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Living Trans*disciplinarity in academic teaching and learning – a conversation



Boka En has dabbled in, among other things, Gender & Sexuality Studies, Science & Technology Studies and applied existence. Hoping to do some good for the world, they occupy themselves with all kinds of relationships, including relationships between art, academia and activism; interpersonal and nonhuman relationships; and their own personal relationships to the world and the people in it.

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This essay is dedicated to all the publications, people and projects that never saw the light of day or had to spend their listless lives in loneliness because they weren't written or spoken in English. May you rest peacefully, and may you cause unrest when one day you will emerge from your unmarked and forgotten graves.

The conversation below is based on in-/authentic transcripts of a short range of inter- and transviews involving a variety of humans and non-humans. None of the opinions expressed are the authors' alone. Feel free to join this conversation at <https://livingtransdisciplinarity.noblogs.org/>.

An interviewer: No, seriously, what happened? Tell me.

Another interviewer: Well, it all started in March 2015. We were asked to do a session as part of this course on 'Queer STS' at the University of Graz (Austria, Fortress Europe). We jumped at the opportunity, of course. And then we realised that we needed a topic. So we thought, why not do something on 'Feminist Technoscience and Trans*ing Science & Technology Studies'? Having sent off our little abstract, we started asking ourselves what we had actually meant by it. The bit about 'Feminist Technoscience'

seemed rather straightforward, but what would ‘Trans*ing Science & Technology Studies’ entail? We decided to share our uncertainty¹ with the other participants in the course (aka ‘students’), to try to find out what this strange phrase might mean.

Another interviewer: And, what happened?

Another interviewer: Well, we joined in the communion of several sessions for preparing the course and kept oscillating between the things that we thought we were supposed to do and the things that we felt we wanted to do. In the (not quite) end, a hybrid was born.

Another interviewer: What do you mean, you ‘oscillated’ between these positions?

Another interviewer: Well, there was this tension between ‘What do we want to do?’ and ‘What are we supposed to do?’ On the one hand, we asked ourselves this question: ‘If there is one thing that we want our (‘our’) students to take home with them, what would it be?’, and we answered it with ‘a more critical approach to authorities’. We wanted them to question authority.

Another interviewer: And on the other hand, we grappled with (or submitted to) the authorities that told us what we were supposed to do.

Another interviewer: Actually, it wasn’t just about authorities, but also larger frameworks. We wanted students to be critical of these frameworks that we are presented with and embedded in. Which is something that, for me, very much comes from Feminist Technoscience. Questioning science. Or capital S Science. Or capital with/through science. Asking what is possible, what is being done, what the reasons for that are. Questioning the whole framework. And we ourselves had to question this framework as well, while at the same time orienting ourselves towards it, because we thought that we were expected to do so.

Another interviewer: Yes, and I guess this framework, these authorities, they were, at least to an extent, imagined authorities, or internalised authorities. Because it’s not like Birgit or Anita would have come up and rapped us over the knuckles. So we had this strong internalised feeling, ‘What do they expect of us?’ And so it happened that we had these 6 or 7 hours, and we cut more and more ‘normal’ bits away from these 6 or 7 hours, but then we came to a point at which we said, well, but they probably expect some form of input from us. They expect us to do a lecture thing. We’re supposed to do a lecture thing. And then it turned out that the lecture thing didn’t work all that well.

Another interviewer: Yes, that’s also what they [the students]² told us wasn’t too necessary. Although they also said that it wasn’t so much the content that was unnecessary,

¹which is one of principle, of course!

²Ah, yes, of course, the students are just ‘they’. The two of us, we have personalities, we are individuals, but they’re a homogeneous mass. Notes on ‘the mainstream’ in CrimethInc.’s (2001) *Days of War, Nights of Love* made us more aware of certain presuppositions and presumptions that we held/hold.

but rather the way we incorporated it into the session. Because we started with this very interactive approach and then suddenly switched over to a lecture-style lecture.

