



Transdisciplinary employability practitioners: Engaging with skills for the future and redefining professional identity

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Abstract

In response to the need for graduates to tackle global, complex problems, higher education is increasing attention towards approaches that cross the boundaries of disciplinary thinking. However, while students can benefit from learning across disciplines, employability practitioners can also benefit. Transdisciplinary approaches can prompt practitioners to rethink career education, take charge of their professional development, and redefine their identity as borderless, ever-evolving transdisciplinary employability practitioners. Within this provocation, a transdisciplinary approach to learning is introduced and questions pertinent to the seven habits of a transdisciplinary mind are posed, intended to provoke converging perspectives on employability. By refocusing practitioners' employability perspectives, higher education can enhance its capacity for career-led learning and transform the identities of those working within it.

Keywords

Transdisciplinary, work-integrated learning, lifelong learning, boundary-crossing, employability, professional development, career learning, higher education

Provocation

Ways of working and teaching in higher education (HE) have come into question as industry grapple with tackling complex, dynamic, and profound change (Cawood et al., 2018). To prepare graduates for these workplace dynamics, where problems often traverse disciplinary fields, HE practitioners will need to move towards enacting and teaching across disciplinary boundaries. Boundary-crossing is conceptualised by Engeström et al. (1995) as 'stepping into unfamiliar domains' (p. 333) and can potentially be the solution to society's need for students to develop interdisciplinary real-world problem-solving skills (e.g. Brewer et al., 2020). However, this may require employability practitioners to rethink their approaches in ways that span different disciplinary needs, putting them at risk of feeling 'unqualified.'

The need for new, collaborative environments has led to the emergence of transdisciplinary approaches to learning and teaching. McGregor (2004) describes transdisciplinary methods as a way 'to push the boundaries of our thinking' (p. 2) and tackle the complex challenges of society with all members of society. Consequently, transdisciplinary learning presents a forward-thinking and equitable approach to tackling the profound change society is facing within the context of HE. As a result, Australia's top 10 global universities as per the QS World University Rankings 2025 (Top Universities, 2024) currently promote some form of transdisciplinary learning, teaching, or research

to prospective students, encouraging in-depth contextual understandings, collaboration, integration, innovation, and impact (e.g. Australian National University, 2024; Monash University, 2024; RMIT University, 2024; The University of Adelaide, 2024; The University of Melbourne, 2024; The University of Queensland, 2019; The University of Sydney, 2024; The University of Western Australia, 2024; University of Technology Sydney, 2023; UNSW Sydney, n.d.). Internationally, universities understand the importance of t-shaped and key-shaped graduates who can cross disciplinary boundaries to tackle societal challenges and adapt to the future of work. For these reasons, employability practitioners supporting students within these complex and dynamic spaces must also embrace new mindsets and engage with the skills they need for the future of their work.

Within this provocation, employability practitioners are encouraged to embrace transdisciplinary methods for themselves. Those who support student employability work within a complex and dynamic space comprising competing perspectives, personal behaviours, industry needs, and government policies (Nghia et al., 2022; Small et al., 2018). Employability practitioners often span the historically clear-cut boundaries between academic and professional awards and agreements; however, university employment structures have been slow to respond to this change. Scholars argue for redefining professionalism, recognising the need for borderless professionals (Middlehurst, 2009; Veles & Carter, 2016) and emphasising the need for individuals to initiate and pursue professional development for themselves (Veles & Carter, 2016). Because of this, employability practitioners who find themselves spanning academic and professional boundaries must take necessary steps to redefine their professional identity, take charge of their learning and development, and evolve quicker than the structures surrounding them.

Transdisciplinary learning presents opportunities for employability practitioners to acquire the knowledge needed to work creatively across a range of complex employability-related contexts. McGregor (2015, p. 9) frames 'transdisciplinary enterprise as an educative process by which people become a more complex self', who in turn 'can better contribute to solving problems of the world'. If we consider employability to be a problem of the world, practitioners who embrace transdisciplinary learning will be well-placed to support its complexities. It is with a transdisciplinary mindset that employability practitioners might seek to converge academic, industry, government, and graduate perspectives and transcend the artificial boundaries and silos that HE created, out of which, new purpose, concepts, knowledge, interests, and interpretations of graduate employability might emerge, shifting HE's capability and capacity for career-led learning, teaching, research, and practice.

To provoke engagement with transdisciplinary learning, employability practitioners are encouraged to explore the following questions, written to align with the seven habits of a transdisciplinary mind (McGregor, 2017; Mishra et al., 2011):

Perceiving: What have you observed in your life and practice? What employability stakeholder perspectives do you truly understand? What perspectives are unfamiliar?

Patterning: What do you see happening in the world of work? What questions might you want to explore and understand?

Abstraction: How might you explain what you are seeing in your practice? What exists in other disciplines, ways of thinking, or aspects of life through which you might draw comparisons?

Embodied thinking: How might you put yourself in the position of other employability stakeholders? How might you understand different needs and perspectives?

Modelling: What might you build or prototype to study, explore, and understand your teaching, practice, or research?

Deep play: How might you play with ideas to transform employability practice and understanding?

Synthesizing: How might you develop 'deep, empathetic, complex connections' (McGregor, 2017, p. 12) with the people you work with or support within the context of employability?

In a dynamic world of increasingly complex collaborations, employability practitioners must embrace the skills of the future for themselves and redefine their professional identity. Transdisciplinary learning offers one such approach towards an ‘integrated, boundary-less, ever-evolving’ (McGregor, 2017, p. 5) identity, ready to transform the future of career-led learning.

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