

## 131. Travelling concepts

### Abstract

Interdisciplinary work is often motivated by a need to address global challenges or pressing social problems that can only be solved by integrating knowledge from several disciplines. Yet interdisciplinary exchange and engagement is also valuable beyond a problem-solving paradigm. A focus on concepts (rather than methods or problems) can be extremely productive for developing a much-needed self-reflexive approach to interdisciplinary work, both for research and education. First, this chapter discusses the notion of travelling concepts as a tool to understanding interdisciplinarity. Next, it briefly traces the history of travelling concepts in different disciplines, focusing on the disciplines of humanities (literary and cultural studies), anthropology, and law. Attention is paid to the different conceptions of travelling itself and the simultaneous benefits and difficulties associated with them. It concludes with reflections on how to employ the notion of travelling concepts in research and education.

### Keywords

Travelling; Concept; Interdisciplinarity; Reflection; Education; Translation

### Introduction

Interdisciplinary work is often promoted, initiated, and motivated by a need to address global challenges or pressing social problems that can only be solved by integrating knowledge from a variety of disciplines. Yet interdisciplinary exchange and engagement is also valuable beyond a problem-solving paradigm. A focus on concepts (rather than methods or problems) can be extremely productive for developing a much-needed self-reflexive approach to interdisciplinary work, both for research and education. Concepts are dynamic and change over time, and they cross, transcend, and even transform the boundaries between different academic contexts. In doing so, they constitute what Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal has called “travelling concepts” (Bal, 2002). Precisely because the same concepts have different meanings in different disciplinary contexts

and traditions, they can become sites of interdisciplinary exchange: a discussion about a particular concept – its context, history, travels, differences, and commonalities – can establish the basis for developing a common (meta-)language.

This entry first discusses the notion of travelling concepts as a tool to understanding interdisciplinarity more broadly. Next, it briefly traces the history (and travels) of travelling concepts in different disciplines, focusing on the disciplines of humanities (literary and cultural studies), anthropology, and law. Attention is paid to the different conceptions of travelling itself and the simultaneous benefits and difficulties associated with them. The chapter concludes with some reflections on how to employ the notion of travelling concepts in research as well as in education.

### The travelling of travelling concepts

Within the humanities, the idea of travelling concepts has gone by various names, and the notion of travelling has been conceived as a temporal and spatial movement. For example, what in German is known as *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), traces the etymology and change in meaning of a concept across time within a particular tradition or across different traditions and languages (Koselleck, 2004). In the second half of the 20th century, the historical/temporal notion of the movement of concepts was complemented by a more spatial notion and the idea of the journey or voyage took center stage. As Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning show, “the concept of “travelling concepts” is itself a travelling concept par excellence” as it has always been an interdisciplinary endeavor (Neumann & Nünning, 2012, p. 4). In the 1970s and 80s, thinkers in postcolonial studies and history began to use the notion of travel to draw attention to the movement of theories between different disciplines and geographic and cultural contexts. Post-colonial scholar Edward Said (1982), for example, introduced the idea of “travelling theory” to describe the interdisciplinary transfer between the social sciences and the humanities, and anthropologist James Clifford (1997) elaborated on the metaphor of travelling in his essay on “travelling cultures”.

These developments also coincide with a greater emphasis on and increased interest

in interdisciplinary research and teaching. In this sense, Mieke Bal's 2002 book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* is a continuation of an ongoing conversation. Bal advocates a focus on concepts rather than theories or methods. Concepts, for Bal, are theoretical tools or "miniature theories" (2002, p. 22) that have been developed and used in different disciplinary contexts to name and define themes, problems, and relevant questions. Concepts are thus more flexible and can travel more easily than theories or methods. Furthermore, Bal's emphasis is on the movement between academic disciplines. Concepts can facilitate interdisciplinary discussion and innovation "not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't" (Bal, 2002, p. 11). It is precisely the exploration of these differences and frictions that should be explored in an interdisciplinary conversation, as therein lies the potential for innovation. The meaning of a particular concept, thus, emerges from practice: from the ways it is used, "appropriated, translated and kept up to date over and over again and always with a difference" (Neumann & Nünning, 2012, p. 4). Its power "resides in the scholarly activities it propels, i.e., in travelling processes, rather than in what it is "in itself"" (p. 4). In contrast to much method- or problem-based interdisciplinary thinking, a focus on travelling concepts entails making the underlying and unquestioned assumptions explicit and providing space for a self-reflexive exchange.

