



## Learning from transdisciplinary research

*Workshop reflections by Dr Gemma Moore, Institute for Environmental Design and Engineering*

On 18<sup>th</sup> October 2023 a group of 11 researchers and practitioners met online to share their experiences and learnings from working on different transdisciplinary research (TDR) projects. The hope was that together we could draw from our own experiences to explore the challenges and opportunities on working on projects that involve range of disciplines, knowledges and expertise outside the academia, which interact and influence each other in non-linear ways, to address a research problem or agenda.

When, listening to the recording of our discussion and reviewing the numerous post it notes on the miro board, I kept thinking of a quote by the artist and poet Patti Smith:

*"Make your interactions with people transformational, not just transactional".*

The quote kept coming back to me as it resonated with a theme that underpinned a lot of our discussion: the *types* of relationships and connections that we broker, nurture and support within our research projects. The quote from Patti Smith also brings to the fore the actions that can result from the types of relational capacity we have built.

Within our workshop we heard from different 'attempts' of transdisciplinary projects, from a range of perspectives:

- Dr Helen Pineo, University of Washington shared her experience of developing the ['Change Stories'](#): Learning from narratives of equitable and sustainable

urban transformation' project. She spoke of her conceptual approach and how this is informing the design of a multi-country transdisciplinary project. Although the development phase of TDR is often not resourced, Helen has received funding to develop the Change Stories project and spoke of the value of providing researchers with the necessary time and resource to scope methodologies and build partnerships.

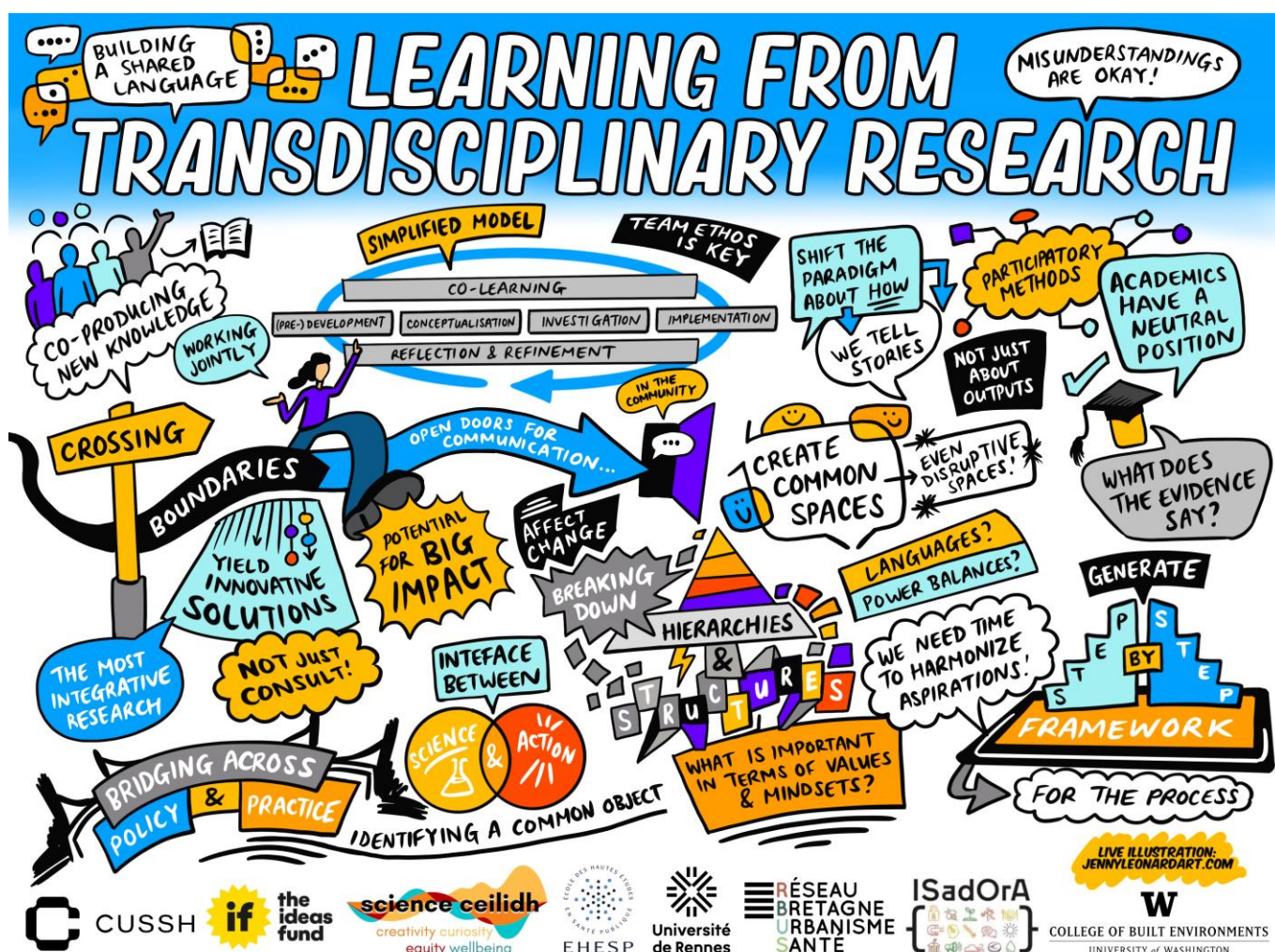
- Lewis Hou, from [Science Ceilidh](#), spoke about The Ideas Fund, which funds communities directly to lead projects and partnerships with researchers around mental wellbeing in the Highlands and Islands. Because it was led by communities they weren't coming from a "disciplinary" lens, and because the approach was more community-based research, it tended to use a mix of creative/qualitative approaches, rather than applying quantitative research.
- Professor David Osrin and Ruth Unstead-Joss, from UCL, shared some work from the [CUSSH project](#), where the main intention was to enable the voices of people in informal settlements to be heard in local government policy on waste management. This involved different ways of working e.g. lobbying for change through media activities, having a local learning partner (Maseno University) advising on suitable community engagement approaches and the local government in Kisumu as a key decision maker responding to the community's identified needs. They spoke of the challenges from moving from partnership building to implementation of ideas.
- Dr Camilla Audia, University of Warwick, reflected upon her involvement in [Pathways to Equitable Healthy Cities](#), specifically in Accra. The project was aiming to inform longer term policies around health and urban planning synergies. While some of the research agenda had already been set, researchers decided to base the core phase of the project on outputs (including links and new/maintained relationships between actors) of a

