

The case for transdisciplinarity

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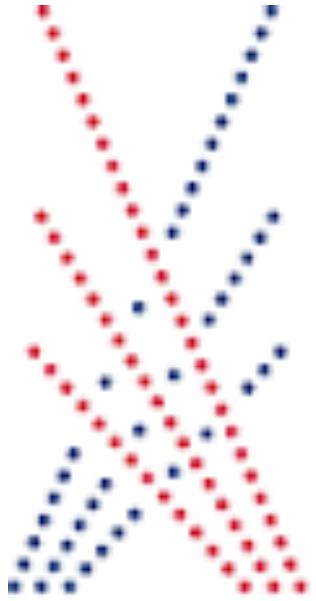
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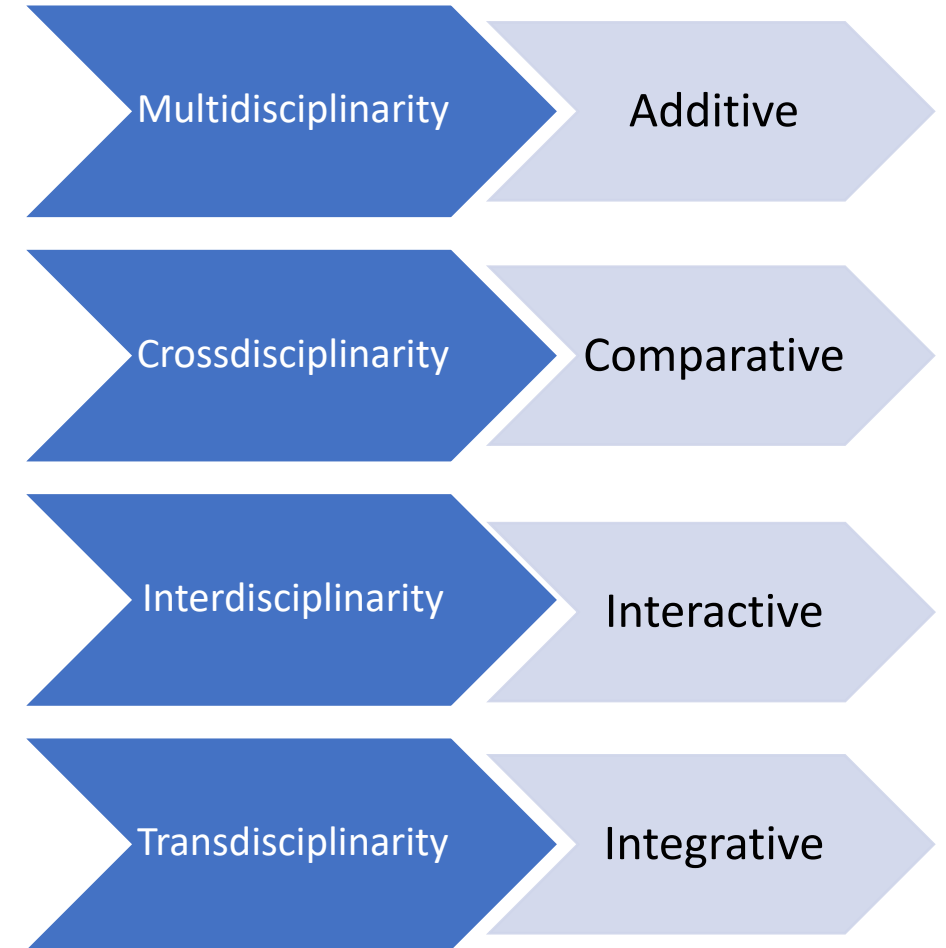
The case for transdisciplinarity

By Seun Kolade

Leicester Castle Business School, De Montfort University

Definitions and conceptual clarifications (Choi & Pak, 2006)

- **Multidisciplinarity** draws on knowledge from different disciplines but stays within the boundaries of those field. Multidisciplinarity brings ideas from different disciplines together in an *additive* manner in which the ideas remain distinct and bounded in specific disciplines.
- **Crossdisciplinarity** views one discipline or an issue within a discipline, from the perspective of another discipline.
- **Interdisciplinarity** analyzes, synthesizes and harmonizes links between disciplines into a coordinated and coherent whole
- **Transdisciplinarity** integrates the natural, social and health sciences in a humanities context, and in doing so transcends each of their traditional boundaries.



What, then, is a discipline?

