

eSSHra call for papers at Conference on Dynamics of Knowledge Production and Distribution “Towards a Knowledge Society: Is Knowledge a Public Good?”

Abstract for submission to conference topic Area 1: What is Knowledge?

The World Knowledge Dialogue Symposia; Exercises in cooperative exploration of the knowledge acquisition process

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A broad domain of material phenomena is amenable to study by approaches from both the natural sciences and from the humanities and humanistic social sciences. However, the pressure on academics to specialise has resulted in a situation where most individuals with access to higher education today are channelled towards an irrevocable choice between study of either the natural sciences or the humanities. The result is a marked disequilibrium in the value that many of us accord to these two complementary areas of knowledge, yet to paraphrase E.O. Wilson, “There is no inherent epistemological fault-line between the different approaches. Cooperative exploration enriches humankind’s capacity to comprehend itself and its environment and increases the body of knowledge available for transmission between individuals of different cultural, geographical and generational backgrounds.” This rationale underpins the creation of The World Knowledge Dialogue Foundation, an initiative aimed at fostering cooperative exploration of the knowledge acquisition process by experts across the cultural and disciplinary spectrum.

The strategic approach of the foundation is based on the provision of a platform for structured dialogue between expert researchers in the traditionally defined, natural/technical sciences and the social sciences/ humanities disciplines. The debates which take place within the context of a biannual event are the culmination of a period of several months of exchange and interaction between a small number of individuals selected for their proven capacity to merge different disciplinary traditions. Each symposium, organised around a small number of pre-defined themes, is intended to afford a testing ground in which to observe, practice and systematically analyse the core mechanisms of interdisciplinary exchange. The chosen format of choreographed, interactive presentations, interspersed with a series of discussion workshops, permits analysis of both the exchange that occurs between the principal actors and across an expert audience intent on weaving its own interdisciplinary network. By examining the process of knowledge creation at the fertile intersection between the boundaries of multiple disciplines, we expect to reveal shared traits among the most productive cross-disciplinary dialogues as well as to identify common bottlenecks that may impede cooperative exploration of the complex issues that confront humankind. The shared perception of such traits and bottlenecks by an international audience of experts eager to propagate the practice of productive interdisciplinary dialogue should facilitate its spread throughout the corridors of academia and governance.

Any attempt to study the process of cross-disciplinary dialogue is faced with the lack of a truly objective means of defining what is commonly understood by the term interdisciplinary research. Therefore when setting in place our testing ground for analysis of interdisciplinary exchange mechanisms, we aimed to broadly represent a variety of approaches to interdisciplinary inquiry. The range of themes of debate chosen for the 2006 symposium were selected to invite cooperative inquiry at different levels; The debate which centred around the theme of a single specific issue of societal concern, namely human migration, highlighted how its understanding has benefited from a comprehensive approach mobilising forces from palaeontology and anthropology to linguistics and molecular genetics; In contrast, the debate which centred around the theme of complexity, itself a newly emerging field of study by the natural science disciplines, highlighted both the advantages and the limitations of adopting purely reductionist approaches to knowledge acquisition, aimed at the derivation of laws, principles, paradigms etc; Finally the debate which covered diverse aspects of the topic "Neurosciences" highlighted how this highly successful, rapidly progressing, transcultural approach has begun to raise new fundamental questions in domains as far flung as philosophy, ethics and theology.

While the small number of individual case studies currently limits the value of generalising correlations of the type of approaches with the particular fields of study, the use of very different approaches to integrating multiple disciplinary perspectives was highly evident. Speakers opting for a reductionist approach of deriving common laws or conceptual frameworks that describe or account for multiple phenomena studied in the context of hitherto unconnected disciplines invariably had strong groundings in more than one area of the natural sciences. A second broad category of interdisciplinarian seemed to be more commonly influenced by insights from a combination of disciplines rooted in both natural sciences and humanities disciplines. This second category are in general less concerned with extracting patterns from information or identifying analogous relationships, and strives to integrate complementary disciplinary perspectives to describe or account for interplay between interrelated components of a multidimensional problem in its full complexity. The extent to which pragmatic, solution-to-problem driven approaches to interdisciplinarity, called for by those chiefly concerned with its economic, social and political dimensions, share characteristics of the above categories or define a third broad category of approach differentiated from the others by its clear sense of target outcome, is a matter for future debate.

A first assessment of the aims and achievements of this initiative has been obtained by analysis of the feedback solicited from participants to the 2006 Symposium. 95 % of respondents indicated their willingness to participate in further events of a similar nature and expressed opinions to the effect that the experience had broadened their perception of how cross-disciplinary dialogue can contribute to the improvement of social cohesion, stimulate the process of innovation, and advance the cause of knowledge as a public good. Despite such positive feedback, many participants objectively classified the extent to which productive dialogue was achieved in this first attempt, as fragmentary and primitive. Representatives from both the natural/ technical sciences and the humanities/

social sciences, clearly perceive that there is a highly unsatisfactory divide between the two academic communities and seek means to redress the problem.

While proponents from either side of the natural sciences and humanities cultural divide still show a pronounced tendency to blame each other for their past misunderstandings, there is bi-partisan acknowledgement that a heavy intellectual investment is required to develop new and more effective modes of interdisciplinary communication and that traditional academic structures are ill placed to be the vectors of such change. Ultimately the creation of an environment propitious for cooperative exploration between the natural sciences and the humanities requires building a foundation of mutual understanding of the distinct intellectual mechanisms by which experts succeed in crossing disciplinary boundaries. Recognition of the patterned diversity of the aims and approaches that characterise interdisciplinary work constitutes an important step in building that foundation.