

The Concept of a Transdiscipline: And of Evaluation as a Transdiscipline

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There are two main meanings of this term that can be disinterred from the 8,000+ references to their definition in Google (at December 12, 2007), both of them sharing the idea of a discipline that crosses over the boundaries between *many* other disciplines: we can distinguish them as the ‘point of view’ sense of the term and the ‘method’ sense of the term. These senses are not sharply distinct from each other, but are distinct from ‘interdiscipline’ meaning a *compound* approach drawing from or working in the boundary area between two or sometimes more other disciplines; and from ‘multidiscipline’ meaning a compound approach involving more than two other disciplines.¹ In more detail:

1. Transdiscipline meaning a theory, point of view, or perspective that has some application in several disciplines. This is the earlier of these two uses of the term, and was applied by people in reference to both Marxism and feminism, since both points of view can affect one’s stance in many traditional disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and economics.
2. Transdiscipline meaning a discipline that has standalone status as a discipline *and* is also used as an methodological or analytical tool in several other

disciplines (cf., Coryn & Hattie, 2006). Statistics is a good example, design and communication are often classified in this way, ethics has a strong claim that I have not seen pursued,² and the master transdiscipline is perhaps logic, which is used as a tool in *all* other academic disciplines, since they crucially involve inference and argument.

Evaluation is another candidate for the transdisciplinary crown since it is, first, an essential element in all other academic disciplines, as the tool that distinguishes them from pseudo-disciplines, that distinction being based on the ability to distinguish high quality data and hypotheses from shoddy ones in order to distinguish, for example, science from pseudo-science. Second (perhaps giving it an edge on logic), it is also an essential element in all physical disciplines such as tai chi, marathon running/training, dance, etc., since there are clearly standards of merit in these disciplines and judgments of it. It is only in recent years that it has become possible to argue that evaluation is an autonomous discipline, too, with not just a large number of people working professionally in it, in the 60 or so countries that now have a professional association of evaluators, but with some identification of a core logic and methodology. While it’s true that

¹ The term ‘transdiscipline’ is sometimes used to mean nothing more than ‘multidiscipline,’ but it seems more useful to use it for something different.

² Computer science & information science are other recent and serious entries in the transdisciplinary stakes.

in a sense, evaluation is a branch of logic, it can also be argued that it is a cognitive process in its own right, emerging as an identifiable, albeit tacit, element, at around the same time as (tacit) logic a million years ago.

It might be argued that Marxism and feminism are also methods and hence our distinction here collapses. But if they are properly called methods at all, they are methods with specific doctrinal content, which statistics/logic/evaluation lack. If the latter have doctrinal content at all, it is at some subtler level yet to be uncovered and disputed or corrected. And it seems implausible to describe these theories as disciplines in their own right; they are theories or approaches within other disciplines; at most sub-disciplines. I think the distinction, essentially between content and tools, holds up and is worth making. Incidentally, the term 'multidisciplinary evaluation' (MDE) also has an independent meaning: in the medical and special education fields, it refers to evaluation of a case or patient when done by representatives of more than one profession, e.g., by a psychologist and a teacher. [Historical postscript: when I invented what is here called the second sense of transdiscipline, in 1990,³ I did not know about the first one. I am not sure whether such knowledge would have altered my decision to use the term as I did.].

References

- Coryn, C. L. S., & Hattie, J. A. (2006). The transdisciplinary model of evaluation. *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation*, 3(4), 107-114.
- Scriven, M. (1991). *Evaluation thesaurus* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

³ It is set out in some detail in the introduction to my *Evaluation Thesaurus* (Scriven, 1991).