

Playing the Water Dance
A guide to conducting and reporting interdisciplinary research in
water resources management
(Sun Press, AFRICAN SUN MeDIA, Stellenbosch, 2008)

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Indeed a very catchy title for a rather serious and – most of times – a time consuming and energizing process of doing and facilitating research in water from many disciplinary angles. The WaterNet funded the publication of this book in which 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 post graduate 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 & Unesco). WaterNet promotes Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) to support the process of developing research guidelines and aids that compliments a variety of discipline's way of doing research and a drawing of conclusions. The *Playing the Water Dance* was such an effort by the leading authors Jonker and Manzungu.

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 also expressed the hope that *Playing the Water Dance* will also be used by policy makers, planners and members of society. However, it will probably mainly be the academic researcher that should benefit the most. This “broader” utility focus is wining somewhat when the authors, on p. xvi, turn the discussion into another direction by stating that: “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 interdisciplinary 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 post graduate student in all institutions dealing with research.

Two key differences that distinguishes this “guide” from the ordinary post graduate 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. Critique is expressed by the authors 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 pre 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. Also the constraints between all disciplines regarding an accepted methodology, and an accommodation of methodology not familiar to your research repertoire as challenges, should be taken note of. A lack thereof are 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 eg water based themes with a subject focus angle. It does not provide guidelines for that specific interdisciplinary touch to a theme. To not devote some 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 into basic content that most post graduate researchers are perhaps familiar

with when writing a research proposal.

If “better research practice in institutionalizing interdisciplinary research”, according to *Playing the Water Dance*, 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 post graduate 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 states that “Interdisciplinary 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 don't 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 be solved by existing and new theory only but rather through an efficient methodological approach accepted by all faculties to marry research on for example a specific topic in an integrated way. Whether the authors regard is 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 (is said to be able to) accommodate all disciplines in the research design structure. Especially those in the Historical and Human Sciences. After all is said and done with, it *Playing the Water*

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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.