Another interviewer: Yes, that was probably symptomatic of our own conflictedness. Because we had wanted to involve the students in the whole course. So we started out in a rather interactive way. We proudly proclaimed that we didn't really know what 'Trans*ing STS' might be and that we wanted to find out together. We did a few rounds of academic 'speed dating' to think about the relationships that we form in academic contexts and elsewhere and the things that we consider important in them. And we asked students to define – find possible meanings for – a range of terms that we considered relevant for the session, including 'transdisciplinarity', 'Science & Technology Studies', 'Feminist Technoscience', 'Trans*ing', etc.

Another interviewer: But then, after so much student input, we felt that we should really do some proper lecturing. So we lectured them. For an hour. On Feminist Technoscience, Participatory Design, Public Engagement ... I think everyone was relieved when we finally stopped and went into the lunch break.

Another interviewer: Yes, maybe we should have put the input at the beginning where people expect that kind of thing, and then get more interactive afterwards. That's also closer to where we wanted to get, as a process. You start from this authoritarian framework, and then you slowly leave it and enter a more participatory, more interactive one. Because participation was definitely a keyword for us, also as a key feature of trans*disciplinarity. Enabling – and soliciting – participation for and by groups and people and whatever who can't usually participate that easily. In the context of the course, this meant participation by students who may otherwise be seen more like canvases that 'we' can fill with our wisdoms.³

Another interviewer: I do think that input has its place, but it's a question of how we arrange it and who can decide its form and place. Because people want to learn, and there are many forms of learning, and the question is, how can they themselves decide how they want to learn? How can they choose the form that works for them in a specific moment? And that can also depend on how they individually feel on that particular day. So, ideally, we'd have some sort of process in which people can say, 'Right now, having a half-hour lecture bit would be really interesting, let's do that.' And in that sense, our course didn't really work that well because people didn't have that much influence over the process.

Another interviewer: Although that's also linked to what happened after the break that we had after the lecture. Because we gave out copies of four different academic texts on what we felt could be considered (not) trans*disciplinary: Public Engagement with Science and Participatory Action Research (Fals-Borda, 1991; McIntyre, 2008; Stevens,

³See also Paulo Freire's (1993 [1970]) concept of the 'banking' idiom of teacher-student relations.

2008; Bensaude Vincent, 2014). We asked students to engage with these texts during the lunch break, so we'd be able to discuss them afterwards.

It turned out, however, that that wasn't quite what they wanted. Instead of sticking to our pre-ordained topics, they instead chose to talk about their experiences with hierarchies at the university. So we went with it. If our idea of trans*disciplinarity was that it was about breaking down hierarchies and involving people and parties in decision-making processes that would not usually be welcome in them, our students were living that trans*disciplinarity. We started out wanting to talk about Participatory Action Research and ended up doing something more participatory than we had imagined.

Another interviewer: Yes, it was very much a process. But I think it's also important to keep in mind that there are both individual and collective processes going on. And because it is a collective process, you just can't completely eliminate that element of 'I have to do this right now.' You could only have that in a system where it's clear that people can come and go whenever they want. But even if we had told our students that, it wouldn't have worked. So all we can do is try to give them more opportunities for shaping the process.

Another interviewer: And in our case, our students just created these opportunities themselves by moving the directions of our discussion. Although, 'created opportunities' sounds a little romanticising, as if there hadn't been any power relations between them and us.⁴ We could of course have stopped them. But maybe that's also an aspect of trans*disciplinarity: trying out things together, being open to where they may lead us?

Another interviewer: Yes. That kind of leads us to the question of which knowledges⁵ and which forms of knowledge – and knowledge creation – are seen as legitimate.⁶ So, for example, the course was very different from, e.g., weekend seminars that I sometimes do, which are much more about collectively developing – or discovering – knowledges, not about communicating and solidifying canonised knowledges and canonised forms of knowledge: books, papers, important people that you just have to refer⁷ to.

