

## THE PERVERSE EFFECTS OF FASHIONABLE WORDS IN CURRICULAR REFORM

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*When I am telling the truth,  
I don't do this to convince those who do not know it,  
but to defend those who do know the truth.*  
(William Blake)

**Abstract:** *The present paper represents a reflection upon the state of curriculum reform in Romania after twenty seven years since its beginnings. It intends to focus on the analysis and the implied considerations on a very specific aspect of the curriculum reform: the cacophonous language (quoting Pinar, W. 1975) which in Romanian reform has reached really high levels. More specifically, the purpose is to highlight the use of several terms in official documents and, further in educational practical field, without a real unitary understanding of their meanings. The perverse effects of such state are pointed out. Some brief considerations about the necessary strategy of the curriculum reform are presented. They argue the necessity of a genuine congruence and consistency along a period of reform in the field of curriculum. The paper presents explanations about some core concepts connected to the curriculum content and its way of been structured, correlated with some general principles that should be clearly understood, within the context of the curriculum focused on competencies. The paper belongs to a series of reflections about curriculum reform started in previous publications and wishing to be continued.*

**Key words:** *integrated curriculum, or integrated approach, interdisciplinary, pluridisciplinary, transdisciplinarity curriculum focused on competencies, competence*

### 1. Introduction

In a new hope arose in 1990 in the hearts of those who were pupils, of their families and, especially of teachers from schools of all levels. A new era was waited and now after twenty seven years the wait state is still alive.

The hope was based then, at the beginnings, on an extremely critical view about everything what had been happened in the Romanian school along the communist years.

The last decade, before that moment, unfortunately has offered an enough deep reason for this critical view. We have had needed of other two decades to understand that there were important good aspects in the education of the successive cohorts of graduates during communist era; most of these graduates have shown a solid training in their confrontation with their mates from other countries.

However, an educational reform obviously appeared as necessary. The reform has started, then in early '90. But, the reform is still in a kind of starting point even after these almost three decades. The obvious lack of congruence or consistency in the repetitive attempts to develop a strategy of the educational reform, as a frame of the curriculum reform, led to a kind of Babylonian tower. An important number of good intentions and even good starts had the misfortune to be abandoned again and again when the political strategy on the general level has been changed. The priority of education has remained a slogan revived from time to time when it was necessary to be released to be heard.

New generations were involved in the educational process. They have been confronted to so many changes, visions, and to a lot of intentions that eventually led to the education decline. The school dropout and the poor results in international assessments generic (like PISA) have managed to blur the real Romanian successes, still present, in clashes of worldwide school elites.

A lot of causes could be highlighted for this reality. One of them can be located in the area of the curriculum reform from diverse perspective:

- a general incongruent strategy,
- the repeated steep interruptions of "new beginnings",
- unexpected and unfortunate changes in the educational process trajectory of a cohort,
- a worrying and unjustified disconnection between the philosophy about the teaching and assessing components of curriculum reform etc.

Maybe, an exhaustive analysis of all these aspects could offer golden data for an effective reconsideration of this curriculum reform, that seems to be sentenced to a constantly stillness in its early stage.

The curriculum reform everywhere in the world represents a continuous process, but worldwide, the reform follows the necessary way of a ascending spiral of the curriculum development.

This paper intends to focus on the analysis and the implied considerations on a very specific aspect of the curriculum reform: the cacophonous language (quoting Pinar, W. 1975) which in Romanian reform

has reached really high levels. More specifically, this paper intends to highlight the use of several terms in official documents and, further in educational practical field, without a real unitary understanding of their meanings.

Integrated curriculum, or integrated approach, interdisciplinarity, pluridisciplinary, transdisciplinarity belong to the category of the mentioned terms and they are the specific topic of this paper.

## **2. Why it is necessary to understand the terms used in curriculum reform ?**

The strategy of a curriculum reform should have a logical number of steps and several defined levels.

The highest level is that of the policy of education one. A reform in curriculum is decided and generally managed from this level. But, under this umbrella there are levels, or should be, where the professionals of education and, particularly of curriculum should be the managers. Professionalism in the field of curriculum has itself its own levels: there are specialists in the theoretical field of curriculum and specialists in the practical one. They should act together but with responsibilities on different plans: strategic one for the first category, and tactical one for the second. Unfortunately, the real life does not respect this logical request. Quite often the things are mixed; the levels are interchanged without being genuinely connected. This connection is however strictly necessary.

When this request will be understood and respected for sure the effects are to be felt.

