

Disciplinary Narcissism and the Pedagogy of Transdisciplinarity¹

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to stress the critical pedagogy of Transdisciplinarity as the basis of communicative, contextual and democratic system(s) of knowledge. Accordingly, it criticizes 'disciplinary narcissism' as the main cause of disoriented, present day Higher/University education. Disciplinary Narcissism is figuratively defined as the enclosed and self immersed, non communicative attitude of a particular branch of knowledge where the intelligentsia as academia operating within the discipline act structurally in an anti-dialogical manner. In order to achieve such a critical perspective, the paper initiates to be in accord with the critique of knowledge enunciated by critical theory of Juergen Habermas which facilitates the critique of disciplinary narcissism/ decadence or the self-imposed boundaries of disciplines and the resultant delimitations. The paper puts in place the idea that 'Transdisciplinarity' as communicative-dialogical willingness, designed and constructed to border-cross, both the structural and functional self-imposed boundaries of the disciplinary delimitations, is essential to make the natural movement of knowledge from within and to constantly renew and transform knowledge and learning.

Keywords: Disciplinary Narcissism, Disciplinary Decadence, Decentred Knowledge, Scientism, Trans-Disciplinarity.

Introduction

As many thinkers in the critical tradition recognize, higher education in general or university education in particular has become disoriented as the commodified and over-gadgetized concept of knowledge makes them mere de-contextualized piles of processed information. Therefore, contemporary critical theories of education/pedagogies attempt to remodel education as critical and more interactive, which ultimately understands and registers knowledge as dialogically and communicatively poised. Critical engagements which problematize the mainstream or popular idea of education caution us that education falls into 'disciplinary delimitation' as 'disciplinary narcissism',² which constructs and proliferates knowledge as 'dis-communicative'

¹ An earlier version this paper was presented in a national seminar on 'The Dynamics of Higher Education', organized by AUTA (Assam University Teacher's Association), Assam University, Silchar, which was held in July, 2011.

² The term 'discipline' originally means to educate. Broadly, it is a specific branch of knowledge which claims its own method to approach its knowledge claims. More specifically, in the academic culture a discipline refers

(non-communicating and structurally refusing to communicate) system of disengaged methods when the function of education is reduced to a mere commodity due to various dynamics of power plays. As Lewis R. Gordon points out in his very recent study:

The emergence of disciplines has often led to the forgetting of their impetus in living human subjects and their crucial role in both the maintenance and transformation of knowledge-producing practices. The results are special kind of decadence. One such kind is disciplinary decadence. Disciplinary decadence is the ontologizing or reification of a discipline. In such attitude, we treat our discipline as though it was never born has always existed and will never change or, in some cases, die. More than immortal it is eternal.³ Knowledge as disengaged containers of different disciplines, refuses to initiate a socio-cultural understanding and contextual auditing of the knowledge claims as the claims of education, which is essential for communicating knowledge. In other words, when it comes to communication among established subjects/academic disciplines at the level of higher education/University level education, both conventional and contemporary, they become disciplines with delimited horizons. Disciplinary narcissism is disciplinary fundamentalism. It is like religious fundamentalism or ideological fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is reificatory universalization of a particular period/phase/epoch of religio-cultural or socio-political ideals or ideologies. The major fault of any fundamentalism is that it is anti democratic, anti dialogical and by virtue of being so denies any form of reflective self-understanding and communication. Disciplinary fundamentalism and its spin-offs such as disciplinary solipsism and dehumanized technologization are instrumental in creating a scenario of practically nonexistent public sphere, civil and knowledge societies and effective democracy.

The discussion that I intend to carry out here, therefore, takes up two important concepts: Communication and the 'Trans disciplinary' nature of knowledge. Moreover, I consider that the communicative model of knowledge make interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary nature of knowledge inevitable and offer an intimate vantage point to locate the dynamics of higher/university education and the role of the teachers/educators in realizing it.