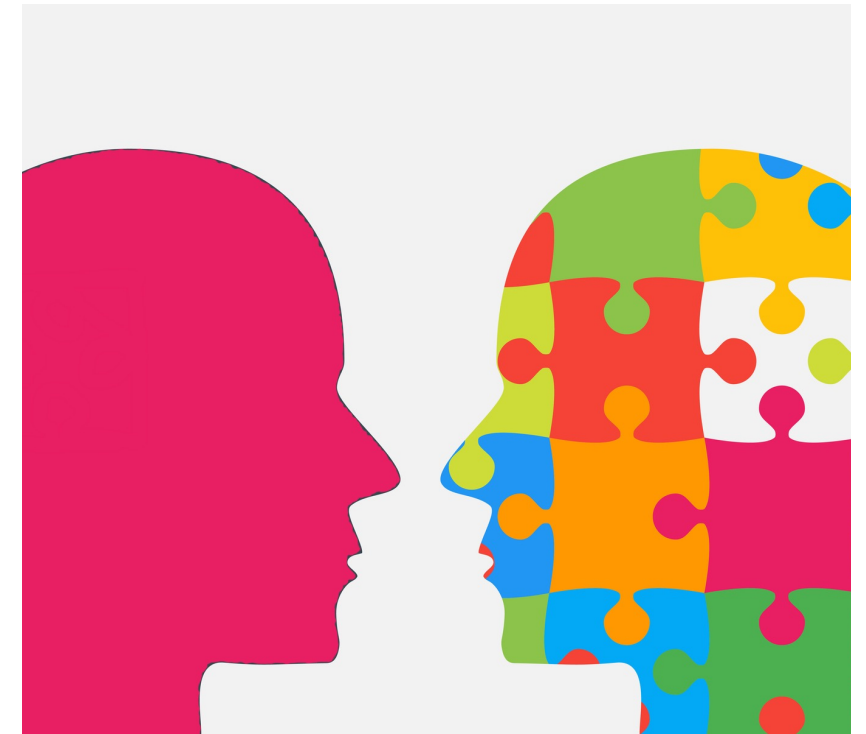
Discipline is a specific branch of knowledge recognised by a certain distinctness it reveals in its substance and methodology (Yadav & Lakshmi, 1995)

Characteristics of disciplines (Bourdieu & Strand, 2007): disciplines have:

- A particular object of research that may or may not be shared with other disciplines (e.g. plant, society, politics)
- A body of accumulated specialist knowledge referring to their object of research, and specific to each discipline
- Theories and concepts that can organize the accumulated specialist knowledge effectively
- Use specific terminologies or a specific technical language adjusted to their research object
- Developed specific research methods according to their specific research requirements
- institutional manifestation in the form of subjects taught in universities, and typically domiciled in departments.

The merits and limits of subject specialisms

- Specialisation is underpinned by the logic of division of labour and its implications for increased productivity.
- Academic specialisms have rapidly expanded in the 20th and 21st centuries and have immensely contributed to the sheer volume of knowledge production.
- Digital transformation has up-ended the old division of labour, as automated machines and robots take over routine, repetitive tasks. In the same vein, digital transformation has disrupted the landscape of knowledge production, precipitating new roles for the academic scholar.
- The archetypical academic specialist today is limited not by their depth of knowledge but by the breadth of their perspective and the capacity to make connections across disciplinary boundaries.



Source: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_it_better_to_be_a_specialist_or_a_generalist

Academic scholarship and the emergence of the knowledge worker



Source: <https://km4meu.wordpress.com/2012/04/23/portrait-of-the-modern-knowledge-worker/>

- The knowledge worker is an individual who aggregates, integrates and recombine information to develop innovative outcomes.
 - Within organisations, they take on boundary-spanning roles and contribute to tacit knowledge transfer within organisations (Ferreira et al, 2022).
 - The knowledge worker is critical to the functioning and progress of the new knowledge economy.
 - The ideal knowledge worker is a generalising specialist
- The academic scholar is eminently positioned as a knowledge worker, but now operates in a contested space in which non-university actors are staking their claims as knowledge producers.
- The contemporary scholar must re-invent themselves in order to keep up with the pace and rapidly changing landscape of the knowledge economy
 - Disciplinary rigidities must therefore give way to institutional flexibilities and loose boundaries

The evolution of the academy

The medieval university:
storehouse of old knowledge

The modern university: factory of
“new” knowledge

The 21st century university:
boundary-spanning innovation hub

Transdisciplinarity: what it means for the research process

- The transdisciplinary process begins at the very top of the research process, not as an afterthought.
- The transdisciplinary researcher conceives of a research problem as a complex system of interconnected facets and dimensions.
 - It therefore actively co-opts non-academic stakeholders as co-creators of the research question
- Transdisciplinary research supplements, rather than supplant, disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research (Lawrence et al, 2022).
 - It therefore includes some of the methodological and analytical approaches and processes enacted at the lower levels of interactions between disciplines

