Transdisciplinary validation of knowledge

Sharing Knowledge?
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Transdisciplinary situations are everywhere. In informal settings people from a myriad of backgrounds co-create meanings in friendships, family affairs, business matters, and so on. In formal settings transdisciplinarity is more explicit. In doctor-patient, teacher-student, governor-governed relations, demarcation lines of diverse fields and levels of knowledge become clearer. Whereas in informal settings validation of knowledge is based on emotional grounds and a common interest, in formal settings this validation usually follows the aforementioned lines. With a specific expertise at the centre stage, more explicit power balances and appreciation of one knowledge system over another enter the setting as well. It is as if in these kinds of situations people define themselves solely in terms of demarcation lines; one can speak of co-creation, but it is a co-construction of roles rather than one of meaning. Different discourses meet at the table, so to speak, and the representatives of these discourses (professionals and laymen) identify each other precisely as such: a representative of the 'other party'. It seems as if the different roles a person plays in life become complementary: the doctor is always healthy, the teacher never enjoyed education, the policy-maker is no longer a citizen and the marketer is not a consumer any more. In these situations, transdisciplinary validation is difficult; the subject of validation is the expertise of one of the parties and the submission to it by the other. This one-sidedness inhibits integration of knowledge and results in persuasion that varies from mild to downright blunt. Discourse analysis is a helpful instrument in unravelling the layers in communication that reproduce barriers in transdisciplinary meetings.

In this paper I present two cases of inhibition due to complementary roles. One case describes how, at a business school, academic staff advice self-directed and team learning at a content level, but refuse to translate these concepts into education at a process level. The other case focuses on how politicians publicly lament the low level of civic activity, ignoring and undermining the efforts people take to improve society as they see fit. In contrast, I present two cases in which roles are integrated. One is about a care-centre for the elderly, of which the managing director is also an inhabitant. The other outlines a round table discussion in which all participants bring more than one role to the table.

Academic business school

In 1999, I researched an academic business school in preparation of my PhD (Basten 2000). I interviewed seventeen staff members on their ideas about and experiences with organising and learning in their own school. Additionally, I examined sixty publications of that same staff, in which they report about and advice on organising and learning. Using a combination of the learning history method (Kleiner & Roth 1997) and literary critique, I identified critical moments in the ten years history of this school. At the start, a small number of staff was responsible for the education of an unexpectedly high number of students. Given only little resources from the faculty and aiming for recognition from the field of business education, the school developed a strong sense of 'us' and 'them' and a sturdy ambition to prove itself. This found its form in the metaphor of the battlefield. In these early days, form and content of the message were close, reflecting a

no-nonsense practice and a survival strategy. In course of the history of the school, form and content, however, started to diverge. Staff grew and resources became less problematic. The battlefield metaphor of the early days, once valid for the school as a whole, now became true for the separate teams, as the outside world, once the faculty and the field of business education, was now formed by the education management team. A new enemy was found inside the school. Form and content grew further apart. At the time I researched the school, ten years after its foundation, the situation was even worse. The battlefield metaphor had moved from the team level and was incorporated at the individual level. The teams, once close unities, were no longer safe havens. Management strove for continuous innovation, but excluded staff in the decision to innovate in the first place and spoke of cosmetic changes that did not alter their original plans. Staff, tired of educational innovations and looking for possibilities to make a career in research, went as far as to sabotage management efforts to innovate education. Writing in journal articles and books about the need to learn, innovate and share knowledge on the one hand, staff spoke of their own organisation in terms of pigeon-holing and strategic games on the other hand. The aims of the innovation were to implement student centred education, based on educational and organisational theories of how people learn. These aims were lost in the battle for whether or not to innovate at all. The roles were completely complementary. Management, recruited from staff, forgot what it was to be a researcher or a student, and researchers forgot what it was to be a student. None of them brought prior experience nor their own educational and organisational theories to the negotiations and mixed messages and paradoxes were abundant. In the curriculum, for instance, the explicit message was that students were responsible for their own learning, but the silent message was that the school itself was not a learning community. Furthermore, students were confronted with organisational theories about knowledge management, team learning and implementation strategies, whereas, at the same time, the school showed no evidence of putting these theories into its own practice. Management communicated with staff in terms of team responsibilities and co-creation of the new curriculum, but handed out assignments and monitored staff with timetables. Staff taught their organisational theories to students, but were unable to live these theories in their own educational practice. In relation to management, staff played the role of educational innovators, but referred to their activities as horse trading and tactics. In the end, both staff and management were unable to do as they said. They were unable to validate each others' knowledge systems on their merits. In this case, this meant they were also unable to validate their own educational and organisational knowledge systems, since this would mean they had to be able to share knowledge and learn.

