Interdisciplinarity, Connectivity and Capability: An Exploration in the Context of Social Change[1]

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Abstract
Gaining insight into the complex problems facing humanity requires an ability to read one's social reality, a right and responsibility shouldered by all. This paper explores the strengths and limitations of an interdisciplinary approach to reading social reality in the context of an interconnected world beset by attitudinal and social fragmentation. Having articulated certain limitations of interdisciplinarity as currently conceived, it examines "learning in action" (an iterative process involving consultation, action, reflection and study of the Sacred Texts) and its role in the promotion of human agency through the development of new capabilities, leading in turn to purposeful action and societal transformation.

Résumé
Pour appréhender les problèmes complexes auxquels l'humanité fait face, il faut être en mesure de lire sa réalité sociale, un droit et une responsabilité qui incombent à chacun. Cet article explore les atouts et les limites d'une approche interdisciplinaire de la lecture de la réalité sociale dans le contexte d'un monde interconnecté en proie à une fragmentation comportementale et sociale. Après avoir exposé certaines limites de l'interdisciplinarité telle qu'elle est actuellement conçue, il examine « l'apprentissage par l'action » (un processus itératif faisant appel à la consultation, à l'action, à la réflexion et à l'étude des textes sacrés) et son rôle pour promouvoir l'intervention humaine grâce au développement de nouvelles capacités, qui conduisent à leur tour à une action résolue et à une transformation de la société.

Resumen
Adquirir conocimiento de los complejos problemas que enfrenta la humanidad requiere una habilidad para que uno lea su propia realidad social, un derecho y una responsabilidad asumidos por cada quien. Este artículo explora las fortalezas y las limitaciones de un abordaje interdisciplinario para leer la realidad social en el contexto de un mundo interconectado hostigado por fragmentación actitudinal y social. Habiendo articulado las limitaciones de la interdisciplinariedad, tal como se concibe actualmente, el artículo examina "aprender en acción" (un proceso iterativo que involucra consulta, accion, reflexion y estudio de los Textos Sagrados) y su papel en la promoción de agencia/autonomía humana por medio del desarrollo de nuevas

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capacidades, abriendo el camino a su vez a la acción con sentido y la transformación social.

Introduction

Over thirty years ago, in 1990, when announcing the establishment of the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, the Universal House of Justice located its activities in an "interdisciplinary context": "The stated purpose of the Chair is 'to conduct and publish research, design courses and conduct seminars in the field of Bahá'í studies and world peace within an interdisciplinary context'" (12 February 1990). Later, in 2012, the Universal House of Justice called for "interdisciplinary and multisectoral action" in the context of social and economic development and pointed to the need to build capacity in this relation:

> That the development process is inherently complex is undeniable. It can involve activity in areas such as agriculture and animal husbandry, manufacturing and marketing, the management of funds and natural resources, health and sanitation, education and socialization, communication and community organization. The knowledge that must be brought to bear on the development concerns of the communities of the world, then, does not fit into a single area or discipline. Interdisciplinary and multisectoral action is clearly called for. Yet the capacity to pursue such coordinated action will only appear in the Bahá'í community over the course of decades, as will the capacity to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness. (26 November 2012)

In recent years interdisciplinarity has gained considerable momentum with many advocates viewing it as a vital step to addressing the complex and multidimensional nature of humanity's problems. Perhaps most vocal in the call for an interdisciplinary approach have been public health experts and medical scientists—not only in relation to COVID-19 (Bontempi, Vergalli, and Squazzoni; Meisner et al; Sentell, Vamos and Okan; and Tyagi, Nigam and Chauhan)—but also in the area of chronic disease where the intersection of nutrition, socio-economic background, and ethnicity play a crucial role in both its prevention and management (Mann et al.; Skegg; and Zimmet).

Interdisciplinarity is variously defined and is subject to manifold interpretations. Drawing on J.A. McLean's definition, interdisciplinarity connotes a movement "beyond the strictures of one discipline only, to embrace larger horizons of analysis" (3). There is generally an acknowledgement that interdisciplinarity relies on solid foundations across the disciplines insofar as a strong command of the disciplines is integral to its effective operability. An interdisciplinary approach allows one to learn about the interconnections

between the various disciplines; navigate the disciplinary interfaces; consider multiple perspectives; and generate new insights. Interdisciplinarity sits within a family of interrelated concepts including multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. It is not, however, the intention here to undertake an excursion into the distinction between multi / inter and trans / disciplinary studies as this would detract from our core concern: to explore the interrelationship between interdisciplinarity, connectivity and capability in the context of social change.

