



Editorial Introduction

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This issue of *Information Technologies & International Development* raises questions (and provides answers) about both interdisciplinarity and development theory. A forum piece by Geoff Walsham, emeritus professor at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, exhorts us, as members of the ICTD research and practice community, to do better on both fronts. Reflecting on his keynote at the international ICTD 2010 conference in London and his observations at ICTD 2012 in Atlanta, he points in particular to some of the structural features of conference organizing and peer-review that could make a difference.

As an associate editor for *ITID*, certainly in deciding which manuscripts to put through review and which reviewers to assign to an article, the challenges (and possibilities) of interdisciplinarity are not far from my mind. I look at the writing of submitted manuscripts for accessibility to a diverse readership, and I seek to assign appropriate reviewers who possess a certain breadth of interest and enthusiasm for scholarly diversity. However, the possibilities for steering the research field of ICTD to a deeper level of interdisciplinarity are more likely to be powerful and profound if they come at even earlier stages of research, not at the very end stage of publication. This could take the form of presenting late-breaking research findings before diverse audiences, or it could be situated in the formation of new research projects, or at an even earlier stage, in curriculum building for ICTD courses or degree programs.

What we should be aiming for, as Walsham suggests, is really *trans*-disciplinarity. He quotes Bryant and Land (2012) on the desirability of drawing from the unique strengths of different disciplines while “creating the space of their productive encounter so that a different kind of knowledge emerges in the act of intersection.” Walsham’s concern in his comments about the ICTD conference goes beyond the substance and approach of the research presented to consider how a conference venue might best facilitate these productive encounters. How can we structure a conference such that people of different disciplines don’t just mingle, but engage and become changed in their own research orientation by the work of others? This is Walsham’s call to the organizers of future ICTD conferences, including the upcoming one in Cape Town, South Africa. It is perhaps a tall order, but a worthy one. His specific recommendations can be found in his forum piece.

Beyond the question of interdisciplinarity, Walsham also encourages a deeper engagement with existing theories of development, rather than allowing the D in ICTD to be implicit. On this matter, the research articles in this issue make a strong showing, as each one explicitly situates itself in theory. The

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capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen (a “heterodox economist,” as I’ve heard him referred to) has become in ICTD (and elsewhere) the go-to alternative to more conventional economic growth-based theories of development. It is drawn upon in two of the three research articles in this issue (Bass et al. and Vincent & Cull). The work here and by others makes the critical effort to bring Sen’s approach to bear specifically on ICT-based intervention work in development (also, be on the lookout for Dorothea Kleine’s forthcoming book from the MIT Press on Sen and ICTD).

Two papers in this issue (Tapia et al. and Bass et al.) manage to situate themselves somewhere between the micro interactional domain of, for example, interface design, and the very, very macro level of nation-state level policies and global processes. They do so by looking at organizations and drawing from organizational theory.

In Tapia et al., the collective role of information technologies and information systems is viewed as being a kind of connective fiber among organizations. The time pressure of crisis response, one can imagine, would create enormous organizational challenges. The authors look especially at collaboration in relation to organizational hierarchies. Their contribution joins a growing body of work in this space of IT and IS as employed by NGOs to both improve their processes and be of benefit (if indirectly so) to the communities they serve.

Bass et al. contribute a piece that respecifies theory to contribute value to the domain of ICTD. The authors seek a fruitful combination of Sen’s capabilities approach with institutional theory to bridge between the micro level that deals with individual choice and the macro level where rules, norms, and structures shape the environment of these choices. In their study of several institutions of higher education in Ethiopia, they look at challenges to students in this setting (in light of changing curriculum and growing enrollment) that alter “the extent to which technology expands people’s abilities to determine and realize lives that they value.”

A third research article in this issue (Vincent & Cull), the second to take up Sen’s capabilities approach, evaluates women-led dairy farming cooperatives in Lesotho. It offers an all-too-rare longitudinal analysis, returning to the cooperatives over four years for further evaluation of impact after the introduction of 10 mobile phones. The authors offer an important insight in their conclusion, not simply that “impact” may take time, but that this is especially true of certain types of impact (they specify empowerment as one of these impacts). In the rush to evaluate ICT and other development interventions, projects are often judged in terms of immediate measures. How does this skew the kinds of projects that are deemed successful and those that receive funding in this era of impatient M&E (monitoring and evaluation) requirements?

It is encouraging that this issue of *ITID* offers research articles that reflect a diverse range of departmental affiliations (including schools of business, computing, architecture, and planning, and departments of information science and sociology), as well as geographic diversity among authors. This is a good sign, but not necessarily a guarantee of either inter- or trans-disciplinarity, or of the generation of a truly “different kind of knowledge.” In addition to enjoying what is on offer in this issue of *ITID*, I would encourage readers to take up the cause of interdisciplinarity in other ways. Ask a friendly anthropologist, computer scientist, or economist, or someone in the fields of information science, business, public policy, or public health to recommend some piece of published research they consider important. Better yet, follow up with a conversation after reading it. Through such open conversations, we may yet find the foundations (of theory and practice) to distinguish the novel contributions and possibilities of this emerging field.

References

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