

## Interdisciplinary research in water resources

**Jonker, Lewis & Manzunu, Emmanuel.** 2008. **Playing the water dance.** Stellenbosch: Sun Press. 89 p. Price: R150,00. ISBN: 978-1-920109-95-0.

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This is indeed a very catchy title for a rather serious and – most of times – a time consuming and energising process of doing and facilitating research in water from many disciplinary angles. The WaterNet funded the publication of this book. Five authors contributed, namely Lewis Jonker (zoologist and educationist at the University of the Western Cape), Emmanuel Mazungu (a research associate from the Netherlands working in Zimbabwe), Lorna Holtman (a postgraduate of the University of the Western Cape), Innocent Nhapi (from the Faculty of Applied Sciences in Rwanda) and Hubert Savenuey (representing the Water Resources Section of the Delft University of Technology and Unesco). WaterNet promotes Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) to support the process of developing research guidelines and aids that compliments a variety of disciplines' way of doing research and drawing conclusions. *Playing the water dance* was such an effort by the leading authors Jonker and Manzunu.

A key concern as motivation for the development of *Playing the water dance* was the need for a systematic research process in the relation of water to people among researchers of different academic backgrounds doing water research together under the banner of an interdisciplinary methodology. The authors expressed the hope that policy-makers, planners and members of society would also use *Playing the water dance*. However, it will probably mainly be the academic researcher that should benefit the most. This “broader” utility focus is waning somewhat when the authors, on p. xvi, turn the discussion into another direction by stating: “The idea of this guide was not to produce a treatise on conducting research in this wide and interesting field. Rather the guide provides important hints on how to undertake research”. The “how” in so far then as research in water-focused themes is concerned as viewed from an interdisci-

plinary angle, becomes a second priority in the publication. Therefore, most chapters of Parts 1, 2 and 3 (accept for Chapters 4 and 7) can be seen as familiar texts to every postgraduate student in all institutions dealing with research.

Two key differences that distinguish this “guide” from the ordinary postgraduate research guide are the easy-going way in which it is written and secondly the more expansive and valuable Chapter 4 that explicitly focuses on important aspects of dealing with water as an interdisciplinary research theme in the field. However, the authors fail to be more specific about “interdisciplinary” other than the short section 1.4 in which the interdisciplinary approach is boosted. The authors expressed critique against past “interdisciplinary” and “multidisciplinary” studies because these works express a so-called lack of understanding of the “intricacies involved in relation to how people use water”. Young researchers finding their way into interdisciplinary research and representing different disciplines and under-graduate training would certainly want to know how their discipline could contribute to *Playing the water dance*. Obviously, it can become a daunting task to describe research possibilities in a specific theme such as water in all disciplines. An effort to acknowledge the variety and to describe their key utility worth within a theme such as water could provide a solid backing for a continuation of this discussion guide on how to deal with interdisciplinary research. In addition, note should be taken of the constraints among all disciplines regarding an accepted methodology, and an accommodation of methodology not familiar to one’s research repertoire as challenges. A lack thereof is part and parcel of the reasons why some past “interdisciplinary efforts” have failed.

In Chapter 1 of *Playing the water dance* the interdisciplinary possibility is totally absent. It rather reflects well-known current trends in all disciplines, namely a focus on research in example water-based themes with a subject focus angle. It does not provide guidelines for that specific interdisciplinary touch to a theme. To not devote sufficient space to some theory and an impression on concepts and the theory of interdisciplinary research (according to the author’s statement on p. 9), do not suffice. This “guideline” or “reader” is precisely the correct platform for just doing that, rather than going into detail in basic content that most postgraduate researchers are perhaps familiar with when writing a research proposal.

If, according to *Playing the water dance*, “better research practice in institutionalising interdisciplinary research” is to be the focus (p. xvi) “to be developed fully” (p. 8), then theory and practice must be

equally valued in a publication of this nature. It simply is not possible to understand and apply the one without the other. As a result the following questions, as examples of questions by young postgraduate researchers and their promoters/facilitators on Chapters 2 to 6, may be expected because of vague and incomplete explanations or/and information:

- How do I develop a notion of interdisciplinary consideration into my research proposal? As it stands in the publication, it reflects the subject only.
- Why do you call a topic “interdisciplinary research” but state that “(i)nterdisciplinary research does not mean that all disciplines need to be included”? (p. 8). Does it mean a few can be included or nothing at all when you deal with a theme outside the boundaries of your subject but at least focus on people?
- The methodology of all disciplines/major science groupings in certain faculty boundaries do not appear in Chapter 4, neither in Chapter 3 (p. 28 top as example), nor as a possibility of a newly created combined design that may fit all shoes doing interdisciplinary research on the same theme but from various angles. The problem reflects itself in Chapters 4 and 5 where methodology applications only relate to some disciplines. The question then is how do you go about with research content that for example deals with the human side in research themes or deals with trends and historical events rather than models and theories (compare for example Section 5.6)?

To have insight in a “problem related water issue” is not going to solve it by existing and new theories only, but rather through an efficient methodological approach accepted by all faculties to marry research on a specific topic to theory in an integrated way. Whether the authors regard it as feasible or not, it was and is necessary to guide researchers through the methodology by providing some fundamental background on exactly what is perceived by “interdisciplinary” and how/why it can (or is said to be able to) accommodate all disciplines in the research design structure. After all is said and done with, *Playing the water dance* definitely serves as a newly created basis from which the conducting of interdisciplinary research in water resources management can be done with the intention to debate, improve and eventually constructively build on these first valuable strides taken.