionals look to generate innovative solutions to contemporary issues. New media and transmedia are addressed as a catalyst for creative expression and industry transformation for their ability to break traditional boundaries. Addressing collaborative practices, and supported by case studies taken from different disciplines, this paper focuses on a conceptual approach to creative activity in which a diversity of methodologies and an emphasis on individuals can ignite new ways of thinking, communicating, and creating.

KEYWORDS: *Multidisciplinarity; Interdisciplinarity; Transdisciplinarity; Arts; Creativity; Communications.*

Introduction

With the development of technology and facilitated access to a variety of media, methodologies in different academic fields have evolved in the past decades. Practitioners can now leverage diverse disciplinary knowledge and innovative tools. Recent studies point out that specialization in academia has reinforced existing structures, and in doing so, hindered the implementation of change (Misiewicz, 2016). On the other hand, multidisciplinary approaches support the merging of different types of expertise (Zuo & Zhao, 2018) and positively influence productivity (Stvilia et. al., 2010). Besides, projects involving multiple disciplines are often associated with teamwork (Choi & Pak, 2007), and collaboration in research is prone to improve the quality of the outcome (Bu et. al., 2018). In creative disciplines, it is not uncommon to include more than one medium, skill, knowledge, and technique. Embracing new technologies, such as digital art, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence can expand creative possibilities. But the process does not end with practice, it also involves theoretical tools, thinking methodologies, and conceptual reasoning about creative projects. Terms addressing disciplinarity can often be used interchangeably, leading to misunderstandings about their distinct natures and the practices that are linked to them (Zuo & Zhao, 2018). Supported by the work of artists Mariko Mori, Wang Ruobing, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Lambi Chibambo, D.R. Echeverri Giraldo, and referencing studies by Anita W.P. Pak with Bernard C.K. Choi, Janina Misiewicz, Melanie Schiller, Alexander Jensenius, as well as Howard E. Gardner, this paper discusses how multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity function independently, relate to each other, and participate in transforming the contemporary landscape of arts and communications, with the different implications that result from the process.

Multidisciplinarity

Trying to defining the term multidisciplinary can be misleading because it is understood differently depending on the settings and circumstances; it can be recognized as “combining or involving more than one discipline or field of study” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), “of or relating to several subjects” (Collins, n.d.), or “of, relating to, or making use of several disciplines at once” (American Heritage Dictionary, n.d.). The latter points to the concurrent utilization of separate

disciplines. In the arts and humanities, this approach can be in fact a succession of different methods and media, to obtain a final product. The selection of instruments, techniques, and processes is left to the creator's judgment in consideration of the appropriate methods to reach the objective. This aspect emphasizes the importance of decision making: the creative individual assesses the elements necessary in view of the message to be conveyed. As a result, the choice is already part of the creative process. It is also informed by pre-existing knowledge, environment, as well as artistic, cultural, philosophical, and ethical factors. Artificial intelligence, for instance, can be a complex option to choose without careful evaluation of the consequences, and the type of instruments employed. This aspect highlights crucial characteristics of multidisciplinary practices.

Norwegian researcher and musician Jensenius defines multidisciplinary as “people from different disciplines working together, each drawing on their disciplinary knowledge”, as opposed to the term intradisciplinary, designated as “working within a single discipline” (Jensenius, 2012, para. 3). The difference appears to be collaboration. However, design, by nature, is multidisciplinary, working with text and image as fundamental constituents of communication. But it can be the work of one person. Projects can also include kinetic typography—animated text, audio-visual media, mixed media painting, or augmented reality. The intersectional element of multimedia practice emerges as the utilization of various media, tools, techniques, ways of thinking, and methodologies to create.

For instance, multidisciplinary is central to Japanese artist Mariko Mori's work, which blends photography, video, and performance to tackle issues related to contemporary society, mythology, philosophy, technology, and the place of women (Mori, 1994). Mori's art installations include new media and digital images, sometimes including herself performing in costumes, blending together a variety of media in a futuristic visual identity, without limiting her creativity to one specific mode of expression. Multidisciplinary art practices emerged in the 1960s; they developed in the early 1980s when new media became more accessible and are constantly transforming as technology evolves.

Interdisciplinarity

If multidisciplinary is challenging to comprehend, the term interdisciplinarity can appear even more ambiguous. Its definition ranges from “combining or involving two or more academic

disciplines or fields of study” (Dictionary, n.d.), to “involving different areas of knowledge or study” (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). The essential component of interdisciplinarity lies within the approach to making: the prefix *inter* suggests navigating between different practices and establishing connections between them. This particular characteristic further defines the formula to expand from using several disciplines to combining and merging different processes into a comprehensive mechanism for creation and communication.