Similar to Bal, scholars from other fields and disciplines have explored how concepts move within and across disciplines (Baer, 2013; Neumann & Nünning, 2012; van der Tuin & Verhoeff, 2022; Veen & van der Tuin, 2021). Within law and across different legal fields, one of the earlier ways of describing this movement was casting it as a process of transplantation (Watson, 1993) where one legal concept is taken from one context and then transplanted into a new context or jurisdiction. In that process, just as in a medical context, a transplanted concept can be accepted or rejected. For example, taking a legal text from one jurisdiction, such as the US, on freedom of speech and then inserting it into another legal context, such as the Netherlands, would be highly problematic and would likely not work given the different social and legal structures in place.

Generally, however, the metaphor of transplantation has proven too restrictive, and new metaphors have arisen. One of these is "migration", which captures how ideas travel through communication and then are taken up in a place where they did not originate; another is "diffusion". Norm diffusion theories show that travel occurs through, inter alia, networks of people, institutional structures, advocacy strategies, and knowledge sharing (Risse & Sikkink, 1999). This approach offers an alternative to notions of transplantation and migration since it tries to understand how processes of socialization assist in travelling.

Inspired by Science and Technology Studies (STS), the concept of "travelling models" (Behrends et al., 2014) has taken hold in anthropology to describe how ideas, technologies, and tokens are taken up in various contexts amidst continuous global change. Aiming to understand "how things and ideas move from one place to the other" (p. 9, emphasis in original) in an increasingly globalized world, Behrends et al. define travelling models as "observable social processes" (p. 7). In outlining the meaning, function, and relevance of travelling models, the authors use a range of metaphors, such as translation, appropriation, transfer, and adaption to emphasize the myriad of ways travelling can occur. An increased emphasis on the routes (Clifford, 1997), dynamics, and processes of exchange and movement can thus be observed across disciplines in recent years.

### Working with travelling concepts

An analytical focus on "travelling" has thus emerged across disciplines as a useful way to engage in interdisciplinary exchange. This does not mean, however, that working with the idea of travelling concepts is necessarily easy or self-explanatory. Very often it requires tremendous effort for those employing it as an interdisciplinary tool. A first, key challenge of interdisciplinary research is the difficulty of finding a common language among those involved, especially when there is no understanding of the assumptions that underpin different disciplinary perspectives. There are significant distinctions in how different disciplines construct knowledge, approach their objects of study, work with methodology and theory, and conduct their research more generally. Furthermore, methods, theories, and concepts are also shaped by historical, lin-

guistic, geographic, and cultural traditions, and therefore tend to come with particular, often unconscious, assumptions and biases. A crucial aspect of the theory and practice of interdisciplinarity is the surfacing of and reflection on these assumptions. Uncovering these assumptions demands a self-reflexive and open-minded approach.