First of all it is important to have a group of professionals in the theory of curriculum able to create the foundation of what it is called as Frame of Reference for every Curriculum reform. This is an action on the level of *curriculum representation* or curriculum theory (Ungureanu, D.1999, Niculescu R.M., 2010), where the congruent meanings of the concepts are a strict necessity.

An in depth analysis of the successive documents belonging to this category in the Romanian curriculum reform does not reveal such a congruence. A glossary of terms should be included in this type of documents, expressing a mutual acceptance of explicit meanings, inside the authors' group, for each considered term.

Further, on the track of designing the strategy of the curriculum reform, all the defined terms must be used on the level of *curriculum representation of action*, in the same way, by designers who have previously shared and understood the accepted meanings. This plan of curriculum design is reflected in National Curriculum with all the subsequent documents, including syllabi, as official curriculum.

The level of designing syllabi is the one where the professionals of theory of curriculum should meet and work *together* with the professionals of practical level of education, scholars and teachers from different grades in education, even if the designing action is still on *strategic plan*. The National Curriculum with all its involved documents must represent a unity, with horizontal and vertical consistency, and must be built, assessed, published, and further implemented, as a unique document, possible to be effectively consulted in all its details. A good example could be the Ontario Province Curriculum<sup>1</sup>.

Curriculum implementation is a field that involves a large number of actors: teachers, students, middle managers in school as *leading actors*; parents, librarians, supporting teaching staff, community as *supporting actors*. It is important to understand that, at least the first group should be pre-trained before the process of implementation of a new curriculum starts. The involved actors have to be able to understand what they are asked to implement, because the correct *perceived curriculum* represents the foundation of an effective educational activity. From this point further, the tactical plan of curriculum reform enters in action. It must keep the stones of the strategy (National Curriculum) even if the design in its detailed takes into account the peculiar aspects of the educational context. Thus the flexibility should be considered within the limits of keeping the *unity of the essence*.

### **3. Some core concepts necessary to be genuinely understood**

#### **3.1. Principles in teaching and learning: trans-disciplinary and integrative learning approach**

A considerable number of methodological meetings in school are focused, at least formally, on: trans-disciplinary, pluri-disciplinary, integrated approaches. These three concepts get so many meanings from a family of school to another (micro-circle, in Romanian organization), from a teacher to another that the cacophony of voices in curriculum area is highlighted more than ever.

These concepts are connected to the curriculum contents, in professional debates, as important components of curriculum, of its core cell represented by the learning situation. The learning situations are meant to develop students' competencies, at least, as long as everybody claims the necessity to put the students in the center of the educational activity, the learners with their necessary development, according to the requests of a new and dynamic society.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teachers/curriculum.html>

Talking about competency, it could be defined as proved potential of a person to give an appropriate and effective answer to a specific task, putting in action own capacities/ abilities, working with self-selected knowledge, connected to a specified task, and motivated and led by attitudes based on genuine values. Talking about competency, it could be defined as proved potential of a person to give an appropriate and effective answer to a specific task, putting in action own capacities/ abilities, working with self-selected knowledge, connected to a specified task, and motivated and led by attitudes based on genuine values.

This definition suggests that a competency is developed within an educational process which involved appropriate learning activities. These learning activities represent the action facets of the designed learning situation. The learning situations are designed by teachers. They establish as expected outcomes (finalities) exactly the competencies to be achieved by the learners. The way to reach the expected results is that of selecting the adequate contents, of an efficient activity of teacher and students together upon these contents. A connected condition is also the effective use of teaching and assessing methods, able to support the developing of efficient learning and self-assessment methods. The teaching and assessing methodology turns, in time, into effective learning styles of the students. Another condition is the adequate allocation of the necessary time to cover this entire and complex process.

The core ingredients of competencies development are, of course, contents; but not as an aim in itself, but as vehicles towards the outcomes to be obtained: the designed competencies. What is, in fact, the content within the context of the structure of curriculum?

The components of the curriculum contents are considered to be (McNeil 1981 apud Wulf & Schave, 1984: 24):

- concepts such as: culture, growth, number, space, entropy and evolution;
- generalizations: lessons learned after a long and serious scientific research;
- capacities/abilities (skills) - expertise with different degrees of complexity in the construction of various types of approaches (primarily intellectual); they are the basis of aptitudes gradually formed structures, as operational structures of the personality;
- values – shared beliefs, with a director role in behavior as a basis for structuring and developing attitudes, the vectors of the personality.

