

Frodeman, R. (2013). *Sustainable knowledge: A theory of interdisciplinarity*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 128 pp.

Review by Danielle Lake

Sustainable Knowledge: A Theory of Interdisciplinarity is a valuable, compelling, and quick read for current and future academics and administrators committed to engaged scholarship and outreach, as well as those still in need of convincing. A succinct and—at times—radical take on the core problems facing the academy today, the book begins by rejecting the notion that prolific knowledge production is an unqualified good. Robert Frodeman (2013) reminds his reader that knowledge is practically limited by our capacity to understand, by “time and money,” and by “research itself” (p. 55). With this in mind, he calls on academics to carefully consider “the costs—economic, social, and ethical—of such proliferation” (p. 65). Given the plethora of systemic messes we face today, we need a new approach.

With this critique in mind, Frodeman addresses problems with the disciplining of knowledge in Chapter 2. To the extent that *disciplinarity* fosters a separation of knowledge production from its use, he argues, it is a mistake. It tends to dig infinitely down instead of out, setting up narrow frames of expertise that often hamper efforts toward collaborative problem-solving on the ground. *Interdisciplinarity*, assessed in Chapter 3, is—on the other hand—a step in the right direction in that it reminds scholars of the need to address our systemic challenges and to consider the “inherent limitations to knowledge” (p. 42). In practice, however, interdisciplinarity often fails to address real-world problems, privileges and mimics the disciplines, and develops prescriptive formulas and techniques; as a result, it also frequently gets it wrong. Scholars of “wicked problems”—large-scale, interconnected, high-stakes messes—concur with Frodeman’s critique and emphasize these same concerns. They conclude, for instance, that isolation and fragmentation exacerbate the narrow framing of these problems, that idealistic and theoretical expert- or technology-driven solutions will not work, and thus that efforts to ameliorate messy, real-world problems cannot be standardized (Kolb, 2003; Ramaley, 2014; Rittel & Webber, 1973). In such complex situations, amelioration is achieved by collaborative, experiential, and reflective action, through the cocreation of new approaches to long-standing problems.

Ultimately, Frodeman's analysis of the current structures surrounding knowledge production within the academy leads to an examination of the merits of *transdisciplinarity* in Chapter 4. He defines transdisciplinarity as the "co-production of knowledge between academic and nonacademic actors," saying it is the linchpin "marking the end of the era of peer control" (p. 61). It leads us to *sustainable* knowledge production. Aimed more directly at ameliorating our shared problems, sustainable knowledge operates under a collaborative, transdisciplinary model in which knowledge is both coproduced and more directly linked to its application. Because current and impending crises place us in a position of urgency, where we need to act despite serious resource limitations, a focus on sustainable knowledge is key. The preeminent status of prolific knowledge production in the academy creates serious opportunity costs. Frodeman challenges us to ask ourselves what the costs of this system are: What are we seeking to sustain and what are we "going to let go by the wayside" (p. 72)? To answer such questions, we must expand our epistemological and ethical frameworks; we must acknowledge a responsibility not only to our own "disciplinary cohort" but also to the "larger community." Here, sustainable knowledge can and should ultimately operate as a "regulative guide" (p. 74).

Although an incredibly valuable and quick read, *Sustainable Knowledge* could benefit from enacting its call for transdisciplinarity. This volume, in fact, leaves largely unacknowledged a rich well of strategies, tools, and resources for effective bridge-building work, including participatory action research (*Fals Borda, 2001*), systemic engagement practices (*McNall, Barnes-Najor, Brown, Doberneck, & Fitzgerald, 2015*), feminism (*Iverson & James, 2014*), and pragmatism (*Lake, 2014*). Indeed, engaging these tools, processes, and recommendations is what will make Frodeman's call for sustainable knowledge *sustainable*. Although engaged, transdisciplinary scholarship will not automatically yield progress; it will prompt scholars to grapple with the systemic messes society faces. And since the lag between the needs of our time and our dominant institutional responses is still great, our problems still urgent, and our responses still largely inadequate, there is a lot more work to be done.

In the end, Frodeman calls most directly on humanists to take on the task of challenging the barriers posed toward genuinely sustainable and ameliorative knowledge production. We can continue to advance this work by challenging and changing the organizational structures of higher education, reconsidering the expectations within doctoral programs, and shifting the expecta-

tions we place on ourselves. Academics begin to perform this work by stepping into the fray of modern life: as coproducers of knowledge and field practitioners, facilitators and advisors, experts and lay-citizens. In the end, success should be measured “by the extent to which... [we] address the needs of others as they define them,” by the extent to which we literally “change the world” (p. 111).

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About the Reviewer

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