The Concept of Transdisciplinarity

As Pollock observes, the concept of going beyond the disciplinary bounds or crossing the borders of disciplinary determinism comes alive 'when academic scholarship extends beyond the parameters of a single discipline, it tends to follow one of four trajectories: (i) multidisciplinary- drawing upon a range of disciplines to apply them individually (ii) interdisciplinarity-engaging the disciplines in collaborative forms of inquiry (iii)

to the organization of knowledge in the universities under the rubric of departments. Narcissism is the morbid and irrational self love or self adoration. I use the term disciplinary narcissism to define and denote the non-communicative and self-indulged attitude of different disciplines to other branches of knowledge.

³ Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*, London, Paradigm Publishers, 2011, p. 4.

crossdisciplinarity-employing the disciplines to illuminate aspects of one another (iv) transdisciplinarity-transgressing and undermining disciplinary boundaries'.⁴

Nonetheless, I propose to use the term 'Transdisciplinarity' from the present discussion's point of view to denote all the above mentioned four 'beyond the disciplinary-dimensions' of knowledge together to represent dialogical/communicative, critical and contextual knowledge which transcends the disciplinary boundaries in designating and understanding knowledge.

Similarly, Foshay observes that 'this question (the question of interdisciplinarity) comes to us from (at least) two quite different directions, one internal to academic life and one external-although my point is that these locations and sets of priorities are not simply opposed. They are not even two. The point is that they are one and the same, or that until they come into active engagement with each other-an engagement fully social, political, and economic, as well as intellectual and even personal-the potential and the prerogatives of interdisciplinarity will not be fully or adequately plumbed'.⁵ Moreover, building up further on what Forshay points out, I think, a philosophical critique of knowledge shows the way more emphatically.

Consequently, as it is quite obvious, I think that the above delineations about the stirring environment of interdisciplinarity and the context of education/knowledge strongly suggest an indicative reading of the dominant concept of knowledge and the communicative ideals related with it which takes us to the critique of knowledge as 'positivism' and 'scientism'.

Philosophical Critique of Positivism and Scientism

The hurdle in initiating communication among different modules of knowledge has been well recognized in systematic thinking and philosophy, which produced a good number of theoretical frameworks to address the problem. In the context of our study, positivism can be seen as creating the false ideal of 'disciplinary singleness' and by way of such an ideal promoting a non-communicative mono-methodological hegemony. Contemporary Continental tradition in Western Philosophy has many a schools of thought critiquing Positivistic and Scientistic theories as delimiting knowledge and causing the death of inter-transdisciplinary approaches. Phenomenology, Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, The Method of Genealogy by Michel Foucault, Deconstructive method of Jacques Derrida are some of the major examples. I discuss Critical theory and specifically the second generation critical theorist Juergen

⁴ Griselda Pollock, 'Interdisciplinary/Crossdisciplinary/Transdisciplinary', Presentation to the Research Strategy Seminar, Arts and Humanities Research Board, London, 7 May, quoted in Derek Britan, (2012), 'From Integrated to Interstitial Studies', in Raphael Foshay (Ed.), *Valences of Interdisciplinarity: Theory, Practice, Pedagogy*, New York, DCM Publishers, 2004, p. 367.

⁵ Raphael Foshay, "Introduction: Interdisciplinarity, for What?" in Raphael Foshay (Ed.), *Valences of Interdisciplinarity: Theory, Practice, Pedagogy* by New York, DCM, Publishers, 2012.

Habermas's theory of de-centred knowledge and the concept of communicative necessity it promotes.

