Chapter 16

Bricolage: Excursions Into Transdisciplinary Territory

David Starr-Glass
SUNY Empire State College – Prague, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Disciplinary work is conducted within a socially constructed framework of assumptions, processes, methodologies, and discovery that are particular to, and embedded in, a specific discipline. Disciplinary paradigms define the discipline and provide it with a cohesive integrity, but they also operate as barriers for those outside the disciplinary community. For collaborative explorations and research—whether in the form of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary work—it is necessary for those involved to first recognize and appreciate these paradigmatic boundaries before negotiating them. The approach of the bricoleur is different. Bricoleurs make do with fragments of previous knowledge, analogous encounters, and different disciplinary experience and use them to gain new insights into the problem at hand—insights that may be partial but which are also both pragmatic and functional. This chapter considers the nature of bricolage and the approach of bricoleurs in conducting explorations of transdisciplinary territory.

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, knowledge production might seem relatively straightforward; however, the notions that knowledge is approached in a neutral fashion or that knowledge is produced simply for its own sake are challenged by a number of realities. First, existing knowledge and the advancing frontiers of knowledge production are selectively defined and recognized according to existing disciplinary assumptions that highlight and privilege the discipline’s current understanding of usefulness, validity, and generalizability. Second, knowledge is produced, recognized, and conserved—or ultimately rejected and superseded—within distinctive paradigms and ideological frameworks (Kuhn, 2012) that serve to define the discipline and shape its ongoing research efforts. Third, those who produce new knowledge—and those who will eventually consume or utilize that knowledge—do so within overarching political, social, and economic frameworks that inevitably set agendas and establish preferences regarding the nature and the utility of what is deemed to be knowledge (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Ozaga, 2007).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9531-1.ch016
Bricolage

Knowledge production is heavily—but not exclusively—centered in the research function of the academy, where individual disciplines are self-defining and where each has established a characteristic methodology and developed a “specialized terminology, a community of practitioners, a canon of authorities, an agenda of problems to be addressed, and perhaps more formal signs of a professional condition, such as journals, textbooks, courses of study, libraries, rituals, and social gatherings” (Kelley, 1997, p. 1). Academic disciplines are socially constructed, culturally conserved, and increasingly driven by ideological assumptions and preferences. As Shulman (1993) observed, the very term disciple is significant because “it not only denotes a domain but also suggest a process: a community that disciplines is one that exercise quality, control, judgment, evaluation, and paradigmatic definition” (p. 6). The power and authority of the disciplinary community regulate the ways in it defines itself and—often obliquely and sometimes unintentionally—these same forces define what the discipline is not and with what it should, or should not, be involved.

Disciplinary identity and identification create disciplinary boundaries that may not be implicit stated, but which are nevertheless recognizable to community members. Boundaries delimit the territorial range of the discipline and function as barriers that prevent members from venturing beyond their familiar and established territory (White & Hanson, 2002; Quattrone, 2000). Academic disciplines and communities of professionals perpetuate the accepted boundaries of their disciplines through the education and socialization of their novices; that is, through what Lee Schulman (2005) has called signature pedagogies—“the types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (p. 52). The signature pedagogies that are associated with individual disciplines are pervasive, reinforcing, and “implicitly define what counts as knowledge in the field and how things become known” (p. 54). Commenting on the purposeful distinctiveness of disciplinary education, some have asked rhetorically: “What does our pedagogy reveal, intentionally or otherwise, about the habits of head, hand, and heart as we purport to foster through our disciplines?” (Gurung, Chick, & Haynie, 2009, p. xii). Those educated, trained, and living within the confines of the disciplinary community may be wary about approaching the knowledge margins of their disciplines—let alone actually crossing them. Accordingly, many members of the disciplinary community may require considerable encouragement, support, and training in order to engage in ventures that are characterized as either interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity (Owen, Johns, & Etkin, 2011; Snow, Salmon, & Young, 2010; Su, 2016).

Significant challenges arise when research efforts are not undertaken within a defined discipline but rather through the joint efforts of those belonging to different disciplinary communities. The research might consider an object of enquiry through multiple lenses, each constructed from the distinctive assumptions, beliefs, and methodological cultures of the participating disciplines. The research effort might attempt to synthesize its results and conclusions into a unified framework that recognizes the separate disciplinary paradigms that were involved but which finds ways of blending, integrating, or reconciling these paradigmatic differences. Alternatively, the research effort might employ multiple ways of presenting and expressing its conclusions, thereby providing a richness of alternatives and possible connections for others to consider. No matter which goal is selected, all collaborative work involves recognizing, approaching, and crossing established disciplinary boundaries.

This chapter considers the impact of disciplinary boundaries and ways of undertaking excursions into interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary territory. The first section considers the nature of disciplinary boundary work and introduces the constructs of bricolage and the bricoleur. The section following this
Related Content

Game Theory for Cognitive Radio Networks
www.igi-global.com/chapter/game-theory-for-cognitive-radio-networks/183122?camid=4v1a

Game-Theoretic Approaches in Heterogeneous Networks
Chih-Yu Wang, Hung-Yu Wei, Mehdi Bennis and Athanasios V. Vasilakos (2018). Game Theory: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice (pp. 204-218).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/game-theoretic-approaches-in-heterogeneous-networks/183112?camid=4v1a

Metaphors in Science: A Change of Perspective
www.igi-global.com/chapter/metaphors-in-science/182213?camid=4v1a

Lead-Entropy: Redefining Leadership from the Perspective of Organizational Entropy
www.igi-global.com/chapter/lead-entropy/150420?camid=4v1a