

397. Facilitation as a Catalyst for Effective Interdisciplinary Research: An Autoethnographic Exploration

Interdisciplinary research is essential for addressing complex global challenges, yet its implementation often encounters obstacles such as disciplinary silos, communication barriers, and differing methodological approaches (Schmitt et al. 2023; Suckow et al. 2024). This study investigates the role of facilitation in overcoming these challenges, drawing on autoethnographic methods (Anderson 2006) to provide an insider's perspective on the processes that enable successful interdisciplinary collaboration.

Building upon the theoretical frameworks of interdisciplinarity, which emphasize the integration of diverse disciplinary perspectives to generate comprehensive solutions (Lattuca 2001), this research positions facilitation as a pivotal mechanism that structures and guides collaborative efforts. Facilitation here refers to the deliberate process of guiding interdisciplinary teams through structured interactions, fostering mutual understanding, and co-creating shared goals (Gray 2008).

Providing a rich, reflexive account of the facilitation process through the autoethnographic approach, this case study allows for a nuanced exploration of the facilitator's role from an internal standpoint. This method is particularly suited to uncovering the often-invisible dynamics of interdisciplinary teamwork and the facilitator's influence on these processes.

The analyzed data consists of process documentation, extensive team communication, field notes and journal entries. The setting involved an interdisciplinary research team engaged in projects addressing complex societal issues, providing a relevant context for examining facilitation practices.

The findings connect to existing discourse on different role concepts in interdisciplinary research such as boundary spanners and knowledge brokers (Klein 2021; Bednarek et al. 2018) and reveal the central need for facilitators to actively bridge disciplinary divides by creating spaces for dialogue, encouraging the sharing of diverse perspectives, and translating jargon, thereby enhancing mutual understanding among team members.

By relating and triangulating theory and findings through introducing and testing the practice-informed concept of facilitation (Straus 2002; Kaner and Lind 2014; Kahane 2021), the study addresses how collaborative processes may be structured by facilitators to help teams navigate the complexities of interdisciplinary work. This touches on cultivating reflexivity, as well as fostering self-learning and self-organization in interdisciplinary research teams as important criteria for effective scientific knowledge co-production (Suckow et al. 2024).

The main finding of the research addresses how tensions in facilitating interdisciplinary research process arise when the invisibility of managing research work (Meyer 2010) creates challenging overlaps in process- and content-related work that culminate within one researcher (Tagare, Exter, and Ashby 2023) and how they may best be mitigated.

These insights support the fostering of interdisciplinarity, as they address common barriers and promote effective collaboration (Schmitt et al. 2023; Vladova, Haase, and Friesike 2023).

The autoethnographic approach also highlights the emotional and relational dimensions of facilitation, underscoring the importance of empathy, trust-building, and adaptability in managing the human elements of interdisciplinary teams. These findings suggest that facilitation is not merely a procedural role but also a relational one that requires attentiveness to the interpersonal dynamics that influence collaboration.

This study contributes to the literature on interdisciplinary research by elucidating the facilitator's role as a catalyst for effective collaboration. It provides practical insights for researchers, practitioners, and institutions aiming to implement best practices in interdisciplinary settings. By highlighting the significance of facilitation, this research advocates for the intentional integration of facilitation roles and training in interdisciplinary research initiatives. In addition to sharing lessons learned, and potentially helpful practical advice for facilitating interdisciplinary research, I aim to discuss how deep a facilitator's disciplinary research involvement should or could be, thereby exploring new roles and role constellations within interdisciplinary research teams.

In conclusion, as the academic community continues to address increasingly complex and interwoven global challenges, the role of facilitation in interdisciplinary research becomes ever more critical. This study's autoethnographic insights offer a valuable perspective on how facilitation can be effectively employed to foster successful interdisciplinary collaboration, ultimately contributing to the advancement of knowledge and the development of innovative solutions.

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