40. Implementing Integration in Research and Practice

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The I2S Framework

This book establishes a sound theoretical framework for an I2S discipline. This framework is well supported by the recently published book of dialogue methods.[2] These methods will be central to the practice of I2S specialists who will work between professions, policy sectors, research methodologies, values and academic disciplines. The absolute brilliance of the book is that with the foundational research into dialogue methods it tackles the most critical integration methodology issue—that of analysing data generated through different disciplines and stakeholder perspectives/values.

Section four of the book introduces the third domain of the I2S framework: integrated research support for policy and practice change. As an integrator working in a policy context, I struggled most with the fit of this section in the framework. If I2S is to research real-world problems, supporting policy and practice change is the overarching component of the framework, the glue for managing the integral processes of engagement, negotiation, participation and research adoption. Yet this section does not deal with the issue of recommending particular courses of action to policy and government.

Instead this section discusses knowledge about policy and knowledge about scoping, managing engagement and influencing. The management/process component is an identified leg of the framework, as it should be, but the theoretical discussion on policy and practice change should constitute part of the introduction to the book as it sits across the framework as the context for integrated research into real-world problems.

The large literature on community engagement, participatory research methods and research adoption could be consulted and incorporated into the integration management/process chapters to illustrate that integrated research into real-world problems will usually be research and *development* if evidence-based,

directed action on the issue is the desired outcome. The development component demands knowledge of engagement, research adoption and negotiation processes. Perhaps this section could be called 'Managing integration processes in the real world'.

The New Discipline

Establishing a new discipline is no small challenge. New disciplines are generally born of a seemingly insurmountable social problem. Eclectic disciplines and endeavours that sit across traditional disciplines are often marginal. Think for instance about social work, social development, and so on. Their research methodologies are described as 'soft'. The findings of qualitative studies are frequently dismissed as not being 'scientific'. Purist and positivist disciplines are accepted as the norm and this preconception is difficult to disarm in the context of the academy. The epistemological polarisation is very real, leaving a significant void that I2S can surely occupy. The cleavage is the space where we need to find not only theory and methods but also reason with respect to the reality that some of the world's greatest challenges can only be understood by looking through multiple lenses.

The analogy Gabriele Bammer draws with statistics is significant in demonstrating how I2S can operate and make a significant intellectual contribution. It lends weight to the case for the new discipline. A 'discipline', according to the *Penguin New English Dictionary*, is 'a field of study'. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines a 'discipline' as 'a branch of instruction or learning'. This book establishes the theoretical framework for a discipline and invites collaboration in the next steps: building a knowledge base and training program from that framework. This is an alluring prospect for those of us who are excited about integration.

Integrationists will surely be people who think creatively, people who see the big picture, understand systems and want to connect disparate parts of pictures. In my view, work remains to be done to take I2S beyond a field of study and to illustrate what the I2S field of practice will look like. Placing the hypothetical view of the future that opens Chapter 31 at the beginning of the book would have been useful for me, to illustrate the vision of how I2S graduates might operate and contribute. Further examples of how integrationists might operate in a policy or practice change context, in addition to the research integration focus, will no doubt be further elaborated as I2S develops.

I2S specialists will, no doubt, have an interest in a wide range of social and political systems. When I, as an integrationist working in and between policy,

research, teaching/practice, think about establishing I2S as a discipline, I think about theory, tools, knowledge, skills and practitioners. Further careful thought will be needed to establish a comprehensive curriculum for I2S.

Analysis and Actors

In my experience, the biggest challenge in practising integration is analysing data and information that are generated in disciplines at various points in the epistemological spectrum. Sense-making of local knowledge emanating from a social-action process and social and physical sciences inevitably involves a deal of 'expert judgment' and risks being labelled 'unscientific'. Fields of endeavour such as environmental and social impact assessments illustrate well the difficulty of weighting diverse data sources. The desired outcome of policy makers (who are often the research/study funding source) can also influence the analysis process. Factors in the integration context including values, power and credibility of actors are worthy of more detailed consideration in the book.

This has been the most tortured aspect of social-impact assessment, a methodology that is supposed to provide decision makers with options for action and their pros and cons, including mitigation strategies laid out for the cons. Social-impact assessment specialists have tended to be coopted by the agency funding the research and development and either make a case for the option the decision maker seeks or do not weight the data. In part, this is because there have been so few articulated and accepted methods for weighting multidisciplinary and stakeholder data. The result is often much contention over the findings based on the different perspectives and values of stakeholders. What we learn from social-impact assessment is that the more independent the research and development is and the more transparent the findings and the processes to generate them, the more credible and acceptable will be the results. The overview of relevant dialogue methods for integration and their suggested application is an immense advance in addressing this problem.

Managing the integrated research/study often demands a high level of interpersonal skill, not only knowledge of dialogue methods. The integrator is tasked with negotiating across value systems as well as political imperatives. There is often a researcher/policy/community cleavage. Training in interpersonal communications, including negotiating skills, will need to be core skills for I2S specialists. The I2S course entry criteria may need to be carefully determined with issues such as these in mind.

Why would someone enrol in I2S? Is there an employment future for graduates? Where might those opportunities be and how will the merits of I2S be promoted

in such a way that employment opportunities will be created? It may seem trite to comment on the need for a business case in this commentary but the world of academia is very much a business these days.

Indeed, the academy has resisted interdisciplinarity. Much current integrative work occurs in practice, both private and public. Professions working in areas such as human relations, evaluation, risk analysis, Indigenous health, natural resource management, and social and environmental impact assessment generally sit outside academia, while practitioners work with academic theory and specialists. Disciplines including community, social and international development and social geography (note they are all social science disciplines and often marginal in universities) often produce practitioners who establish private practices. Many of these people are practising I2S, even though they are not always writing and publishing a process analysis of their work. They deserve greater recognition in the book. They may be the people who enrol in the course. They will contribute to the development of I2S with their prior knowledge and experience and specialist skills. They will bring to the discipline many items for the storeroom.

Continued Collaboration

This book sets out a truly ambitious and worthwhile project. With engagement and collaboration among integrationists and those with an interest in integration, the bringing together of people, tools and skills has potential for a discipline to emerge that is desperately needed if we are to address the complex problems of this world. This book presents both a sound theoretical basis for I2S and the challenge of further developing the three domains: synthesis of disciplinary and stakeholder knowledge, understanding and managing diverse unknowns and providing integrated research support for policy and practice change.

There is much work to be done in each domain to establish a curriculum and teaching/training program, a blend of theory and practical learning. The I2S storehouse will need to have plenty of tunnels as many of the tools will move between rooms, as will the integrationists. The prospect of such a course is very exciting. The collaboration that will make this a reality will be immensely rewarding. I am enthusiastic to be engaged in this pursuit.

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Reference

McDonald, D., Bammer, G. and Deane, P. (2009). *Research Integration Using Dialogue Methods*. Canberra: ANU E Press; <http://epress.anu.edu.au/dialogue_methods_citation> (accessed 6 August 2012).

Brief Biography

Dr Alice Roughley currently works in the heritage area of the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. She has been involved in a range of agencies and projects to build bridges across disciplines and between community, research and policy stakeholders. In her capacity as a part-time private consultant, she specialises in strategic planning and participatory evaluation. She has managed two highly integrated research and development portfolios, one for Land & Water Australia, the other for the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre. She holds a masters degree in Social Impact Assessment and a PhD in integrated local area planning, and has extensive experience in community development and as a social policy practitioner.