The paper will explore (1) how notwithstanding the underlying unity of creation, human striving to understand reality has led to fragmentation; (2) how interdisciplinarity can be seen as a potential response—or partial response—to our growing appreciation of the problems created by the disparity between a unified reality and a fragmented perception of knowledge; (3) some of the challenges to be addressed in our efforts to move towards interdisciplinarity, and specifically (3a) the tension between the need for disciplinary specialization, and the need for humanity as a whole to recognize the inherent oneness of knowledge. This leads to (4), an argument for the merit of the Bahá'í experience worldwide in creating a culture of learning through its learning in action framework, which points to a pathway to resolving the tension in 3a. The discussion of the learning in action framework draws on existing scholarship in this area; the paper's original contribution is to link that scholarship to the developing discourse on interdisciplinarity which is of growing interest in wider society.

Connectivity and Fragmentation

Bahá'u'lláh explains that all existence originates from one unified divine principle: "The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different" (*Tablets* 140). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains that all created things are interconnected:

> Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. (qtd. in *Compilation* 1, 71)

It can be surmised that "the unified body of the world of being" corresponds to the unified orderliness of the universe as understood by the ancient Greeks, and resonant in other religious scriptures and Indigenous

cosmologies.[2] Such an understanding of the interconnectedness of the world has as its corollary that knowledge is an interconnected whole, that is to say, "the knower, the knowledge, and the objects of knowledge are one single reality" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 291). As John Hatcher observes, "from a Bahá'í perspective, every branch of scholarly endeavor at every level of discourse, is examining a dimension of a single reality—diverse in its constituent components, coherent in its structure, and purposeful in its design." ("From the Editor's Desk" 5).

While a conception of the universe as an interconnected whole is gaining wider scientific support (Capra and Luisi) and is affirmed in its philosophical articulation in works such as David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, the idea that everything created is from the same source and that a deep relationship exists between all things struggles to find expression in many areas of social reality—from the relationship between nation-states and the peoples therein[3] to the relationship between humanity and nature.[4] Fundamental to this incongruity is a widely held assumption of a negative view of human nature characterized by selfishness and aggression giving rise to a sense of hopelessness and causing inertia and apathy. Such a cynical belief, fueled by a culture of consumerism, has taken firm hold resulting in exploitative human relationships—along lines of gender, race, ethnicity and other social markers—and a widespread disregard for the environment, both of which run counter to the truth of oneness. The Universal House of Justice observes,

> The forces of materialism promote a . . . line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture . . . (1 March 2017)

Arguably, a new conception of human nature is required during this critical juncture in human history—one underpinned by a belief in the inherent nobility of human beings, that can give rise to new modes of thinking, being and doing. As Haleh Arbab observes,

> The Bahá'í belief in the primacy of the spiritual dimension of the human being is not rooted in a naïve attitude toward existence; Bahá'ís have not closed their eyes to the

2 See for example, *The Holy Bible* John 1:1; *The Holy Qur'án* 21:30; and Atkinson, "Negotiating Worldviews."

3 See Danesh and White III.

4 See Poelina et al., and Shiva.

> cruelty, injustice, oppression, and thirst for power that permeate human relations. But how will these forces be overcome if humanity insists on building society according to the dictates of our lower, materialistic nature? (38)

If a materialistic view of human nature is one barrier to a holistic worldview, then its corollary is a distorted view of history as similarly fragmented, a narrative of conflict and division with no overriding purpose or direction, reinforcing a sense of hopelessness. To propose that aggression and selfishness are immature human traits that can yield overtime and ultimately be supplanted by ennobling qualities necessitates a careful re-thinking of historical processes.