Critical Theory and Transdisciplinary Approach

Habermas holds the view that positivism is scientism. Scientism is science's belief in its infallibility. Positivism is the tendency to prefer one type of science over all the others. The Positivists' favourite science is usually physics or sometimes biology. But it is always one of the natural sciences, never one of the sciences about humans as cultural or social beings. Secondly, Positivism claims that there has to be one single true method - not several different ones - that the sciences have to find and use when producing knowledge. The idea tells that once the method is found and used right we will get good and true knowledge. It also believes that the same method is to be used in all kind of studies, no matter what kind of objects we want to study. This means that Positivist do not think of science as a group of different sciences, but the Science - one and the same all across the different fields of studies. Critical theory addressed and projected the need to have a meta-theory of human science, the historical science of the society, a theory of socio-cultural critique as a normative theory and to disclose the 'interdisciplinarity' necessitated in such an endeavour. As Douglas Kellner put it, 'This project requires a collective, supra-disciplinary synthesis of philosophy, the sciences and politics, in which critical social theory is produced by groups of theorists and scientists from various disciplines working together to produce a critical theory of the present age aimed at radical socio-political transformation'.⁶ The flip side of such a project is 'the triple loss of faith apparent in the west', which as pointed out, begins with 'a) politically, the breakdown of "great transformation", whereby free markets were to be succeeded by democratic planning, b) scientifically, a loss of faith in the reason (and science) that would rationally guide this process, and c) morally, pervasive challenges to the universalistic values embodied in the theories of natural rights associated with modernity'.⁷

The Ideal of Communication

Though there are many theories on communication,⁸ Juergen Habermas's concept of communicative necessity and rationality as his theoretical endeavour highlights in a major way how knowledge ultimately is a sharable, interactive and an intersubjective entity (process).⁹ Habermas conceives the concept of communication as the action

⁶ Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 7.

⁷ Raymond A. Morrow, *Critical Theory and Methodology*, London, Sage, 1994, p. 21.

⁸ The word 'Communication' is derived from the Latin word 'communis'. It means, to share. Therefore, communication can be defined as the primary function of human life that determines social life through sharing. Thus, it is to be understood that communication is not only mere sharing of information but also sharing of all that is possibly human and humanly named, including ideas, concepts, feelings and emotions. In other words, since, everything of an individual, his/her social behaviour involves a message, everything that emanates from human beings is communicative and pertaining to communication.

⁹ Juergen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press, 1971..

for reaching understanding, since language can function as a medium of unhindered understanding. It is so, since the telos of communication is there in the idea of language which is intersubjective in its deep, formative structures. For Habermas, the same linguistic intersubjectivity is the basis of knowledge. Therefore, knowledge without communicative willingness is socially strategic and non-socially instrumental. Strategic and instrumental frameworks of knowledge fail in understanding itself and fail the very purpose of knowledge since understanding is the utmost intent of knowledge. So, it is argued that communication makes knowledge to be consensually understood, socio-culturally delivered and politically appropriated with a necessity, which is none other than communicative reason/rationality. Reaching an understanding requires, says Habermas, 'a cooperative process of understanding, aimed at attaining intersubjectively recognized definitions of situations'.¹⁰

The Generative and Relational Mode of Knowledge and Interests

Habermas makes an inquiry into the foundations of knowledge, human interests and language to put forward a theory of tripartite mould of knowledge and corresponding human interests, supported by the theory of 'Universal Pragmatics' and the 'Theory of Communicative Action/Rationality', which, according to Habermas, proves the human interests in autonomy, rational consensus, responsibility etc, 'for they can be apprehended a priori. The positivistic / scientific misappropriation of knowledge was that despite of all the epistemic and theoretical difference within, it conceives and postulates knowledge as a definable single field. In his effort to go beyond this objectivistic illusion of single categorical reduction, Habermas recognizes how knowledge is constituted by human interests. He writes:

There are three categories of process of enquiry for which a specific connection between logical methodological rules and knowledge constitutive interests can be demonstrated. This demonstration is the task of a critical philosophy of science that escapes the snares of positivism. The approach of the empirical -analytical sciences incorporates a technical cognitive interest; that of the historical -hermeneutical sciences incorporates a practical one; and the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the emancipatory cognitive interest that, as we saw, was at the root of traditional theories.¹¹

The theoretical bedrock on which Habermas builds up the concept of knowledge constitutive interests is elaborated further by assuming the following theorems as they are complimentary and constitutive of the meta-logical and meta - critical hypotheses on the natural and the cultural and the cultural break, self interests, instinctual aims and social controls, human autonomy and values etc. The theorems Habermas discusses are as follows:

¹⁰ Juergen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol 1*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, London, Polity, 1984, pp. 69-70.