Prioritizing content components in the structure of a curriculum depends on the philosophy of curriculum designers; this ideal is encapsulated by the educational ideal, established by the educational policy. Thus, the type of personality considered as desirable by the educational ideal represents an important criterion for the selection of the contents

The selected content components for each level of education are structured in different ways. The main *types of structuring contents* are: *on subjects (disciplinary*, as terms used in Latin languages literature), *inter-subjects or cross-curricular (interdisciplinary)*, *pluri-subjects or on themes (pluridisciplinarity)*, *modular* (on modules.). Nowadays another concept has appeared: *integrative approach*, but, as it will be explained this is not a way of structuring contents, but more a *methodological approach* in the context of philosophy of curriculum focused on competencies. This conception leads to another extremely used term, with a multitude of meanings: *”transdisciplinary”*. **Transdisciplinary** itself can be considered as an organizing principle, a manner of approaching contents, and not a way of structuring contents.

D'Hainaut (1981) speaks about so called instrumental transdisciplinarity that consists in approaching contents more than structuring them. It implies a common organizing principle of several disciplines, aiming to ensure the progress through each subject, before proceeding to the next principle. In this case, a focus on education as an ongoing process is highlighted. The meaning of the prefix *trans* may be here connected to *through* or to *over* (meaning *along of*.) The adjective „instrumental” refers to student’s active involvement in the process of their learning. It is assumed an integration of contents around the organizing principles, highlighting more a teaching attitude than a way of structuring contents.

D'Hainaut (1981) also introduces the wording “behavioural transdisciplinary approach”. It is defined as the one which highlights what the students should learn to do, how they are expected to act in situations that can be found at the end of a school cycle, or in life, not only in the context of subject matter or themes that are approached in the teaching activities. These represent only a practical context with formative effects. An enough strong accent should be put on the general intellectual and socio-emotional approaches of students, which they will be able to use further, in the situations for which they are trained.

The prefix *trans* has here the meaning of “*behind*” or even better of “*beyond*” what is to be learned. This type of transdisciplinarity involves a complex integrative process on the level of the learning situation in which the learner is involved. This time the emphasis is on product hypostasis of education. (apud Niculescu R.M. 2010: 136,137). In this case the concept of the trans-disciplinarity is much closed with the wording integrative approach in teaching. The last one has been introduced by Jerry Perez de Tagle (1986, apud Saint Louis University, 2008:6).

Hill B. (2008: 6,7) within the previously quoted paper says:  
”The verb *to integrate* means “to bring together or incorporate (parts) into a whole” so says Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary (1998).

[...] Integrative learning is an ongoing conversation between curriculum development, faculty development and assessment. Operationally defined, a teacher using integrative learning would be someone who developed and taught their classes using a mosaic of teaching strategies. They would review their course assessments at the end of their semester as well as reflecting on their own teaching style. Along with their course and self assessments, they would also be aware of their departmental program assessment outcomes. Throughout the school year, the teacher would routinely interact with peers in other disciplines for value added faculty development.”<sup>2</sup>

Here an active and reflective educator is highlighted, an educator who is interested to involve students into an educational process aiming to help them to remain engaged in their own developmental process.

”Learning through an integrated studies approach is enhanced when students are actively engaged in meaningful and relative topics. *Learners construct and produce knowledge by solving problems, conducting inquiry, engaging in reflection and building a repertoire of effective strategies.*

*Integrated studies helps students to become lifelong learners and allows efficient coverage and delivery of curriculum in terms of expertise, resources and time”*( An integrated approach to learning and teaching. w.y: 1)

The first concern seems to be about the results of the educational process on the students’ level, on their achieved competencies. It is about of the educator's attitude in teaching; the educator seems to have a specific philosophy about curriculum, which is able to generate a constructive attitude in learning from the students’ side.

### **3.2. Interdisciplinary and pluri-disciplinary – ways of structuring contents**

Structuring contents in an interdisciplinary way imply to organize the selected components of contents on broader areas (curriculum areas) that have in common: principles, laws and even concepts which can be detailed according to their specific appearance within more peculiar (disciplinary) contexts.

**Interdisciplinary** seen as a way of putting the contents into a national curriculum; it represents a necessary but not enough condition of an interdisciplinary approach.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.reference.com/education/integrated-approach-teaching-7526cac10b3fc03#> p. 1

The interdisciplinary approach should aim to develop a system of functional knowledge, at the intersection of different fields of knowledge when the manner of structuring contents in curriculum makes it possible. First, interdisciplinary is an attribute of the strategic curriculum design; here the facet of interdisciplinary as a way of structuring contents is more obvious. In the second case, it is a methodological approach of the educator (close to the integrative one); this facet becomes possible if the strategic design prepares an appropriate structure of contents. Both of them aim to determine an integrative process of student's learning. The development of the necessary students' competencies for solving complex problems, through the creation of a good background of practicing transversal/ transferable competencies, and the active involvement of students in this practice are the main goals of an interdisciplinary way of structuring contents and of an integrative approach of them within the teaching focused on learning process.