Shoghi Effendi's analysis of historical processes sheds light on our understanding of the course of social evolution and the contemporary condition of society more generally. Taking an evolutionary view of history,[5] Shoghi Effendi portrays historical development in terms of a successive progression of levels of unity in the ordering of human society: units of social organization have evolved from their earliest stages in kinship groups, through the establishment of the city-state, to the formation of independent sovereign nations. The nation state, however, is not the endpoint in these historical processes. In the Bahá'í view, the processes of disintegration and fragmentation currently confronting humanity will, at some future point, give way to the promising integrative forces emergent in the world and which will ultimately herald a unified global society which Shoghi Effendi asserts "is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving" (*World Order* 202). Accordingly, this "inclusive historical consciousness" or "grand narrative" (Smith, "Crisis" 85) entails an upheaval in all aspects of our lives. Hence, the weakening and ultimate disappearance of certain social institutions and practices should be expected insofar as they will no longer serve the next stage of humanity's development. Shoghi Effendi writes:

> If long-cherished ideals and time-honoured institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away… Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution? For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine. (*World Order* 42)

5 See also Laszlo 1989a and 1989b.

It is not surprising that a view of humanity itself as a disunified collection of self-interested individuals, and of history as a directionless arena of conflict, contribute to a fractured perception of the world which for many is still characterized by what Bohm lamented as "a fragmentary atomistic approach to reality." Resonant with a Bahá'í perspective, it is a "fragmented self-world view" (19) which has distorted the prevalent perception of the world. Accordingly, this fragmented lens on the world has impacted our understanding of knowledge itself. As Bahá'u'lláh observes, "Knowledge is one point which the foolish have multiplied" (*Gems* ¶39).[6] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that disciplines have become isolated one from another. In a letter written on its behalf, the Universal House of Justice observes, "One of the problems of modern times is the degree to which the different disciplines have become specialized and isolated from one another. Thinkers are now faced with a challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century" (23 March 1983).

To what extent can an interdisciplinary approach assist our efforts to address this challenge? Arguably, it has certain potential if it is applied in keeping with Bahá'u'lláh's criterion for the proper study of sciences and arts: He counsels, "It is permissible to study sciences and arts, but such sciences as are useful and would redound to the progress and advancement of the people" (*Tablets* 26). To this end, (furthering the "progress and advancement of the people"), an interdisciplinary approach can serve as a point of departure to gaining a more holistic view of knowledge.

It will be helpful at this point to consider some of the possible ways to frame interdisciplinarity.

1. Interdisciplinarity as the use of methodologies from various disciplines to explore an object of study

The sheer complexity of the problems confronting humanity dictates the need to employ methodologies from a range of disciplines to properly consider their interrelationships. Recognizing this need, Adaikkalam et al. observe, "we discern growing aspirations for triangulation and integration at both methodological and theoretical levels in the search for solutions to pressing social problems" (14). Interestingly, bearing on this point in relation to the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh,[7] Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá[8]

6 From a Ḥadíth.

7 Ḥuqúqu'lláh, translated as "The Right of God" is considered by Bahá'ís as a spiritual bounty and obligation. It involves a payment from one's surplus capital (above a certain threshold) offered to the Universal House of Justice to support the work of the Bahá'í Faith and for public welfare.

8 Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá (b.1911-d.2007), Hand of the Cause of God,

signaled the anticipated insights from both science and the humanities:

> Evidently the scientific progress and philosophic deductions in the coming centuries will shed light on the hidden realities of this great law, particularly in the fields of cause and effect, reciprocity, and mutual assistance, which bind together all the component parts of the world of creation and control their cooperation in harmony and balance. (184)

Interdisciplinarity in this sense is also exemplified in Nader Saiedi's approach in *Gate of the Heart*. On the back cover we read, "Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Nader Saiedi examines the Báb's major works in multifaceted context, explaining the unique theological system, mystical world view, and interpretive principles they embody as well as the rhetorical and symbolic uses of language through which the Báb radically transforms traditional concepts."[9]

A discussion of interdisciplinarity as a kind of multi-methodology invites us to consider the advent of generative Artificial Intelligence. On the one hand, AI holds significant promise for problem solving and innovation, including from an interdisciplinary perspective, through its ability to analyze vast amounts of data and integrate knowledge from multiple fields. On the other hand, the pressing ethical issues presented by AI—bias, misinformation, lack of transparency, etc.—indicate that close human oversight remains a moral imperative. This oversight must itself be interdisciplinary, involving computer science and a range of social sciences in a conversation that can inform both technical design and government policy (see Al-kfairy et al. for an example of such an approach).