⁴See Arzmann, Wintersteller and Wöhrer (forthcoming, 2016) for an interesting take on power relations in PAR. See also Sara Ahmed's (2015) piece 'Against Students' for thoughts on people's moaning about students' having a say in where courses go.

⁵We spoke about frameworks of learning, teaching and knowledge creation earlier. In the same sense, we usually refer to knowledge in its plural form as long as we are not talking about a specific form or knowledge. This of course is not just our own way of seeing things, but inspired by Donna Haraway's paper on situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), as well as what we made of it in ongoing conversations with yet other interviewers outside the scope of this paper. Of course, this already points to the fact that for us 'knowledge' is always tied to practice and power. Speaking of knowledges as a plural points towards the existence of different frameworks of 'knowledge' – and, perhaps, even actually different knowledges. Of course, which form is most adequate depends on the specific situational context and our own involvement in it.

⁶Actually, it didn't. But we can't have unpolished incoherence and disjointedness in this text, can we? Law (2004) offers some interesting thoughts on the role of coherence and what we/you/one could call coherencing in research.

⁷defer?

And for my parts of the class, I also had that in the back of my mind: ‘but people have to be able to make these connections to canonised knowledge’.⁸

Another interviewer: Which brings us back to these internalised pressures that we exert on ourselves, doesn’t it? Because we’ve been talking a lot about the things that we ‘have to’ do or that ‘they’ ‘have to’ do, but there’s the question of where that ‘have to’ comes from. And yes, there are of course institutional pressures. But I think part of it is also a sort of performative drilling. We keep repeating these norms to ourselves.⁹

And, speaking of performativity. You know, I’m doing this other course at the University of Salzburg with Mercedes Pöll. And in that course, we talked about what ‘normal’ means. And one of our students said that if you just repeat something often enough, it becomes normal. And I thought, Yes, that’s performativity right there! I didn’t really react to it in that situation because it was too unexpected, but I think that that’s a way of forming these connections that you talked about. That we might connect the outcomes of these collective processes to canonised knowledges.

Another interviewer: And that’s a different approach, maybe a less authoritarian approach to knowledge and knowledge generation. Because people generate knowledges in these collective processes. And we could then kind of come in and say, ‘Yes, indeed, that’s really interesting. And there are these other people who have also thought about similar issues in similar ways and they have called this XYZ. And if you want to, you can go and have a look at that.’ And I imagine that people might also feel more appreciated that way. Because if you have a more input-driven approach, there’s this ‘higher’ form of knowledge, the established people, and before you can do anything else, you first have to follow these people.

Another interviewer: Yes, and of course, that gives you a foundation that you can build on. But the question is whether that foundation is a prefab house, and you put that prefab house somewhere and people can maybe decorate the walls, or whether it’s more like Lego bricks.¹⁰ And then you can try to help people make these connections, alt-

⁸There is this saying, ‘mit Kanonen auf Spatzen schießen’ – ‘using cannons to shoot at sparrows’. Using sledgehammers to crack nuts. Maybe it’s not just about cannons, but about canons as well?

⁹See, e.g., what Judith Butler (1997, 2006 [1993]) has to say about the role of iterability and citationality in performativity. ‘The doctor who receives the child and pronounces – “It’s a girl” – begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girded: gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation. Kendall Thomas makes a similar argument that the subject is always “raced”; transitively racialized by regulatory agencies from its inception. The power to “race” and, indeed, the power to gender, precedes the “one” who speaks such power, and yet the one who speaks nevertheless appears to have that power.’ (Butler, 1997, p. 49; see also Ehlers, 2006)

¹⁰Even though we’re not particularly happy about the gendered politics of Lego (Feminist Frequency, 2012a, 2012b). And it seems that Lego may have become more like prefab houses than it once was as well if it’s moving from creatively using bricks to build according to your own imagination to following instructions in order to emulate pre-built suggestions. We believe this to be a potentially productive metaphor for how we deal with knowledges, so we’ll leave you with it.

hough of course, that's not all that easy, because you just can't be prepared for everything all the time. But maybe that could be handled as a sort of homework for all participants. So you'd have not one 6-hour session with a break in between, but two shorter sessions on different days, and in between these sessions, 'students' as well as 'teachers' think about which connections they may be able to form. And this also means that there are very different impulses for the direction that a course can take.

