

**Symmetrical interactions, shared experiences and
dialogical communication:**

Keys for collective sensemaking towards
transdisciplinarity in inter-university cooperation for
development.

Guadalupe Peres-Cajías

Promoter: Prof. dr. Joke Bauwens

Co-promoters: Prof. dr. Marc Craps and Prof. dr. Gerrit Loots

A Dissertation submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Media and Communication Studies, 2023

Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences & Solvay Business School

Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Abstract

This Dissertation set out to understand the role of interpersonal organisational communication processes in making sense of transdisciplinarity in inter-university cooperation programs for development. The study focused on a Bolivian university - Universidad Católica Boliviana- implementing an academic cooperation program (IUC for short) with the Flemish University Cooperation for development (VLIR-UOS) from Belgium. This program encouraged the co-creation of "Transdisciplinary Learning Communities" (TLC for short) to produce knowledge and practices among academic and non-academic stakeholders to answer to local development complex issues. However, the novelty and the challenging nature of this approach to existing structures and ways of functioning within a university context triggered considerable ambiguity that prompted endless discussions about the definition and roll-out of the TLC. Therefore, a sensemaking analysis was conducted to reveal (1) the role of interpersonal organisational communication in co-creating Transdisciplinary Learning Communities that challenge existing structures and ways of functioning within a university context; (2) the role of interpersonal organisational communication in connecting frames of academic and non-academic stakeholders in order to co-create transdisciplinary answers to complex issues of local development. The research was conducted between 2017 and 2022 through the case study of the Bolivian IUC. It combined first-person action research with an ethnographic approach and applied an abductive strategy of data collection and analysis. Different methods (group discussions, individual semi-structured interviews, participative observation and document analysis) contributed to triangulating the data analysed through the coding and categorizing process. The study was developed in three main stages in different locations in Bolivia followed by a self-reflective analysis.

Grounded in this research, interpersonal organisational communication was revealed to be a cornerstone in making sense of transdisciplinarity in inter-university cooperation for development, because of the continuity and the quality of interactions (symmetrical/asymmetrical); the shared experiences conducted by the actors, which not only enhanced the symmetrical interactions but also the sense of becoming more collaborative and trans-passing boundaries; and the dialogical communication, where the diversity of actors and perspectives could be respected and encouraged in order to build shared understandings and collaborative initiatives.

Against this backdrop, this work expects to contribute to the reflection and practice of communication to successfully appropriate and co-create a transdisciplinary initiative in future university cooperation programs for development.