2. Interdisciplinarity as bringing two bodies of knowledge into relationship

Ernest Boyer's work is helpful in this connection. Perceiving the dangers of the lack of connectivity in prevailing conceptions of the world and the implications for a fragmented view of knowledge, he set forth in his celebrated work *Scholarship Reconsidered*, a "scholarship of integration" (16) as one of the four functions of an educator.[10] He writes: "By integration, we mean making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialities in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists, too. . . . What we mean is serious, disciplined work that seeks to

served as Chief Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh from 1955 to 2007.

9 The reason for highlighting Nader Saiedi's work, in particular is that Bahá'ís may be familiar with it; of course, many scholars in other contexts use this kind of interdisciplinarity.

10 For Boyer, the four functions of an educator are "the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching" (*Scholarship Reconsidered* 16).

interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear on original research" (18–19). For example, Herman Pi'ikea Clark, a Kanaka Maoli, tells the story of how he, as an Indigenous Hawaiian art educator, discovered a reconnection to the Kanak Maoli cultural framework through immersion in the Māori art context in Aotearoa / New Zealand, ultimately giving rise to the emergence of an Indigenous cultural-based alternative educational practice in Hawaii (Clark). Clark's experience also speaks to Boyer's conception of a certain beauty in connectivity, one which both reflects a "more integrated view of knowledge" (*Scholarship Reconsidered* 19) and yields "authentic discoveries" ("From Scholarship" 132).

3. Interdisciplinarity as bringing a diversity of perspectives to bear on the object of study

Seeking to enhance our understanding of the world, Stephen Friberg, drawing on the work of Helen Longino, argues that diversity of perspective is necessary in the search for objective scientific knowledge. He observes, "Diversity . . . plays a vital role in overcoming bias and creating objectivity if properly harnessed, and thus contributes to both Bahá'í consultation and learning in action, as well as shedding light on the way that Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is scientific in its method" (23). Obtaining a fuller picture of reality necessarily involves diverse perspectives, whether in the form of diverse disciplinary perspectives, diverse disciplinary training or diverse life experience / background and so forth. Diversity of perspectives enables participants to question assumptions and explore ambiguities in light of empirical evidence giving rise to new insights. Todd Smith puts it this way: "[I]nterperspectival collaboration offers the possibility of richer, more incisive readings of reality and corresponding, more inclusive visions of how to advance inquiry" ("Becoming" 60). Ien Ang draws on the concept of hybridity to highlight its importance. She observes, "research and writing from a hybrid perspective always has to establish itself relationally, articulating a shifting multiplicity of standpoints that are put into dialogue with one another to bring about a more comprehensive, multifaceted understanding of the world" (26).

4. Interdisciplinarity as an expression of systems thinking

Christine Blackmore and John Smyth advocate a systems approach to illustrate the need to engage with multiple perspectives in order to understand the whole. In the context of teaching global citizenship,[11] they write:

11 From a Bahá'í perspective, education in global citizenship is an integral element in the promotion of human agency. It is regarded by the Universal House of Justice to be "part of the standard education of every child" (Message, October 1985) so that children "see themselves as citizens of one world, the builders of a just and prosperous world civilization"

> Taking a systems approach involves thinking in terms of being part of a system rather than a separate entity; appreciating a range of different perspectives and motivations as well as one's own and understanding relevant interconnections. Our perspectives on the world are partial and we cannot understand the whole unless we take multiple perspectives into account. (204)

By affirming the integral relationship between an individual and its environment and the importance of multiple perspectives, a systems approach opens up possibilities for diverse forms of connectivity to flourish and the ripe conditions for reciprocity to emerge. The role of reciprocity in the unshackling of asymmetrical relationships is highlighted by Rebecca Bilous et al.: "Adopting an ethics of reciprocity in the context of research, learning and teaching is an attempt to reframe unequal power dynamics that can dominate researcher-researched, and academy-community relationships" (292).

Indigenous peoples have long experience in this connection. Their enhanced ability to see the world through multiple lens has opened new vistas of research and enquiry. The first part of the next section of this paper will explore some such experience.

(Bahá'í International Community, "World Citizenship").

