

Bridging theory and practice in transdisciplinary research ? A case study of a multi-stakeholder-workshop with the CCES Winter School ?Science Meets Practice? 2017

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Transdisciplinarity is not only an emerging approach in today's research practice, but is also an integral part of teaching in higher education. Here, a challenge is to successfully transfer theoretical knowledge into practice. Because real-world knowledge exchange cannot be simulated, we propose a case study format that combines coaching in theoretical methods and practical experience in a real-world situation. In this presentation, we describe a case study experience of this knowledge exchange for a group of 20 PhD students who attended the CCES (Competence Center Environment and Sustainability) Winter School ?Science meets Practice?, held in January and February 2017 in Wislikofen, Switzerland. In the two weeks of coached training, the PhD students planned and conducted a multi-stakeholder workshop where representatives from civil society, private and public sector, and science were brought together to deliberate on ?Rheintal+?, a municipality amalgamation project in Switzerland. The aim of the workshop was to formulate potential transdisciplinary research questions, particularly regarding the potential impact of the amalgamation on land use and regional planning. The workshop combined multiple methods that varied in the degree of formal and informal interaction: (1) a walk, (2) a focus group, (3) a plenary discussion, and (4) a market place. The walk at the beginning of the workshop enabled the stakeholders to express their tacit knowledge. The subsequent focus group discussions provided more detailed insights on perceived risks and opportunities related to (a) a joint vision for the amalgamated municipalities, and (b) regional planning. Afterwards, a plenary discussion was used for collecting and integrating the thought collectives and insights from the focus groups and developing interdisciplinary research questions. After the workshop, the methods and the research questions as well as the discussions were reviewed and displayed in a market place format. The market place was open to the public and the stakeholders to facilitate an informal exchange on the outcome of the workshop.

The Winter School not only focused on the analysis of the workshop output, but also provided room for (i) guided reflections within the group of responsible PhD students, (ii) analyses of the process and the results, as well as (iii) lessons learnt through the monitoring of the planning and conduction of the workshop. In order to enhance the learning process for an effective workshop planning, students and teachers analyzed the particularities and the effectiveness of the methods used (e.g., reflections were made on group dynamics and the implications of bringing together stakeholders from different thought collectives). Furthermore, a follow-up survey invited the stakeholders to give additional feedback to the different phases of the workshop and the developed research questions. Through this survey, we received additional feedback on content- and process-related aspects, which are usually not captured in conventional research practices.

In our presentation we stress the process, the results and lessons learnt at the Winter School from diverse perspectives. Besides a deepened understanding and provision of new knowledge on the amalgamation process and the identification and validation of research questions for transdisciplinary research, we also evaluated the exchange of tacit knowledge and the bridging of thought-collectives. Simultaneous observations on group dynamics among the stakeholders (e.g., power relations) and within the group of PhD-students (e.g., explicit vs. implicit coordination) provide valuable insights for transdisciplinary research processes and allow for methodological reflection. To conclude, learning about transdisciplinary methods is enhanced and achieved when theoretical inputs go alongside with practical experience in planning, implementing, and reflecting in a real-world setting that enables experiential learning, such as a workshop.