¹¹ Juergen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, 1971, p. 308.

1. The achievements of the transcendental subject have their basis in the natural history of the human species.
2. Knowledge equally serves as an instrument and transcends self- preservation.
3. Knowledge constitutive interests take form in the medium of work, language and power.
4. In the power of self - reflection knowledge and interest are one.
5. The unity of knowledge and interest proves itself in a dialectic that takes the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstructs what has been suppressed.¹²

The tripartite moulds/divisions of knowledge constitutive interests and their functional-cognitive fields can be expressed in tabular form as follows:

Aspects of Human Society	Knowledge-interests	Type of study
Labour	Prediction & control	Empirical-Analytical Sciences
Interaction	Understanding and meaning	Historical-Hermeneutic Disciplines
Domination/ (power)/ Systematically distorted Communication	Emancipation	Critical Theory

Whether we fully accept or not the significance of Habermas's concept of knowledge and knowledge constitutive interest is that with the idea of the emancipatory - critical interest, which is not as direct and coeval with the society as the technical interest in controlling nature or the practical interest in sustaining social harmony, Habermas proposes to invoke a permanent possibility of knowledge being de-centered.¹³ As Habermas says, the emancipatory interest is a survival interest in the modern capitalist world/society and it develops within the society, 'to the degree to which repressive force, in the form of the normative exercise of power, presents itself permanently in the structures of distorted communication'.¹⁴ Habermas sees psychoanalysis as the model of critical reflection, since its methodological paradigm can equate individual pathology with cultural and societal pathology and find similarities between them. In finding psychoanalysis as the model for ideology critique and the domain of emancipatory interest, it is reasonable to see that more than anything else the conception of depth hermeneutics operative in between the technical-instrumental and the practical -interpretive, shows the reflective necessity of inter-subjective communication.

¹² Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 312-315.

¹³ The notion of emancipation loses its strength in Habermas's later theorization. But, it does not vanish, instead, gets changed into the concept of a permanent democratic revolution.

¹⁴ J. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, p. 22.

The Consensus Theory of Truth

The Consensus Theory of Truth as part of the theory of communicative competence tries to answer the problem of the mutual understanding between speakers. Truth, for Habermas, is a quality of propositional assertions contained within language use. Truth as validity claim is generated and associated with the factual content of statements. Truth is not representational but an agreement reached through critical discussion/discourse. As Anthony Giddens says, 'This in turn means that the notion of truth is tied to presumptions about the circumstances in which it is possible for arguments to be assessed in such a way that (1) all pertinent evidence could be brought into play, and (2) nothing apart from logical, reasoned argument is involved in an ensuing consensus'.¹⁵ Without the consensus concept of truth a speaker cannot have a concept of communicative competence (which is the ability to make the justifiability of a statement of the theme of a discussion) and vice versa, according to Habermas, since mutual agreement is the need and nature of rational agreement. Habermas' inter-subjective critique of the correspondence, coherence, pragmatist, semantic and redundancy theories of truth, come to the conclusion that 'universal consensus under ideal conditions is the ground or criterion of correct truth claims and truth is constituted by this criterion'. So, truth for Habermas is that which is agreed on ideal conditions of communication or inter-subjective agreement.¹⁶ The concept of truth without the notion of rational agreement fails to understand the paradigmatic belongingness of truth claims to the assertive speech acts. '... the ability to raise a truth claim requires an awareness of and the ability to understand possible demands for its defense (as well as the point of making such demands), truth on this account to be understood as a kind of warranted assertibility'.¹⁷