As an extension, interdisciplinarity has been described as “integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of approaches” (Jensenius, 2012, para. 3). The key ingredient materializes with the concept of synthesizing methods and practices from different areas. In fact, interdisciplinarity is inherently connected to the notion of synthesis because it involves bringing together knowledge and methods from multiple disciplines to create a new understanding of a situation, and generate solutions, or provide fresh perspectives. It operates with the integration of diverse frames of references to offer complementary insights: different fields offer distinct views on an issue. By combining different approaches, a more comprehensive understanding can emerge. Additionally, comparing and contrasting different viewpoints can highlight inconsistencies and reveal deeper truths, identifying overlaps and contradictions. Interdisciplinary projects can lead to the development of novel theoretical frameworks that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries to reach a broader context. By drawing on diverse tools and techniques, creative solutions can be found to complex problems. It also encourages to consider the interconnectedness of separate elements that can seem unrelated or divergent, and can uncover multiple angles, to better understand historical, cultural, and social contexts. All these facets lead to the creation of new knowledge and improved creativity.

Artists such as Singaporean Wang Ruobing tap into these connections to generate interdisciplinary pieces, using a variety of mediums, including sculpture, installation, and kinetic art, to address questions of sustainability, and collaborating with scientific research centers (Wang Ruobing, 2022–2023). Her interdisciplinary practice also allows her to venture into curatorial endeavors, dealing with transcultural discourses (*Sites & Nature: A Collection of Remembering*, 2023).

In essence, interdisciplinarity is a composite process that involves breaking down disciplinary

silos, building bridges between different fields, and generating innovative and valuable creative outcomes. The differences between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity can better highlight the potential benefits of collaborative, integrative approaches to complex questions. Both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity involve drawing on knowledge from multiple fields to address questions. However, they differ in their approach, level of integration, and the manner in which the practitioner uses different methodologies: with interdisciplinarity, the connections between practices are central to the process, disintegrating disciplinary boundaries.

Transdisciplinarity

The word transdisciplinarity is not included in a number of dictionaries, online and otherwise. Its meaning remains elusive, even to some researchers, scholars and art practitioners. Jensenius describes it as “creating a unity of intellectual frameworks beyond the disciplinary perspectives” (2012, para. 3). While interdisciplinarity focuses on ways to synthesize different fields of study, transdisciplinarity fuels creativity by encouraging diverse perspectives and ways of reasoning. It is first and foremost in conceptual thinking that the connections between methodologies are established. The strength of interdisciplinarity lies in the reflective aspect of the pre-production process. It requires the creation of new conceptual frameworks or models. In this configuration, conceptual thinking helps integrate diverse perspectives into coherent and new approaches, blurring the lines between different disciplines because they are not yet tangible: they start as theories, ideas, or visions. This initial stage enables the project to form without the ordinary confines of disciplines, systems, and techniques. For instance, concepts from social studies, ethics, biology, and philosophy may come together to shape new creative ventures, free from conventional specifications defined by context and outcome, away from the expected.

Within interdisciplinarity, two aspects are particularly intertwined: theory and practice. A dominant characteristic of the method is the combination of theoretical, instrumental, and methodological aspects of the different disciplinary fields (Nowotny et. al., 2016). Transdisciplinarity creates a holistic approach by constantly crossing disciplinary boundaries and by encouraging the blending of theories, methods, and concepts from multiple areas, practices, and types of knowledge. To do this effectively, individuals think conceptually—seeing beyond the constraints of specific academic or professional fields. Conceptual thinking allows one to abstract

and generalize ideas, making it possible to transfer knowledge from one field to another, without the restraints of the discipline that can restrain the development of the project.

As an illustration, Vietnamese scholar Trinh T. Minh-Ha explores filmmaking, photography, writing, and art installation to approach postcolonial issues in a broad, yet pertinent manner (Minh-Ha, 2024). In addition to being unique, this *modus operandi* becomes more relevant to complex topics in a global context. Her practice reveals a truly transdisciplinary way of thinking about her subjects, combined with a practical approach to art making that does not limit itself to the medium or frame of mind to produce documentary works.