Challenges Associated with an Interdisciplinary Approach

Aboriginal educator, Judy Atkinson, a Jiman (from Central West Queensland) and Bundjalung (Northern New South Wales) woman, also with Anglo-Celtic and German heritage, points to the need to build a bridge between Indigenous ways of knowing and the academy.[12] Reflecting upon the challenge entailed in this undertaking, Atkinson observes:

> I struggle to negotiate a place for Indigenous worldviews and pedagogical practice, within a space that was, and continues to be controlled by a dominance that, too often, believes in its own superiority. In an attempt to create safe *places* of learning and healing, within academic space—I often found a continuation of colonial systems of power, perpetuated by the very institution(s) in which I was working. ("Negotiating Worldviews" 42; italics in original)

Atkinson has developed a person-centered approach to healing referred to as "educaring." This approach—which recognizes the reciprocal relationship between healing and education and is located in a "multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural education" framework ("Negotiating Worldviews" 51)—invites participants

12 Academy denotes "institutions of higher learning" (Atkinson, "Occasional Address").

to "understand the social, political, psychological, environmental, family and community functions that have made them who they are, and how they relate to the world in which they live" (*Trauma* 84) and "take charge of their own lives, and that of their families and communities" ("Negotiating Worldviews" 51).

Ocean Rīpeka Mercier, a Māori from the Ngāti Porou tribe on the East Coast of Aotearoa/New Zealand tells of similarly hazardous "border crossings" (Aikenhead and Jegede 271) in her narrative about her experience as a physicist and teacher in unfamiliar spaces transitioning from Physics to Māori Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka in 2004 (Mercier). So "immense" were the differences between the two departments, at once "philosophical, structural and social" (64) that she equates the disciplinary divide with a "faultline." She observes, "Characterising the disciplinary divide as a faultline is evocative of: historical rifts, the ever-present potential of shifting landscapes, uncertainty in building on top of the faultline, but an area in which renewal and growth is seen. Making camps either side of the disciplinary divide necessitates crossing this line" (64). While facing numerous challenges in this transition, Mercier's migratory experience has ultimately enabled her to set up camp on the "faultline" where she has opened up new cultural spaces and initiated innovative interdisciplinary work drawing on the rich resources available to her at the disciplinary interface. For example, she has introduced two interdisciplinary courses "Science and Indigenous Knowledge" which explores Indigenous knowledge systems and their interface with Western science; and "Cultural Mapping" which introduces students to the practice of cultural mapping at the intersection of Geography and Māori Studies in the context of Māori development (Mercier).

While an interdisciplinary approach may be helpful in many areas of endeavor, its enactment, however, as demonstrated by Atkinson and Mercier, is challenged by a range of considerations. The following discussion begins by considering one of the central "overt" problems of interdisciplinarity—the practical challenge of putting disciplinary perspectives into conversation in a coherent way—before then introducing the more fundamental challenge of the human dimension, i.e. the key requirement of universal participation.

The "Fusion of Horizons"

The challenges associated with enacting an interdisciplinary approach are wide-ranging: inherent power differentials that advance the interests of certain disciplines while diminishing others; evolving methodologies; structural inequities in relation to resources, etc.; a lack of established benchmarks; and disparate cultural and academic conventions, to name but a few (see for example, Atkinson, "Negotiating Worldviews"; Mann; Tuck and McKenzie).

In "A Reading of Sona Farid-Arbab's *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*" with reference to curriculum, Gerald Filson, while acknowledging the role of interdisciplinary studies in "putting concrete problems of human life at the center [of education]" (98) also concurs with Farid-Arbab that "the logic or form and development in specific disciplines of knowledge, whether in science or the arts and humanities, can be very poorly covered in some interdisciplinary studies approaches, and a sound mastery of pertinent disciplines can be neglected if the formal logic of disciplines is ignored" (98–99). How then to address such valid concerns around superficiality while yet responding to the "challenge to achieve a synthesis, or at least a coherent correlation of the vast amount of knowledge that has been acquired during the past century"? (Universal House of Justice, 23 March 1983). In this connection, recognizing both the strengths and limitations of the methods employed across the disciplines, it is fully acknowledged that the nature of the integrative process which utilizes disciplinary perspectives is both dynamic and complex, requiring a certain humility to be willing "to put our own presuppositions on trial" (Smith "Becoming" 49) and be receptive to a broadened understanding of one's discipline. Further, in a discussion on the interplay of science and religion, the Universal House of Justice highlights the need to anticipate ambiguities and underlines the importance of not imposing methodological limits on science:

> The prosecution of this vast enterprise [to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence] will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. (19 May 1995)