Politics and active citizenship

In 2002, I completed a research project named *Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe*[1]. In this project, funded by the European Union, a team of researchers from the United Kingdom, Belgium, Finland, Slovenia, Spain and the Netherlands, sought to define and identify the phenomenon of active citizenship. In the first phase of the project a literature review was conducted. In the second phase, the life histories of sixteen people active in a broad range of social were collected. In the final phase, the results so far were input for focus groups made up of experts and professionals in the fields of adult education and community work. For the final report, I conducted a discourse analysis (Basten, 2004), reconstructing the communication between politicians and policy-makers on the one hand (drawn from the literature review), and active citizens on the other (based on the life histories). I combined legitimising, project and resistance identities (Castells 1997) with power struggles in language (Lakoff 2001). Legitimising identities, i.e. identities that legitimise the power balances as they are, in general apply common-sense discourses. These discourses imply continuity and progress. In this case, legitimising identities define active citizenship as 'actively supporting and carrying out' their interpretation of the term and legitimise their conservatism with reference to common sense. In language, there is a difference between unmarked and marked ideas, concepts, and storylines (Lakoff 2001). The unmarked are natural, simple, and what we expect. They seem neutral and do not require defence or explanation. They are plausible. The marked, however, seem bizarre, complicated, and not what we expected at all. They are either subjected to severe tests or rejected all together. 'Unmarked' equals the common-sense definition of a situation as it is accepted by the majority of influential people (legitimising identities), whereas 'marked' equals the definition made up by people who disagree with or are (self-)excluded from that situation (respectively project and resistance identities). In my analysis, I identified several stories about active citizenship. In the political and policy-making stories, the element of 'active' was translated into 'good for

[1] http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Education/ETGACE/

the status quo'. Within this group, 'good' was defined in divergent ways, reflecting the definition of 'citizenship'. For neo-liberals, citizenship is membership of a self-governing community of free, equal, autonomous and judicious people. The 'good citizen' in this discourse is the financially independent citizen, which implies participation in the paid labour market. For neo-republicans, citizenship is membership of a self-governing community as well. However, this ideal is more substantiated than the neo-liberal ideal: in the neo-republican perspective, a nation of citizens derives its identity from democratic decision making. Therefore, political participation is crucial. Unlike the neo-liberal and neo-republican perspectives, both based on the principle of territorialism, the communitarian perspective is based on the principle of extraction: the nationality of the parents is the determining factor for membership of the community, which can be defined as an ethnic nation that precedes the nation state. Nationality is defined not in terms of citizenship (central to the two previous discourses), but along the lines of (assumed) descent, language, religion and shared history. The nation is therefore not a carrier of universal values (principle of territorialism), but a representative for and keeper of an ethnic-cultural nation. The active citizen actively conforms to these cultural values. However diverse the three discourses may be in their definition of citizenship, problems, solutions and strategies, they have one thing in common: they disregard the citizenship of politicians and policy-makers, who in fact appear to have a different status. Politicians and policy-makers are not citizens, they are *about* citizens. Common-sense discourses both conceal legitimising activities, using unmarked language, and they prescribe the activities of other identities. However diverse the solutions might be and however sympathetic one can be of them, the message is the same: people must be active citizens, but in defining 'active' or 'citizen', for legitimising identities they play no significant part. They are supposed to passively take over the goals, orientations, and values prescribed in discourses of those who feel responsible for and entitled to the make meaning for everybody. An influential majority has had the right to control language and to determine what language is suitable for public discourse for a long time. The dominant descriptions of these groups are now, however, challenged by non-dominant and marginalized groups, who have learned to defy description and either enter the public discourse using their own voices and vocabularies or withdraw from that discourse all together. Bottom line is, most active citizens do not define themselves as active citizens. They do not set out to be an active citizen in the market, in politics or in their communities, but they identify a problem or an injustice and are motivated to set matters straight. Ukases as 'thou shall participate' ignore and deny people who define themselves as participators, be it that they direct their actions against instead of within the domains desired and their underlying assumptions of equality and freedom.

Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation: care for the elderly

An example of marked discourse is the story of the position of elderly in our society. As soon as people leave the phase of being healthy consumers and enter the phase of needing help and care, the discourse changes from unmarked into marked, pointing at the elderly as abnormal. This has lead to ageism (discrimination based on age) in which elderly are marginalized. Care-centres have been in the news with managers lamenting the shortage of money and staff and employees explaining why they are forced to omit certain aspects of their jobs (for instance, 'pyjama-day' has been introduced to skip duties as washing and clothing clients). Television shows images of elderly withering away in their wheelchairs. All and all, the picture is one of pitiful people who need help, and of caretakers who cannot cope. In a society where autonomous individuals are the rule (unmarked), the needy form a special case (marked). The story about the elderly as 'a special case' has been reinforced up to the point where they have actually become a special case from a policy and managerial point of view: care-centres for the elderly have become special cases as well. But not in Rotterdam. Humanitas is a member based organisation for social services and community development. Dr. Hans Becker, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation, has transformed the misery islands he found when starting his job over ten years ago into a care-centre for the elderly where 'happiness' is the working principle. In 2003, a PhD thesis of his hand appeared, explaining how this principle works. The emphasis is on cultural steering, which "occurs within a symbiosis where terms such as 'yes-culture', 'use it or lose it', 'management by storying around', 'the art of living', 'the Humanitas Extended family' and 'age-proof' have an important place. It is a model in which human happiness is generated through a two sided approach: both individualistic and community based" (Becker 2003: 211). This approach is based on four core values: "(1) an emphasis for both the client and the employee on self-direction and on the things which are (still) possible; (2) an emphasis on the 'fun things' including maintaining a positive attitude to surroundings and a ludic atmosphere; (3) an emphasis on the self sufficiency and the full use of capacities; (4) an emphasis on the social interaction in the extended family via age-proof buildings" (Becker 2003: 211). The strategy is to use unmarked discourse to talk about an elsewhere marked construct; most managing directors of care-

centres use marked discourse. In this twist of discourse, the Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation presents its story as the normal one and, doing so, shows how its practice can be a norm for other care-centres. A visit to one of these buildings, Akropolis, is an eye-opener for how care can be organised while keeping the target group in focus. On the way in, one passes a garden and a petting zoo. Inside, a large atrium accentuates the village feeling. A good restaurant, a beauty salon, a small shop, it can all be found here. Inhabitants diverge in their need for help, and the mottoes ‘use it or lose it’ and ‘too much care is worse than too little care’ enable people to look after themselves for as long as they can. This is enforced by a motivating ‘yes-culture’. Staff is never a problem: clients do a lot themselves, they and their families do voluntary work, and the atmosphere is very inviting for professionals. The apartments are large, because they are for life and facilitate all health situations. Luxury is seen as an investment. The point of departure is not finance, but the happiness of the residents. By consistently starting from this point, finance is not a problem. Or, to paraphrase Becker: “Happy people cost less.” Becker is not a typical manager in the care sector. He has been discriminated upon himself, he is an entrepreneur and he is an inhabitant of Humanitas-Akropolis. Born in 1942, he is a living example of ‘use it or lose it’: his résumé shows an abundant variety in activities in a broad range of social matters. All these experiences he brings with him when he manages the Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation. Both within and outside the organisation he is the ambassador for the four core values, integrating his roles of both manager and client.