workshop where policy makers, representatives of different government bodies, research institutes and civil society led the discussion around their priorities and agendas.

- Professor Anne Roue Le-Gall and Martina Serra, from [EHESP](#), presented their work developing a Health Governance Body, as a mechanism to facilitate the exchange between scientists, decision makers and practitioners. They have worked with local stakeholders through the internal collaborative network to: build trust relationships at the science-policy interface to facilitate exchanges and learning between the stakeholders; and, create an organisation that bring together EHESP, City of Rennes and Rennes Métropole to encourage the integration of health in urban policies. This brought the policy sector and research sector closer, leading to an understanding of how research and policy sector can collaborate to the implementation of evidence-based policies to better integrate health in urban policies.
- Dr Ranjita Dhital, from UCL, shared their work on understanding how pharmacy patients and staff experience [community pharmacy spaces](#). Ranjita work stems from when she observed the lack of attention paid to the design and sensory experience of community pharmacy spaces. She was keen to look at other disciplines within the social sciences and the arts to coproduce knowledge. She has gathered a diverse team of architects, pharmacists, experts by experience participants, historian, anthropologist, mental health clinicians, researchers with arts and health backgrounds. Together they will co-produce an interdisciplinary evidence report to inform pharmacy practice and policy –whilst also planning a range of ‘disruptive art installations’ and exhibitions inside pharmacy spaces.

The workshop encouraged everyone sharing their experiences, whilst also listening to and quizzing others. Despite the varied geographical scales, differing research topics and multitude to approaches adopted – there were some common principles behind our work, and nods of recognition on challenges.

Our conversation was captured by a visual illustrator – Jenny Leonard:



Even though we spoke about large, multifaceted concepts (e.g. transdisciplinary, knowledge democracy, research cultures) the conversation kept coming back to small actions. Everyone shared small actions, or specific steps, that they had

adopted to build trust, understand mindsets and find common shared objectives within their work. Whilst some noted that you need to be open in engaging with another organisation or individual without knowing where the conversation, or partnership, will go. Whether conscious, or not, participants shared a number of relational skills, used within their work, including active listening, questioning, reflectivity and sense of mutuality– all key to make sure that, as Patti would say, ensure our interactions are not just transaction, but lead to action and transformation.