

# Chapter 3

## Transdisciplinary Work: The Mixing of Methodologies and Conversations to Tackle Human Problems

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter describes how two disciplines engaged in a research project and moved from an interdisciplinary approach to a transdisciplinary understanding to solve a human problem. The authors share highlights of two theoretical models (one on conversations and one on methodology) that supported common understandings. Conclusions are shared from this experience. Finally, interest generated in both fields reiterates the need for this work to further content expertise and practitioner implementation.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Given the growing nature of universities pushing more collaboration across their institutions and beyond, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work is gaining traction in higher education to solve real-world problems. More interdisciplinary opportunities are being offered to encourage faculty to reach across boundaries collaborate with peers across the institutional landscape and solve *wicked problems*. The idea of *wicked problems* was first used by Rittel and Webber (1973) to describe

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## ***Transdisciplinary Work***

an issue that crossed boundaries, was complex, and involved multiple stakeholders. These interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary efforts are the result of a variety of approaches to research and unpack the learning needed to solve the wicked problems that impact folks both within and outside of academia.

Transdisciplinary work happens when scholars and practitioners come together and use conceptual frameworks to solve a human problem (Stember, 1991). They must communicate their professional expertise and experiences so that each discipline and role (i.e., academic, practitioner, etc.) can gain information through these collaborative efforts. The collaborative interdisciplinary team is then positioned to develop accurate information that will be used and interpreted by various disciplines around the issue. Using conceptual models and frameworks elevates the work so that it becomes meaningful and impactful through a transdisciplinary lens (Stember).

This chapter describes how a research team investigated an issue that impacted people's ability to have positive healthcare experiences. An explanation of how the initial research question conversations were organized is explained. Then, the trajectory of disciplinary work is defined and specific examples from this research chapter are presented. During the research process, different types of disciplinary work took place and many conversations occurred. Descriptions and examples of the communication and types of these conversations are provided. Next, the collaborators aligned two theoretical models to further explore their experiences through different perspectives. The first theoretical model focused on problem-solving structures in conversations (Franco, 2006) and the second was the Methodology for Interdisciplinary Research (MIR) framework (Tobi & Kampen, 2016). Finally, three conclusions are drawn and provided from this experience to support others who are working to move their interdisciplinary work to a transdisciplinary perspective.

## **The Identified Problem**

In 2021, palliative care physicians from a mid-Appalachian state university noticed that some of their patients appeared to have difficulty reading the documentation required for opioid prescriptions. Given the associated risks of opioid medication, this issue posed a significant threat to patient-centered care. In response, they reached out to the Humanities Center at the institution in search of literacy scholars to help them investigate and advocate for the solution to this problem. The Center connected them with scholars in the School of Education who specialize in literacy education and policy. This connection resulted in the formation of a multi-field, collaborative

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