

Transdisciplinarity Revealed: What Librarians Need to Know [book review]

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Abstract:

As modes of research in the academic world evolve, and new transdisciplinary approaches to more questions grow in importance, librarians will need to understand the basic tenets of the transdisciplinary approach to exploring diverse topics. It should be said that this is a challenging volume in terms of understanding the development of the concept of transdisciplinary, the various implementations of the approach, and the role of librarians in a changing academic world that increasingly uses transdisciplinarity as an approach to solving the world's problems.

Keywords: transdisciplinarity | librarianship | book review | interdisciplinary

Article:

Transdisciplinarity Revealed: What Librarians Need to Know, Victoria Martin, Santa Barbara, CA, Libraries Unlimited, 2017, 236 pp., \$85.00, ISBN: 978-1-4408-4347-1, e-book ISBN: 978-1-4408-4348-8

As modes of research in the academic world evolve, and new transdisciplinary approaches to more questions grow in importance, librarians will need to understand the basic tenets of the transdisciplinary approach to exploring diverse topics. It should be said that this is a challenging volume in terms of understanding the development of the concept of transdisciplinary, the various implementations of the approach, and the role of librarians in a changing academic world that increasingly uses transdisciplinarity as an approach to solving the world's problems.

This volume is divided into two sections: "In Search of Unity: An Introduction to Transdisciplinarity" consists of nine chapters and "A Natural Fit: Transdisciplinarity and Librarianship" consists of six chapters. The first section is historical and explanatory, tracing the evolution/development of the concept. Transdisciplinarity, which was first discussed following

an international seminar in Nice, France in 1970, is defined as: “a new mode of knowledge production that strives to make academic research more pertinent to the complex problems of the real world” (pp. xvii–xviii). In the first chapter, the author indicates that it is an approach used by those focused on identifying and resolving “specific societal problems” (p. 7). (Some readers may feel that multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary research is already doing that. In fact, a recent (2012) volume dealing with this broad topic, as related to academic libraries, describes transdisciplinarity as a “subset of interdisciplinarity.”) This volume explains how transdisciplinary research can bring “academic, industrial, nonprofit, and governmental sectors” (p. 93) together, and can increase the social involvement of professors, researchers and students. Another important point Martin makes is that such research not only crosses disciplinary lines, but also crosses “cultural and organizational boundaries” and those between “practice and research” and “research and society” (p. 47).

The second section of the book turns to the roles librarians can play as this evolution continues. Martin is hopeful when she states that the “traditional strengths of librarians should enable them to successfully respond to the research needs of transdisciplinary scholars” (p. 95), despite having stated in the paragraph before that “some retooling and reskilling will be necessary for librarians.” There are other aspects of the library world that tend to hinder librarians from adapting to this changing world of scholarship. The current classification and subject heading systems (from the Library of Congress and elsewhere) are not designed or equipped to provide useful access to the materials needed by transdisciplinary researchers. Suggestions are made throughout the book, as to how to improve these and other matters. Strangely, outdated quotations, some over 20 years old, are used to describe library activities (such as journal acquisition) that hinder the support of transdisciplinary research, even though these processes are now quite different from what they were in 1990s.

Unfortunately, attention to copyediting could have been better in this book: two minor mistakes on page 4 are the first of quite a number of minor issues. Curiously some direct quotes are rewritten or mis-cited. Martin quotes Daryl Chubin as writing that research problems “fall between the cracks of [established] disciplines” (Chubin, 1976, 466). His original quotation in fact reads “research problems tend to fall in the cracks between disciplines.” And on several occasions, the author replaces a word in a quotation with “transdisciplinary” when it was in fact originally something else.

That being said, the book will provide much useful information to academic librarians as transdisciplinarity becomes a more important element in the academic research world. All academic libraries should consider adding this volume, in print or as an e-book, to their collections.