Another interviewer: Yes, and splitting it up like that would also make it easier for people to take part in shaping the process. Because in the first session, you can collectively talk about what you'd like to do in the second one.

Another interviewer: On the other hand, that also makes it more difficult for people to decide whether they want to be in the course in the first place. If you don't have some overarching topics or methods that you want to work with and that they can rely on. Because if you say, 'We'll just decide in our first session', then people have no basis on which to decide whether or not they want to take part in the first place. So, again, different people may want different things, and you'll always exert some degree of force.¹¹

Another interviewer: Well, what we could also have done was: you know, we had these four texts for people to choose from for reading during the break. And we could also have included our input in these texts, as another offer that they can choose from. Or we could have broken the input up into more smaller pieces. Not saying, 'Now I'm gonna lecture you for 2 hours', but having it as smaller bits. And maybe we could have given people more agency in choosing which bits they want to engage with when. Like the prefab house and the Lego bricks.

Another interviewer: Okay, yes, of course, this would create spaces for interactivity and provide opportunities for students to gradually adopt to – and adapt – our negotiations with them about what the relevant knowledges, theories and practices are. Because usually, we don't start out as being on a level playing field with them – or they not with us, as a more common academic perspective might frame it. And this might be a way to bring 'us' and 'them' closer to each other and refine our understandings on the go, while iteratively deciding where to go. However, just recently, yet another inter(re)viewer was skeptical about this. Because while it may all sound nice and fluffy, when you think it through, it might also mean that we are dodging our responsibilities as teachers: to provide our knowledge(s) to the students, as well as to advance our students' knowledge(s). There's no guarantee that the students would take up our offer to negotiate on content and to participate and, in that way, to learn anything at all.

Another interviewer: No, there's no such guarantee. But you never get that kind of guarantee that people will learn something if they don't want to, no matter how interactive, how participatory, how laissez-faire or how pre-structured the teaching. If students

¹¹See also Brigit McWade's keynote on Mad Studies at the Changing Worlds conference in Vienna in 2015, in which she suggested that in creating spaces for a diversity of people, there will probably be 'conflicting needs': fulfilling one person's needs may mean violating another's.

mostly want to get a course done without much effort and without learning anything, I won't be able to force them to learn much.¹² So, yes, if people had simply wanted easy course credits, they could have gotten them in our setting. But the same would be true if we had adhered to a very focused structure and presented much more focused inputs. However, I think that if you take a student who primarily wants to get easy credits (and, of course, this would only be their *primary* motivation, because they're still in this one course and not any of the many others you can get easy credits in), the probability that they take something away from the course other than the credits is probably higher when you try to interact with them and find out what matters to them and therefore let them partake in choosing which path the course should take. Of course, the paths people want to stroll along might differ from mine or yours, but we can always try to come together from time to time and tell each other stories of our wanderings through these various knowledge landscapes.

Another interviewer: And I think what's also important there is how you treat people. Because I think that in contexts like these, where you get tech people and sociology people in the same context, tech people often feel like they're being treated as if they were stupid. And that you need to be super-critical in a very specific way. And I think that we managed that reasonably well – to include different perspectives on the subject and make them feel valued. Because I have the feeling that you also get settings where that doesn't work at all, where you get these processes of inclusion and exclusion. And sometimes these processes are something you want, and maybe good and even necessary.¹³ And sometimes they aren't.

Another interviewer: Yes, I agree. But what do you think of all of this?

Another interviewer: <https://livingtransdisciplinarity.noblogs.org>

¹²bell hooks (1994) also wrote about this in her book 'Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom'.

¹³E.g., think of safer spaces.

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