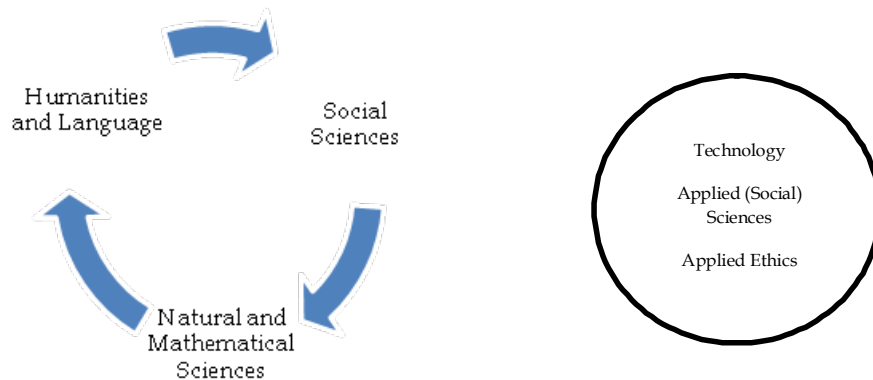
The Transdisciplinary Nature of Knowledge

As we have seen above, Habermas points out that communication is always already happening. Ideally, communication is in the telos of language as an inter-subjective institution. The critical engagement is to reflectively map it and to make it part of the communicative and dialogical willingness. Similarly, the history of knowledge shows us that knowledge as its different branches interacts and interpenetrates to move from paradigm to paradigm. Therefore, it goes without saying that the true nature of knowledge is interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary. As it is shown below it's a continuous process in the history of knowledge.

¹⁵ Anthony Giddens, "Juergen Habermas" in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, Quentin Skinner (Ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 131.

¹⁶ Following Strawson, Habermas argues that what is the truth predicate's function in the language communication is that of a special non predicative communicative function.

¹⁷ J. Habermas, *Verstuden Und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, p. 160. Quoted in Jane Braaten, 1994. See also Habermas's *Critical Theory of Society*, New York, State University New York Press, 1984, p. 22.



Knowledge as the product of disciplinary interaction keeps on generating new disciplinary modules. Contemporary examples are numerous and some of them are: Biochemistry, Biotechnology, Bioinformatics, Econometrics, Environmental Economics, Ecosophy, to name a popular few. As the above diagram shows the interdisciplinary response to disciplinary knowledge offers us innumerable research and learning modules which challenge disciplinary decadence and narcissism. However, as it has been highlighted, the current status of disciplinary knowledge does not easily allow them to be part of our higher education due to the built-in disciplinary narcissism. In other words and from the angle of the broad concept of knowledge, the point that I would like to raise here is that all these seemingly Interdisciplinary or Crossdisciplinary new disciplinary modules fall into the same delimiting disciplinary boundaries unless there is a corresponding Transdisciplinary dimension created in correspondence with every new disciplinary construction.

I would like, therefore, to approach such an inter-trans disciplinary nature of knowledge as interactively burgeoning of language as intersubjective engagement of making meaning and truth. The process can be understood as happening through the following stages, such as, *Natural-ordinary language* which is being abstracted to *subject-discipline specific symbolic languages* in order to be advanced to a *meta-language in the form of inter-trans disciplinary language* which will be forced to be amenable to a further translation to the *Natural-ordinary language* and to the *life-world*. This can be called the movement of knowledge from within.

Towards a Hermeneutic Understanding of Transdisciplinarity

The growth of knowledge, as we have seen, is in harmony with 'inter', 'cross' and 'multi', 'trans' disciplinary modes from within and without. The major question that we face now is how we can make use of it to challenge the disciplinary narcissism which is more of an academic, discipline-wise malady and what would be the reflective engagement to respond to it with a new competence of interpreting it. Let us try to take our discussion forward by initiating certain counterfactual definitions.

Transdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinary Competence

A normative and pragmatic communicative willingness which is constructed to border cross, both the structural and functional, self-imposed boundaries of the above discussed disciplines-related delimitation, I call 'Transdisciplinarity'. By doing so 'Transdisciplinarity' aims at critical contextualization of the mainstream knowledge, dialogical undoing of the distance between the educator and the educated and locating the power structure between the teacher and the taught and the learned.