In reflecting on the "dynamic interplay" of science and religion (Smith "Science" 13), and pointing to a way forward, Smith draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" (317). Gadamer observes:

> The concept of "horizon" suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. (316)

Smith suggests that the "fusion of horizons" is "where different systems of knowledge mature through an ongoing interchange that challenges their respective preconceptions, opens

up new vistas of understanding, and thereby leads to their reciprocal enrichment without necessarily compromising that which is core to each of them" ("Science" 13). Ever mindful of the attendant problems associated with implementing such an approach, noting *inter alia* the "culture of protest" (Bahá'í International Community "Prosperity") far removed from the "ethics of reciprocity" (Bilous et al. 292) required for effective interchange, Smith invokes a commitment to "the ontological assumptions of oneness, nobility, and purpose" ("Becoming" 62). Recognizing ontological oneness as the basic premise that governs human relations presupposes—nay, enjoins—collective participation in human affairs. Such a recognition affirms the "constructive contributions" (Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010) of every member of the human family. Accordingly, to be true to its purpose, interdisciplinarity relies on universal participation, where everyone who is impacted by a decision is able to contribute on an equal footing. The appeal for the participation of people at the grassroots is not new. Kurt Lewin's introduction of "action research" in the 1940s has long been influential (34). The crescendo of interest is widespread and is recently evident in the International Science Council's call for "actionable knowledge" (Kaiser and Gluckman 18). The question then arises: how can individuals be empowered to participate? To this discussion we now turn.

Capability and Transformation

Dr. Farzam Arbab, in his book chapter "Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion and Development", highlights the vulnerability of an interdisciplinary approach to misuse if certain conditions are neglected. He relates his experience as a member of an interdisciplinary group concerned with rural development at the Universidad del Valle in Columbia. The challenging issue was that the group had already previously determined their definitions about development which were to shape the model to guide the implementation of their plans in the region. Commenting on the disjuncture between two distant realities, he observes, "The gap between the reality of life we encountered there [Norte del Cauca, a rural region near Cali] and the elaborate constructs of the interdisciplinary group uncovered contradictions that I found difficult to ignore" (152). Accordingly, such an approach would deprive the local villagers of any involvement in planning or development of proposed models prior to the point of implementation. This ultimately led Dr. Arbab to gradually withdraw himself from the group and together with a few other colleagues engage in the activities of Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC, Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) a non-governmental development organization in Colombia.[13]

13 More information about

A core guiding principle of FUNDAEC is "people centred development" (Arbab F. 154), a principle which implies that community members should actively participate in the development of their own regions. Central to the framework developed by FUNDAEC is the concept of "capability." Capability is defined by FUNDAEC as the "developed capacity to think and to act in a well-defined sphere of activity and according to a well-defined purpose" (*Basic Concepts* 60–61). Conceived of as a means "to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge" (Farid-Arbab 274), the concept of capability has a pivotal role to play in promoting the modes of thought and behavior commensurate with a unified global society. Reflecting on the education of youth in the context of a fragmented curriculum, Dr. Arbab positions capability front and center in addressing this challenge:

> This situation calls for a fresh look at the universe of knowledge and for a new way to bring together its diverse elements in curricula that respect the wholeness of knowledge yet anticipate specialization at a later stage. The focus of each set of interrelated educational activities should be the development of one or more capabilities—scientific, artistic, technical, social, moral, and spiritual—endowing the individual with the understanding of concepts, knowledge of facts, and mastery of methods, as well as the skills, attitudes, and qualities he or she needs to lead a fruitful life. Specifically, in this age of transition, it is imperative to endow youth with a twofold moral purpose: to take charge of their own intellectual and spiritual growth and to make significant contributions to the transformation of society. (Arbab F. 223)

The depiction of a learning culture that respects the "wholeness of knowledge" as the backdrop for the development of individual capabilities and the associated "two-fold moral purpose" is similarly portrayed by Boyer. In Boyer's account one's "sense of purpose" is conditional on the integration of knowledge into a "larger pattern." He observes: "If there is a failure in the academy today, it is that there are fragments of knowledge without a larger pattern. So we develop our own special categories and speak only to ourselves, and we fail to give any sense of purpose or larger perspective to our students" ("From Scholarship" 132). Hence, the foregoing discussion would suggest that there is a correspondence between the realization of a "larger pattern" in the "universe of knowledge" and the promotion of human agency. Why so? The awareness of global interconnectivity—embedded in the "inclusive historical consciousness"—and its corollary—the reciprocal relationships that bind the

FUNDAEC is available on its website: https://fundaec.org/en/.

