

Bringing new PhDs together for supradisciplinary climate change research

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The Dissertations Initiative for the Advancement of Climate Change Research (or DISCCRS, pronounced 'discourse', and see www.disccrs.org) brings 33 or so recent PhD graduates together to encourage supradisciplinary (i.e. more than disciplinary) work on climate change. The DISCCRS Symposium VII held 13-20 October this year just outside of Colorado Springs, Colorado, brought together graduates from across the natural and social sciences for an intensive week of cross-disciplinary engagement, professional development and peer networking.

My sense is that supradisciplinary research is talked about more often than it's actually engaged in. Sometimes, depending on the research question or problem, a disciplinary approach is appropriate. For example, if I break my arm, I don't want a supradisciplinary team to work out what to do, I want one specialist only – a medical doctor! But if instead the problem I am interested in is more complex, for example the national childhood obesity epidemic that currently blights Australia, then a medical doctor – even a whole team of medical doctors – will be insufficient for the task. Tackling something like that effectively will call for contributions from multiple disciplines.

That's because complex problems are not tractable within any single discipline. For complex sustainability problems, for example climate change, this is readily apparent. No single discipline has a mortgage on climate change, neither its causation, its implications nor its resolution.

There are many different approaches to supradisciplinary research. My personal research interest is sustainability, and I think transdisciplinary research methodologies – those that transcend disciplinary boundaries from the very beginning by calling on multiple disciplines to work together to define the research problem – are the most appropriate for complex sustainability problems.

It's for this reason that initiatives like DISCCRS are so valuable. Such initiatives can be great fun – and DISCCRS VII certainly was! – but they are very hard work too. Working across disciplines requires researchers to develop shared languages in order to 'translate' their expertise, approaches and methodologies across disciplinary boundaries. What 'counts' as evidence, or a robust methodology in one discipline won't necessarily count in another; disciplines have their own cultures, their own assumptions, and their own understandings of what is and isn't valued.

Successful supradisciplinary research requires an openness to working in a way that transcends disciplinary boundaries: that is an attitude. It also calls for researchers to nurture trusting relationships across disciplines: that is a behaviour.

This year's Symposium was the seventh so far, and it has evolved over time. The Symposium is fine-tuned each year, and it shows in the incredibly smooth and sophisticated organisation that makes the Symposium the success it is. My sense – and hope – is that in subsequent years the Symposium will include greater representation of the humanities: the humanities have key parts to play as we

struggle to address climate change effectively and fairly. Obviously there is a lot of science in climate change research:

climate change science is complex. But it's not the complexity in climate science that is preventing us from addressing climate change successfully. The contribution of the humanities in resolving this shared challenge will at least equal those of the natural and social sciences.

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MAITLAND COMMUNITY MEN'S SHED CAN SUPPLY RECYCLED TIMBER FOR THE MAKING OF

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 - Pole Mounted Bird Feeder Tables
 - Suspended Bird feeder Tables
 - Cat scratching Poles
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 - Mobile Potting Tables
 - Planter Boxes (to your design)
 - Metal Work Support
 - Wine Racks
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Top Row = Eastern Rosella Boxes
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