

On Transdisciplinarity

by Karen-Claire Voss

What is Transdisciplinarity?

The best primer on transdisciplinarity is the *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* by Basarab Nicolescu (trans. by Karen-Claire Voss, State University of New York Press, 2003). Basarab Nicolescu is a quantum physicist working at CNRS in Paris and the founder of CIRET—*Centre Internationale pour Recherches et Études Transdisciplinaire*. It is my hope that the following remarks will serve as a *prolegomena* for an introduction.

Transdisciplinarity is not a method, but an approach—to everything. Moreover, unlike using a method, if one truly adopts transdisciplinarity, it entails ontological change; i.e., a change of being.

It is based on two ideas from quantum physics. First, it encompasses the logic of the included middle, a logic that is quite different than binary, Aristotelian logic—there is no A this is A and non-A at the same time. That logic excludes the middle. In fact, it is fundamental that there is no middle, no third possibility. Yet the middle is a part of Reality and must be accounted for. The logic of the included middle has been shown to be mathematically formalizable by the late mathematician Stéphane Lupasco. It is a logic that is ideally suited to accounting for complexities of various kinds. While binary logic is useful in its place—for example, it would be a serious mistake to use the logic of the included middle while crossing a street, lest one be run over by a large truck—it is decidedly not useful for dealing with other situations.

The second idea in transdisciplinarity is that Reality is comprised of more than one level. Each level of Reality has its own laws and logic. Phenomena on the quantum level, for example, behave differently than those on the level of the everyday.

All of our contemporary institutions—political, social, economic, and religious—are founded on binary logic and the idea that Reality is comprised of only one level. They are based on the Newtonian view of the world and a 19th century view of what constitutes the scientific. Such a view is hardly adequate to enabling us to deal with the unprecedented complexity that we must confront in the 21st century. This is why our institutions all fall short of being able to deal with the problems they are called upon to try and resolve. And this is precisely why the transdisciplinary approach is urgently called for. Our epistemology must begin to be informed by quantum physics. We have had a technological revolution and a computer revolution. Why have we not yet had a revolution based on quantum physics? Our daily life is dominated, in fact, by a technology that is entirely based on quantum physics, yet our thought process remains rooted in an outmoded world-view. It is transdisciplinarity that can move us beyond the dichotomised categories that function to limit us.

Transdisciplinary Ateliers

Nicolescu calls for the creation of *ateliers* or “work-groups” that “would be the locus for gathering together a group of teachers and students from a particular institution that would generate and oversee their own organization and would all be animated by the transdisciplinary attitude.”¹ “Universities,” he writes,

should create ateliers of transdisciplinary research (free from any ideological, political or religious control) comprised of researchers from all disciplines. It is a matter of gradually introducing researchers and creators exterior to the university including musicians, poets and artists of high caliber in specific university projects with a view towards establishing academic dialogue between different cultural approaches.

These *ateliers*, as Nicolescu points out, would be geared toward encouraging and developing the “application of the transcultural, transreligious and transnational.”² He adds that “Special effort must be made so that some of these ateliers take place in, or in close collaboration with, universities in developing countries.”

The choice of the word “*atelier*” is apt. In English and in French we normally use the word to refer to a place set apart for an artist. An *atelier* is a place in which works of art are created. Since the formation of a human being is certainly akin to the process of creating a work of art, what better term could there be for a gathering place for people, “all animated by the transdisciplinary attitude,” who are accompanying one another and guiding one another on a journey of exploration?

The transdisciplinary atelier is a place where enthusiasm would be the norm, not the exception, where people could read and think and contemplate where they could explore ideas and experiment together. I am convinced that, once created, these transdisciplinary ateliers could and indeed would lead us back to a rediscovery of the true meaning of the word ‘university’—a place dedicated to the study and contemplation of the universe. Moreover, we would discover that in studying the Object, the universe, the macrocosm, we would inevitably learn about the microcosm: i.e., the Subject, as well. And finally, that would lead us to the rediscovery of their essential unity.

While I fully agree with Nicolescu that such ateliers need to be created within every university, it is also my belief that they should also exist outside universities. I cannot stress this enough, it is time—high time—that we actively endeavored to bring these ideas to the People. We have made great inroads in making transdisciplinarity known

¹ IProjet CIRET-UNESCO, “Évolution transdisciplinaire de l’Université: document de synthèse,” p.2. Privately circulated, 1996.

² Basarab Nicolescu, “The Transdisciplinary Evolution of the University: Conditions for Sustainable Development.” Paper presented at the International Congress, *Universities’ Responsibility to Society*, organized by the International Association of Universities, Shulalongkorn University, Bangkok Thailand, November 12-14, 1997.

and legitimate within the academy. Certainly, we cannot abandon our efforts in this respect. But we do need to widen our scope and create events that will attract Everyman. What is needed now is for us to deliberately undertake to create occasions, _occasions at which all and more of what someone like a Marsilio Ficino created is present. That means cultivating the Joy, Poetry, Eros, and Love I have talked about. That means leaving the grand rooms in often stately buildings and fashionable eating rooms where we so often hold our meetings and going out into places like local community centers and primary and secondary schools, places of worship, and even private homes. Given the current state of things in the world, I think that we must move to do this immediately; we cannot wait until tomorrow, because, as Basarab Nicolescu wrote in his Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity, “tomorrow may be too late.”³ I would alter that to say “tomorrow will be too late.” We must act now.

To that end, we are endeavoring to create a space here in this spacious, light-filled apartment that will support a number of activities, planned as well as spontaneous, that can function to enable ourselves and the people with whom we are in contact to develop. What I have written here constitutes a veritable invitation, an invitation to rediscover and reanimate the original, life-affirming meaning of the world ‘university.’ In as much as most of the powers-that-be in today’s world are pushing all of us in the direction of death, rather than that of the affirmation of life, I suspect that this paper also constitutes a challenge. It is my belief that we are up to it.

Workshops

Andy Green and I both want to launch a series of workshops based on our respective areas of expertise. Andy Green, for example, is an expert on lute music and lute tablature, he is an accomplished photographer, with a keen eye for capturing the moment, as it were, and he is an historian. He is also something an expert on the topic of Pythagoras. He is presently planning several workshops with these things as their focii.

I myself am an historian of religions. I specialize in esotericism during the Renaissance period, but I am competent in a number of other areas as well: mysticism, feminism, transdisciplinarity, and issues in contemporary culture. During the twelve years I lived in Istanbul, I put on a number of workshops, including ones on spiritual alchemy and Virginia Woolf’s, *A Room of One’s Own*. Here, I would like to do that, and also offer a workshop on contemporary Turkey, accompanied by a showing of a DVD I produced in Istanbul with photographer James Snow, called *The Dream of Istanbul*.

³ Basarab Nicolescu, *Manifesto, op. cit.*, p. 8 and the title of Chapter 2.