Transdisciplinarity impregnates 'transdisciplinary competence' which can be understood after the concepts of 'linguistic competence' and 'communicative competence'. 'Linguistic competence' according to Noam Chomsky 'is the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language and the 'ideal' language system that makes it possible for speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language'.¹⁸ 'Communicative competence' is the competence of a speaker to possess pragmatic or dialogue constitutive universals to 'produce grammatically well formed' sentences which are intersubjective (that which acts as a *priori* elements which enable the speaker in producing speech act and to produce the general structures of the speech situation).¹⁹ Hence, I frame interdisciplinary competence as basically the competence to approach knowledge critically, dialogically and contextually.

Transdisciplinary competence recognizes and aims to attain self transcending, self critical, liberative dimension of knowledge. It intends to overcome and border crosses disciplinary delimitations by translating knowledge into contextual and intercultural moulds of the subjects and disciplines to situate it within the life-world. Transdisciplinary competence creates a space beyond the borders of disciplines on context to context basis through consensual and dissenting dialogue to nurture continuity to it by frequently searching for the moral-ethical implication.

I think it is in perfect congruence with what Gerald Graff, a contemporary critical pedagogue, observes in connection with the true nature of critical pedagogy. In his 'Teach the Conflict'²⁰, Graff argues that mainstream pedagogy is essentially immoral because it hides from the learner the conflicts that are involved in the actual constitution of knowledge. The best pedagogy, then, according to Graff, is ethical: it rends the veil of concealment and exposes the student to the presence of conflicts. Therefore, finally I would add that interdisciplinary competence functions as exposing the hidden conflictual nexus between disciplines and disciplinary delimitations. Therefore, I move on to the next definitional venture that is about the teacher who is having the Transdisciplinary competence.

¹⁸ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1965.

¹⁹ Juergen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of the Society*, Trans. Thomas McCarthy, Boston Beacon Press, 1979, p. 1.

²⁰ Quoted in Mas'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory as Resistance*, New York, The Guilford Press, p. 27.

Transdisciplinary Competence and the Academic Intelligentsia/Teachers

A teacher, as the educator and the educated at the same time, both in his/her capacity as leader and peer, who promotes knowledge, academic disciplines and curricular designs as ultimately and professionally Transdisciplinary in orientation and nature, can be called having Transdisciplinary competence *prima facie*.

Therefore, teachers as communicators with Transdisciplinary competence operate at three levels:

A teacher as a creative communicator undoes her/himself to translate knowledge as contextually meaningful wisdom - Teacher as translator of knowledge into the context

A real Teacher empties her/himself of her/his egotistic self to create the student or the other as dialogically and communicatively redeemed other - Teacher as creative artist/performer

A real Teacher is a thinker who keeps alive the paradox of knowledge to make it communicative and dialogical - Teacher as thinker.

Conclusion

Disciplinary narcissism as a systemic malfunction affects our academia and higher education very negatively. It is due to disciplinary decadence the knowledge context/situation and its meaningful engagement with life world is dehumanized. It also makes knowledge anti dialogical and anti democratic. If we ask why disciplinary narcissism occurs the answer could be that any knowledge without a root in the contextual wisdom has in its core deep contradictions. Such contradictions by virtue of their centric nature always allow reification resulting in disciplinary delimitation.

As we have seen in our study, only 'Transdisciplinarity' as communicative-dialogical willingness, designed and constructed to border cross, both the structural and functional, self-imposed boundaries of the above discussed disciplines-related delimitation, can make the natural movement of knowledge from within, reflectively encoded and decoded, and grounded contextually. By doing so, 'Transdisciplinarity' aims at critical contextualization of the mainstream knowledge, dialogical undoing of the distance between the educator and the educated and locating the power structure between the teacher and the taught and the learned.

Transdisciplinarity demands the Transdisciplinary competence. Transdisciplinary competence intends to overcome and to border-cross disciplinary delimitations by translating knowledge into contextual and inter-crosscultural moulds of the subjects and disciplines to situate it within the life-world. It does so through consensual and dissenting dialogue to nurture continuity to contextual knowledge by frequently searching for the ethical and creative implications of the human enterprise called knowledge.