The research process

Identify the research problem

Define the research question

Choose appropriate methodology

Collect data

Analyse data

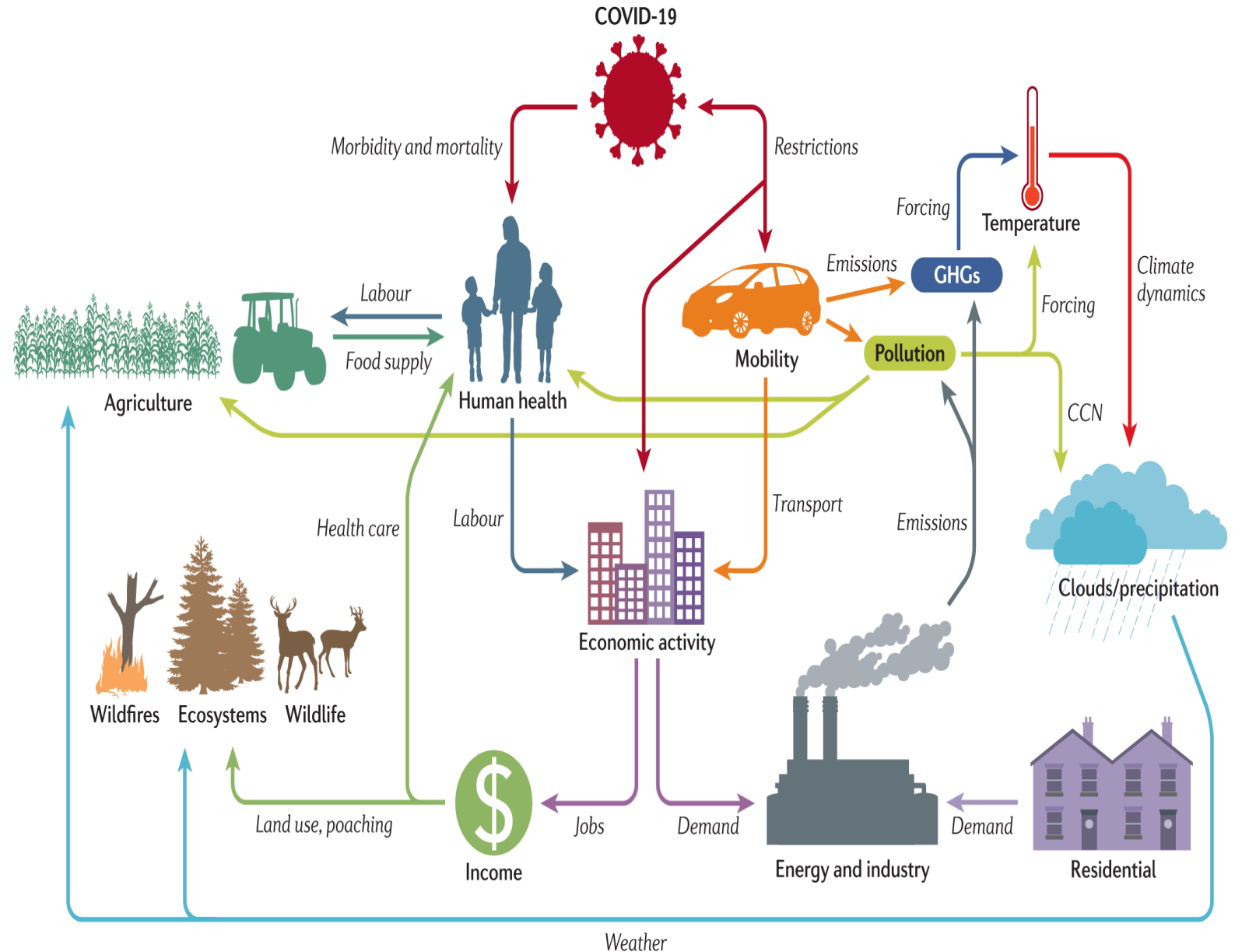
Disseminate findings

Transdisciplinarity: personal reflections

- **Background**

- First degree and M.Sc in engineering, followed by PhD in International Development
- Postdoctoral research in leadership and entrepreneurship
- The transdisciplinary team is a *meeting point* of experts where subject specialists harness the unique of opportunity to broaden their perspective in the light of other disciplines.
- The transdisciplinary space is a *melting pot* of ideas where experts bring their unique insights into the pool where they are combined and recombined in an innovative, integrative process to better address complex societal problems.
- The transdisciplinary process is a *positive sum game*.

The case for transdisciplinarity: Covid-19 pandemic in focus





In a nutshell...

- Transdisciplinarity is **NOT**
 - a repudiation of academic disciplines
 - a call to eradicate disciplinary boundaries
- Transdisciplinarity **IS**
 - a reflective space to contemplate the broader context, meaning and value of our work
 - a co-created process of addressing society's increasingly complex challenges
 - a key driving force of innovation in the new knowledge economy

Thank You!

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