"fragments of knowledge"—entails an empowering conceptual shift in understanding inasmuch as individuals begin to see a connection between their own actions and their impact on the broader society. In this way, they derive meaning through their actions and this in turn develops individual capacity to contribute to the betterment of society; a capacity augmented by the learning acquired through action.

By illustrating the close connection between deeds and the unlocking of the portals of vision, Bahá'u'lláh makes the connection between action and learning crystal-clear: "O people! Words must be supported by deeds, for deeds are the true test of words. Without the former, the latter can never quench the thirst of the yearning soul, nor unlock the portals of vision before the eyes of the blind" (*Tabernacle* 1.13). Recognizing the significant role of action and vision in learning, David Hicks and Cathie Holden conceptualize the relationship between action and vision in terms of symbiosis, positing that vision leads to empowerment because it sustains action:

> Vision offers direction and energy because it harnesses deep aspirations. Direction and energy lead to effective work and action, which may in turn lead to modification of the vision. It may broaden it, also strengthen it. The test of any vision is whether it speaks to people's hearts, to their sense of compassion and justice, for both people and planet. (138)

Keeping in mind the important interplay between action and the power of vision, we will now explore "learning in action" from a Bahá'í perspective.

Learning in Action

In the Bahá'í community "learning in action" is a widely adopted framework for social action. It has been defined as a "a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding" (The Universal House of Justice, qtd. in *Social Action*, ¶151). To allay any concerns in this context about the possible rigidity of such a framework, Paul Lample observes that, "the idea of a 'framework' has nothing to do with a narrow imposition of methods or formulaic procedures, but is intended to provide an evolving, shared understanding of beliefs, concepts, methods, practices, vision and approaches relevant to advancing work in the particular arena of endeavor at hand" (15). In implementing this framework, all those engaged in its activities—the individual, the community and the institutions—are encouraged to gather insights through social action in the field as they emerge. By engaging in activities and decision-making at the grassroots, informed by the guidance accrued from study, there is a "reciprocal flow of learning" (Smith and Sabet 11) among the participants generating new insights, along with shared responsibility and a sense of

empowerment. The Universal House of Justice has noted that the "insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared" (29 December 2015). Such a systematic, collaborative and integrated approach to knowledge generation helps one to make sense of the complexity of reality by identifying areas of need and opportunity; existing capabilities; and emerging currents of inquiry thereby better positioning the community to collectively move forward to address complex problems. To better understand the operative aspects of this mode of learning in action we can draw on the concept of "interplays" defined by Smith as "mutually reinforcing and uplifting dynamics between two or more elements" ("Becoming" 51). Several interplays are identified such as "reader and reality"; "science and religion"; ("Becoming" 52) "the individual and the collective" ("Crisis" 92) etc. Insofar as the mode of learning in action "engenders, incorporates, attends to and quickens" the various interplays ("Becoming" 51), together they enable the filtering of the learning process to distil the wheat from the chaff so that those insights of value can be harnessed and any bias or prejudice can be set aside. Simultaneously, individuals develop the capacity to think and act in accordance with them reciprocally (Smith "Becoming"). In this way, then, it becomes possible in our reading of reality to promote "collaborative attunement", a term that denotes the occurrence of "a unity among a diversity of attunements to a given reality consistent with the interdependent nature of reality as a whole" ("Becoming" 47).[14] Of course, the effective functioning of the mode of learning in action is integral to the degree of "collaborative attunement" which occurs. We will now briefly examine the role of consultation in this framework.

The role of consultation—an effective tool to distil understanding—is explained by the Universal House of Justice:

> If learning in action is to be the primary mode of operation in the area of social and economic development, the Bahá'í principle of consultation needs to be fully appreciated. Whether concerned with analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action, consultation may be seen as collective search for truth. Participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved. In this conception of the collective

14 See Smith "Becoming Attuned to Reality: Presuppositions and the Power of Learning in Action" and "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom" for a detailed discussion on various interplays and their role in collaborative attunement to reality in the context of the mode of learning in action.