Exposure to different disciplines expands mental toolboxes, allowing one to draw from a wider range of ideas and techniques, without constraints. This cross-pollination of ideas can lead to groundbreaking discoveries, artistic breakthroughs, and innovative problem-solving strategies. Transdisciplinarity frequently implies collaboration. When partnerships between experts from different backgrounds and creative thinking within distinct fields of study merge, dynamic interactions materialize, bringing new insights to harmonize and strengthen. This synergy can be observed because the solutions that surface are holistic, comprehensive, and remain coherent. Interdisciplinary creativity implies the use of different media and ways of reasoning, which can be approached in an arborescent configuration: they are not organized in a linear fashion, but branch into new ideas that are interconnected, and respond to each other in a rhizome layout, with schemes expanding from previously generated notions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). As a consequence, the method of thinking influences the method of making, and the other way around is true as well. In creative discipline, the two facets often operate in tandem, one enriching the other, as in a dialogue between different systems in a flexible and organic structure. As a representation of this approach, Malawian artist Lambi Chibambo creates digital images illustrating her exploration of identity, constructing a web of references and symbols, linked by a visual narrative that borrows from daily life interlaced with African spirituality (African Digital Art, 2024).

The interrelation between the separate components of the work can also be found in storytelling. With interdisciplinary art or design pieces, this configuration resonates in transmedia, where a broad range of means of communication work together to compose a consistent story world, enriched by a variety of media (Schiller, 2018, p. 97). The story starts on one platform and

continues on a different, changing contexts, but developing with coherence. This is the case of Colombian scholar Echeverri Giraldo's multimedia project, *Letters to José*, which explores interactive digital and narratives (2021). The work involves audio, illustrations, and text in a playful installation that adapts to the audience's interaction with the story.

Even though transdisciplinary is rooted in conceptual thinking, it remains focused on real-world questions, and their implications in the system and practice. The methodology relies primarily on people: their background, mindset, expertise, experience, and unique profile. Because of this particular aspect, transdisciplinary arrangements require a great deal of concentration on the individual: it implies the acknowledgment, recognition, support, and appreciation of personalities. For a transdisciplinary project, a combination of qualities needs to be taken into account, including knowledge, skills, and proficiency. But other characteristics can weigh in the balance. Expertise can in fact be connected to different types of sensitivity, and ways of reasoning. According to American developmental psychologist Gardner, there are eight different types of intelligence, with different aspects: "visual-spatial; linguistic-verbal; logical-mathematical; body-kinesthetic; musical; interpersonal; intrapersonal; and naturalistic." (2011, p. 77, 105, 135, 179, 217, 251). These traits can be recognized as integrants of expertise that will influence the performance in a transdisciplinary project—collaborative or otherwise.

Consequently, the appreciation and valuing of personalities becomes crucial. It determines the engagement, efficacy and efficiency of the project conceptualization, as well as the execution of the work. When discussing expertise, the notion of trust becomes relevant, with the implications it can have on the outcomes. In this regard, research supported by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research with the support from the Korea Development Institute reveals that trusting environments increase resilience to adversity (Helliwell et. al., 2016).

In addition, with the rise of generative artificial intelligence, transdisciplinarity also ensures that practitioners think carefully about what they design, construct, and produce in a broader framework. At the heart of this practice sits the core function of ethical thinking: anticipation. As a result, transdisciplinarity and ethics are closely intertwined. If expertise is a critical ingredient of the efficiency of transdisciplinary projects, and collaboration is frequently involved, it implies that the focus must be placed on individuals. Therefore, the sincerity, reliability, and trustworthiness of these

individuals is of the essence. This is why the concept of ethics emerges as a key aspect to take into consideration.

Ethics is a trendy term that can be misinterpreted, but remains essential to creation, education, and communication. It requires a careful examination. The notion can include integrity; honesty; fairness; objectivity; carefulness; accountability. It can also involve questions relating to sustainability, human rights, and social justice. These features can strengthen a project and its end product. The nature of transdisciplinarity facilitates the integration of these concepts in the development of the work, for a more just, accurate, and pertinent outcome.

Conclusion

Multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity, are related aspects of an emerging movement of creative activity. Multidisciplinarity provides a broad spectrum of tools and methods for creators but can remain segmented in its approach. Interdisciplinarity takes this aspect further by merging disciplinary boundaries, synthesizing diverse knowledge to address complex challenges and generate innovative solutions. Transdisciplinarity, meanwhile, represents a different level of integration, where creative and conceptual thinking transcends traditional fields to produce holistic and novel frameworks that respond directly to real-world issues. Each of these approaches emphasizes the importance of collaboration, but it is in the conceptual and ethical dimensions that the most profound potential lies for reshaping creative practices in the contemporary landscape. By embracing flexibility, conceptual thinking, ethical behavior, creative practitioners can push the boundaries of their fields, but also contribute meaningfully to addressing societal challenges, ensuring that creative endeavors are both innovative and ethically grounded.

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