Round table ‘learning society’

Since the beginning of this year, I am a member of a round table. From our third meeting onwards, we call our table ‘learning society’, but in fact the name varies from meeting to meeting. At this round table, a diverse gathering of participants sits, and all participants take their various backgrounds and roles, both professional and social, with them. We try to make an agenda and we try to stick with it, but so far we never succeeded. The agenda arises as we start talking and the subjects we discuss vary along the progress of our meeting. In fact, we practice a kind of conversation that is defined, as Shaw puts it, by what we are not doing: “I began to ask myself what kind of work I was doing as an organizational consultant, when I found that from time to time I was being accused, albeit with curiosity, of not being a ‘proper’ consultant, or coach, or facilitator. [The] comments often seemed to be in response to what I was *not* doing. I did not write formal proposals for work. I did not prepare detailed designs for meetings, conferences, workshops. I did not develop detailed aims and objectives in advance. I did not clarify roles and expectations or agree ground rules at the start of working. I did not hold back my view or opinions. I did not develop clear action plans at the end of meetings. I did not capture outcomes. I failed to encourage ‘feedback’ or behavioural contracting between people. I did not ‘manage’ process. There seemed to be a lot of things I did not do that most people had come to expect. At the same time, many managers seemed frustrated with the other forms of consulting or with the facilitation of some other meetings they had taken part in. They said *approvingly* that I was unlike most consultants they had worked with, although they were hard to put to express more precisely what they valued about my contribution” (Shaw 2003:1). Indeed, for us as participants, it is hard to find words to explain why we continue to meet. Professionally, as artists, consultants and researchers, we share an intrinsic curiosity, but our fields of expertise vary (education, politics, area planning, healthcare, youth welfare, poverty, government, and so on), as do our target groups (a diverse set of practices of work floor, middle management, national politics and international activism). Some of us work for wages, others are entrepreneurs. Privately, as parents, husbands and wives, childless singles, grandmothers, lovers and divorcees, our experiences vary but are valued as practical knowledge. However, we do have one thing in common: we are amazed at what happens in society today and are interested in, as one of us puts it, ‘rewiring society’. Our orientation is external, but the moment we sit at the table, our internal cohesion is stronger then the external pressures of unmarked discourse to solve problems, evaluate situations, take actions, in sum: to know what you are doing. The round table functions as an asylum for professionalism as it is a rule in society today, with its proclaimed certainty and self-evident expertise. In fact, to outsiders it might seem as if we are just chatting. Yet to us insiders, it is the constant and spontaneous weaving of conversation threads into a tapestry no one designed at forehand and which none of us could weave on our own. We use our theories and practices as material, while testing their validity. Abandoning regular rules for professional meetings, we create a discourse elsewhere labelled marked, but one that to us is unmarked, normal. After our conversations, we leave the table and sit at other tables, where we share the experiences we had at the round table ‘learning society’.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I presented four cases. Two of them reflect situations in which complementary roles inhibit transdisciplinary validation of knowledge. In the case of the academic business school, management was

unable to integrate their research and student background into the implementation processes of educational innovation. The research staff, in turn, could not integrate their scientific theories not their student experiences into their practices. In the case of political rhetoric about active citizenship, politicians and policymakers neglected their own citizenship and civic issues, at the same time prescribing behaviour and defining actions for others. Both cases show that communication between the different parties was distorted; non of the parties could or wanted to identify with the others, although they all shared a common background. Suppressing that shared dimension only made them less trustworthy for each other. The focus was on the construction and consolidation of roles rather than of meanings. In contrast, I presented two cases in which the integration of roles facilitates transdisciplinary validation of knowledge. In the case of the Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation, the guiding and working principle was happiness. This principle was translated into and supported by core values and cultural steering. Integrating several roles at once, management was able to serve a broad variety of needs, both from clients and from employees. Communication was flexible, but the story remained unchanged. What changed, was that the story of the Humanitas Rotterdam Foundation was treated as the unmarked discourse, countering prejudice based on ageism and using a waterproof logic (who could oppose to happiness?) and self-evident consequences that reinforced this logic in practice. This has made the story appealing to a broad public. The case of the round table 'learning society' shows how integrating different dimensions of the participants results in conversations that create meaning. The research arises in the conversations, inviting hypotheses and the testing of hypotheses from various angles.

In terms of marked and unmarked discourse, one could say that the unmarked communication rules (convincing, agenda setting, looking for compromises et cetera) inhibit integration of roles (focus on professionalism, on the task at hand, et cetera). In contrast, marked communication roles (chatting, no agenda, no preparation, free floating conversation) facilitates that integration (professional and personal voice, theory and opinion). It is my experience that transdisciplinary validation of knowledge flourishes in the latter case.

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