> investigation of reality, truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action. (Message, 26 November 2012)

Interestingly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that it is "only after the clash of differing opinions" that the "shining spark of truth cometh forth" Here, there is "no occasion for ill-feeling or discord" (*Selections* ¶44). Rather, what is needed is adherence to truth-seeking and universal participation in order that a "culture of learning" may emerge (Kazemipour 149). Assuredly, alongside the frank exchange of opinions, there needs to be a concomitant commitment to the development of personal qualities such as a sense of justice, an understanding of the equality of women and men, freedom from prejudice, humility, courtesy, patience and unity of purpose. In this way, consultation, as a key collective practice in the process of learning in action serves as "the collective investigation of reality" in which all can participate, regardless of background or experience. Further, consultation "generates unity of vision about the way things are, what could be, and how to achieve what could be" (Smith and Ghaemmaghami 460). Accordingly, not only do participants gain insight into the root causes underpinning social problems in their local realities and in wider contexts, as well as resources and possibilities therein, they also gain linguistic capital and the power of expression—an important capability and source of empowerment—enabling individuals to see themselves as agents of social change.

Participation in the Discourses of Society

It is worthy of note that in seeking to apply knowledge gained in the field to address complex problems in their communities, Bahá'ís are also encouraged to gain further insights through participation in prevalent discourses in society. In this undertaking the method of correlation—whereby correlative linkages are identified between different areas of knowledge in order to measure the degree to which two variables are related (Martin, Carlson, and Buskist)—has especial significance. Accordingly, where the correlation is negative, the subjects of enquiry are understood to be mutually exclusive; where the correlation is positive, new connections can be made and new insights harnessed (see McLean). The method has been advocated by Shoghi Effendi for investigating and analyzing the relationship between the Bahá'í teachings and the academic disciplines as well as other systems of truth. For example, Shoghi Effendi encouraged Bahá'í students "to investigate and analyze the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science . . . for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation

of truth" (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi qtd. in *Issues*). In this connection, the weighty task involves correlating the teachings across the compass of "modern thought." The Universal House of Justice observes:

> This process [of learning in which the Bahá'í community is engaged] will be augmented by research and discussion and by attempts to correlate the teachings with modern thought, including the identification of similarities and distinctions between the teachings and contemporary social constructs. Involvement in the discourses of society by believers in various social spaces will sharpen the insights gained. (qtd. in *Social Action* ¶153)

Hence, the active participation of Bahá'ís in the discourses of society is an indispensable adjunct to the learning in action framework.

Conclusion

Addressing the fundamental challenge to interdisciplinarity—the need to ensure the full participation of people at the grassroots so that its protagonists are both generating knowledge while learning in the field of action and incorporating elements of interdisciplinarity at a conceptual level into that learning—is key to its efficacy. The intentional integration of the learning in action framework involving the iterative process of consultation, action, reflection and study of the Sacred Texts, is integral to building that capacity. Whatever the complex problems to address, a necessary ability is to be able to read one's social reality in the evolving global narrative—to identify the interplays shaping that reality and to lend one's thought and action to their reciprocal advancement in the direction of a unified global society. Thus, where an interdisciplinary approach is embedded in a context where the generation of knowledge occurs as and when knowledge is applied and also engages a group of learners in which all participants are equal partners, it has true potential to serve beneficial ends. For it is through engagement in this process that individuals gain a positive sense of self-worth which in turn engenders a will to act and arise with confidence, foresight and a clear vision to shoulder their responsibilities to contribute to societal transformation. In this way, the constructive forces of motivation which can dismantle the underpinning assumptions about the negative view of human nature and overcome inertia and apathy, are set in motion.

Inasmuch as the need to restore confidence and envision a better future has never been greater than in the current reality, it may be helpful to consider the words of Clifford Geertz which point to a new reality. Reflecting on changes to prevailing conceptions of knowledge, Geertz points out that while expressions of "blurred genres" (165) are not new, it is their rapid and widespread proliferation which takes us by surprise. For Geertz, there is

a "refiguration" in the way we think (165). He observes:

> It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think. (166)

To conclude, we would do well to ponder the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "Every single letter proceeding from Our mouth is endowed with such regenerative power as to enable it to bring into existence a new creation—a creation the magnitude of which is inscrutable to all save God. He verily hath knowledge of all things." (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 67–68)

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