

The Hidden Third and Me

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Once upon a time (August 2006, to be exact), in the magic island of Florianopolis, Brazil, a meeting that would change my life forever was about to take place. I was a student there, pursuing my Masters in Knowledge Engineering. One day I was attending a class and we were talking about what was the difference between inter, cross and multi disciplinarity. My colleague then said: “Hey, there is this quantum physicist who is really famous and is supposed to know all about these things, he is here on campus right now — he’s speaking on this festival...” I said: “Who is this person?” “Basarab Nicolescu” “You mean the father of transdisciplinarity?” “I guess” “Professor, would you excuse us, we need to go see the father of transdisciplinarity! He is here on campus!”

A few minutes later I was at an auditorium packed of people and there was absolute silence and the level of attention was very intense. Before I started to write this post, I searched the web looking for photos of the event, and I was able to find the actual video on Youtube¹. It’s one of the best talks ever done by Basarab, entitled “The Transdisciplinary Nature of Peace”.

As I tried to adjust my eyes to the brightness of the concepts being presented on the stage, I was trying my best to process and understand Nicolescu’s understanding of the relationship

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxpfmmFTpi0>

between subject and object, science and humanism, ontology and epistemology. His clear explanation of the different levels of reality and the nature of the Hidden Third was a defining moment in my life, one so significant that it would shape the future direction of all of my research, starting that very day. I was so fascinated by these concepts that I followed Basarab around Florianopolis that week, attending various related events in which he was a guest during his stay in the city. In one of them, I ended up substituting his translator at the last minute, and because of that, I had the chance to be introduced to him in person. He was so kind and open that at the apex of his career as an international public scholar he made the time to review and give feedback on the incipient first writings of an unknown Brazilian Masters student: me.

Levels of Convergence

My Masters dissertation was written on the topic of consilience: the transdisciplinary unity of knowledge. Firmly grounded in transdisciplinarity, my first international journal publication was titled Levels of Convergence. I submitted it to the Metanexus Conference in 2008, and because I did not get institutional support to travel to the United States to attend this conference as a student, Basarab Nicolescu read my article there on my behalf. Here is the video of this great honor he gave me, and which I will never forget². If it wasn't for the way transdisciplinarity opened my eyes to the interconnectedness of knowledge, none of my research would have been possible.

² <https://vimeo.com/9579026>

Pursuing transdisciplinary research is a difficult undertaking at many institutions. Disciplinarity is a mindset and a culture, and a very strong one. I can say that to have the opportunity to be working at DIDI³ today, an institute that was born with a transdisciplinary DNA, is a great privilege and responsibility.

Looking back at my professional trajectory, I can see how transdisciplinarity has shaped much more than my research direction. It has also shaped my career path in an interesting way. Because of it, I have always refused to see a separation between academia and non-academia, alternating between positions that were sometimes academic, sometimes not. Transdisciplinarity has imbued me with the capacity to see the big picture and the systemic structure of things, and this has enabled me to become a valuable asset for innovation consultancies around the world, applying this unconventional outlook to the design of new products and services that can be used for creating social cohesion and fostering community.

A Transdisciplinary Response to Covid-19

It is because of my academic formation as a transdisciplinary researcher that I am able to engage directly with the truly transversal and systemic challenges of an emergency such as COVID-19. In my current role as Associate Professor at DIDI, and one of the co-founders of DIDI Agile Factory⁴, I have had the opportunity to test and develop many interesting approaches in collaboration with my students and colleagues that can be the

³ <http://didi.ac.ae/>

⁴ <https://medium.com/dubai-institute-of-design-and-innovation/introducing-didis-agile-factory-cd5432ee6209>

foundation for future applications of transdisciplinary design. As we move forward in our quest to create new meanings and to respond appropriately to these troubling times, applying a transdisciplinary mindset to the design of new levels of reality has never been so important.

Thank you Basarab, for preparing me for this moment. I truly wish that we, both at DIDI and at CIRET, will be able to make you proud.