A second challenge is the process of mapping the travels of concepts in an interdisciplinary encounter. Very often the precise origin and travel history of a concept is unknown or difficult to reconstruct, and often, this already requires interdisciplinary knowledge. Furthermore, concepts have boundaries and affordances – there are things we can and cannot do with them. Tracing these layers, histories and affordances of concepts opens for debate questions as fundamental as the very nature of knowledge production (Darbellay, 2012). The opportunities and challenges involved in this become apparent in the podcast series *Travelling Concepts on Air* (<https://www.uu.nl/en/research/contesting-governance/projects/travellingconceptsonair>) and the discussions held by hosts Tessa Diphooorn and Brianne McGonigle Leyh. In this podcast series, the hosts invite guests from different disciplines to discuss particular concepts, such as “agency” or “time”, and explore how a concept has travelled (or not) across their disciplines. Tracing the precise travels of the concepts requires a lot of knowledge, time, and practice. And often, the travel trajectory is unknown or unclear. With such instances, the need for self-reflexivity and openness is even more pertinent. For instance, in the episode on Agency, which featured scholars from law and ethics/philosophy, it emerged during the conversation that there was little overlap or common ground between the two disciplinary perspectives. While each knew of the other’s disciplinary approach, in practice, very little exchange or openness for the other’s approach to the concept occurred. In contrast, in the episode on Time, which involved a literary scholar and a geologist who had developed a teaching module together, the guests stressed the importance of repeated and extensive exchanges and conversations on the concept, supported by joint reading and discussion of texts from both disciplines. Through these exchanges, both arrived at a richer understanding of the concept, and they were able to introduce students in their

respective disciplines to this broader understanding (Diphooorn & McGonigle Leyh, 2020–2023).

A key challenge is using the idea of travelling concepts in education. In a special issue in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education* (Diphooorn et al., 2023), the authors have outlined some of the ways that travelling concepts can be made productive for education and can facilitate both educators and students in engaging in interdisciplinary exchange. Drawing from Repko and Szostak (2021), they adopt a four-stage learning model in interdisciplinary education with travelling concepts: disciplinary grounding; perspective taking; finding common ground; and integration (Diphooorn et al., 2023, p. 2). The first step – disciplinary grounding – is to make explicit that a particular word functions as a concept and to become aware of the work it does or is being made to do within different disciplines. Or, in other words, to surface its “travel history” and “baggage” (Veen & van der Tuin, 2021, p. 146). This includes a self-reflexive process of making one’s own use of, and disciplinary assumptions about, a concept explicit. This also entails situating oneself in a particular disciplinary tradition or community, as part of a certain “we” who use a concept in a particular way and to mean a specific thing.

The second step – perspective taking – requires acknowledging that one’s own definition of a concept is not the only one and that in other contexts a different definition may be more fitting and productive. Each discipline has its own *perspective* or distinctive way of seeing things drawn from their own body of knowledge and system of theories. The third step – finding common ground – is then to reflect on how the differences in definition and significance may impact one’s own understanding and use of a particular concept in one’s own disciplinary context. Here, it can be helpful to look for common ground or acknowledge clear contestations. For interdisciplinarity, finding common ground is key in getting towards the integration of ideas, which is the final step. Integration refers to the bringing together of disciplinary insights and understandings to develop something new, which would not have been possible through mono- or multi-disciplinary approaches. In the various contributions collected in the special issue, the authors outline how they have piloted teaching with travelling concepts

and emphasize that “interdisciplinarity in education is always an ongoing process requiring continuous practice (Klein, 1990), both for the student and the educator, and never a final state with a final destination” (Diphooorn et al., 2023, p. 10).

## Conclusion

Working with travelling concepts is an enriching way of doing interdisciplinarity in research and education, not only because concepts invite scholars and educators to delve into their (travel) histories and trajectories, but also because concepts often resist simple or straightforward application in a new context. This also means that rather than approaching objects of study and interdisciplinary conversation partners armed with predetermined categories and assumptions, a focus on concepts instead calls for an exercise of humility, respect, and, importantly, of listening. Working with travelling concepts, scholars and educators can act as “mediators” (Behrends et al., 2014, p. 2), and can let the concepts “speak back” (Bal, 2002). And although working with travelling concepts can be a means to reach innovative solutions, this is not the sole objective. Focusing on the “travelling” entails analyzing the processual nature in which scholars engage with ideas and thoughts, and hopefully, with each other (Darbellay, 2012). There is tremendous value in taking a conceptual approach to interdisciplinarity that inherently demands a self-reflexive and open-minded stance and an ability to carefully listen to peers. This step is often omitted in the rush towards “solutions”, yet represents a crucial step that lays bare how we, and others, see the world.

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