

# Transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship

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**How to cite this article:**

Van Zyl, I. Transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship. *J transdiscipl res S Afr.* 2023;19(1), a1411. <https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v19i1.1411>

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In a previous editorial, I wrote about the nature of transdisciplinary research. We understand transdisciplinarity to represent a convergence – or synthesis – of disciplines from within and beyond academia to tackle so-called wicked societal problems. In a transdisciplinary research paradigm, true synthesis leads to the creation of new knowledge and workable solutions. I regard this type of research as a form of engaged scholarship. This is because, firstly, the transdisciplinary endeavour leads to *actionable knowledge*. Mach and colleagues impress this point by saying that '[f]rom a problem-driven perspective, the goal of engaged research is to address societal challenges; creation of actionable knowledge is the means to that end'.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, knowledge has both concrete actionable value and inherent value in the development of human understanding.

Secondly, the transdisciplinary endeavour typically involves in-depth community engagement. I refer here to 'community' as extra-university stakeholders, including government, civil society and local populations at the margins of industrial society. A siloed model – where we find the caricatures of greying professors in faraway ivory towers – is not conducive to engaged scholarship. This is because the metaphorical silo is insular and experientially removed from the complexities of poverty, resource scarcity and other wicked problems. At the very least, a siloed model only reaffirms the disconnect between academia and other communities. A siloed model also removes the skillsets and problem-solving capabilities of the professoriate from the society that surrounds it. This, in turn, disables the population from achieving solutions to societal problems and merely facilitates the continued reproduction of inequalities and other social ills.

Finally, transdisciplinarity is necessarily based on the premises of critical reflexivity and subjectivity, thus unlocking the mental, emotional, cultural and social aptitude to engage. Indeed, in the effort to bring about equity, social justice and inclusivity, engaged scholars must reflect on their actions and question their positionality in often volatile contexts. By being critically mindful of their approach, engaged scholars may not only confront their biases but also locate themselves subjectively within the work.<sup>2</sup> An extension of this concept is critical intersubjectivity, whereby the scholar becomes sensitised to the *shared* experiential and cultural dynamics of the broader context.<sup>3</sup> Stated differently, while being aware of one's own meaning-making as a scholar, one also becomes receptive to others' viewpoints, experiences and ideas through dialogue and engagement. This broadens and deepens engagement with the creative sparks that generate new knowledge that initiates solutions to social problems.

Considering the above, transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship is threefold:

1. It seeks to address critical societal challenges through actionable knowledge.
2. It synthesises knowledge from different communities and sectors.
3. It is critically reflexive and intersubjective.

We can observe different examples of engaged scholarship in practice, many of which are intrinsically transdisciplinary. I can cite one such case from my experience as an academic supervisor. In his doctoral research, Leuna Obioha fuses insights from design anthropology, community informatics, pedagogy and the psychology of gamification, to address youth unemployment in urban poor communities in Cape Town, South Africa. After several years of rich engagement, Mr Obioha was able to prototype a system that successfully motivated unemployed youth to develop critical skills.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his scholarly journey, he was able to address (a small part of) a societal problem through generating actionable knowledge by integrating insights from different stakeholders with whom he developed strong personal bonds. And significantly, he was able to reflect critically on his experiences and thus embrace those of others.

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Transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship is not without its problems, both in theory and practice. Such research is at greater risk of becoming fragmented scholarship, lacking synthesis and bound by conventional disciplinary thinking (and thus paradigm clashes). From an ontological and epistemological perspective, the nature of reality and truth is always contested and contestable when framed in a transdisciplinary way. More practically, politics, power and economics are also at play and can derail any conciliative efforts to bring about an engaged scholarship. Indeed, at the ideological level, transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship is decentralised, democratised and cooperative. It is also built on an ethic of impactful social involvement and therefore requires transparency and self-regulation.

In conclusion, transdisciplinarity as engaged scholarship can be consolidated as modern 'pracademia', based on three key components of identity, community and engagement: 'The work of the pracademic is that of translating, brokering,

bridging, and boundary spanning, with insights from, legitimacy in, and networks across multiple spheres'.<sup>5</sup> This form of scholarship is not a panacea to wicked societal problems, though it should not proclaim to be. Yet, at the nexus of research and practice, it holds great potential for understanding and solving, at least in part, systemic and deep-seated issues.

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