General and directed principles (putting in D'Hainaut's terms, 1981) are to be taught in this context. These principles or laws can be found in several areas of knowledge but they are specifically directed for each of them. It is supposed to be explained and demonstrated how a single principle or law could have many facets according to the field where it is supposed to action. (L. D'Hainaut, 1981, apud Niculescu R., 2010: 143).

This way of structuring the curriculum contents facilitates a cross-curricular approach and also, in the same time, facilitate the connections with a starting point in a subject towards other subjects and back. The student's mind flexibility can be developed, knowledge from an area being are used for solving problems in another area, issues apparently specific to a field being analyzed from other perspectives. This interconnected approach of information facilitates the development of functional, flexible and well structured knowledge. It facilitates the development of lateral thinking, of cognitive skills sets necessary to the transversal development of competencies. Students could develop open-minded attitudes instead of enriching a divided mind with memorized information. (Niculescu R.M., 2010: 143)

This approach has been expressed by our students using the metaphor of communicating vessels; each of vessels there may contain a liquid with a specific color, as in each subject the principles, laws or concepts may have specific meanings; in the same time common features with those are detected as belonging/ acting within other subjects. "The processing action in communicating vessels (similar to the educational process) facilitates the combination of various colors by ensuring the transfer of liquid from a container into another. Designing the learning situation within the educational process should respect the communicating vessels principle,



meaning that knowledge and capacities from one side are possible to be used on another side, enabling the transfer of learning from one situation to another, from one subject to another one, all facilitating a proper and effective development of the student's mind and soul, as a whole, a proper development of the student's cognitive and psycho-motric capacities on a positively evolving attitudinal background. The learner, in the same way as communicating vessels installation, will be a whole in which the contribution of each development department will be obvious and functional, like the colors of each container in the final color of the communicating vessels set, as the result of each component transferring from and to another component." (Niculescu R.M. 2010: 144,145).

### **Pluridisciplinary or multidisciplinary model**

Another interesting and extremely productive manner of structuring curriculum contents is represented by the pluridisciplinarity or multidisciplinary (d'Hainaut, 1981) which is, in fact, a structuring way focused on theme or projects. Different areas of knowledge are the source of each theme or project.

A simple proposal of a theme or of a project topic is not enough to determine the effectiveness of this manner of structuring contents. Like in the interdisciplinary case, the aware approach of the teaching process by the educator, focused on developing for student effective and complex learning experiences, containing and involving multiple competencies is the action side of a pluri-disciplinary design of the learning situations. The designed learning situations focused on themes should determine the students to act in order to achieve cognitive capacities (to analyze, compare, interpret, infer etc.) connected to each topic seen from multiple perspectives.

This way of structuring contents appears to be more effective, in my opinion, at the two extremes of schooling: preschool and possibly early primary education, and the final grades of upper secondary education.

On middle sequence of schooling, the interdisciplinary way of structuring contents connected to an integrative learning approach may ensure a deeper understanding of each knowledge field but not disconnected by the others, accompanied by a proper attitude for learning of the students, and an effective development of the core transferable competencies.

In preschool education, and partially in primary grades, the focus should be on developing a genuine motivation for learning as priority. This accompanies the creation of the fundamentals of the instrumental culture well and effectively accomplished. The mentioned aim may be well supported by a

combined way of pluri-disciplinary (thematic) structure of contents with an interdisciplinary one.

The use of themes/ projects may be taken into consideration in last primary grades and low secondary grades, in an interdisciplinary context as well.

The last year of the high school could totally eliminate the subjects and the curricular areas. They can be substitute with a correspondent number of themes/ projects. These should be approached by students in teams and/or individually; each theme should be asked to be treated, by a student or a group, from the perspective of other groups of subjects (curricular areas). Thus, each student is put into the situation to reflect on each theme/ project, eventually passing through all the previously studied subjects. The focus must be in this moment on re-organizing the knowledge of students, putting them to use what they have already learned into the service of solving the specific tasks of each theme and practicing important competencies for future life: for documentation, selection of proper information, interpretation of it according to the requests of the tasks, planning the paper editing, writing on computer, orally presenting the topic in front of the other students based on an self created support (PPT, Prezzi, poster etc.)

These ideas totally correspond to a definition of *integrated teaching and learning*<sup>3</sup>

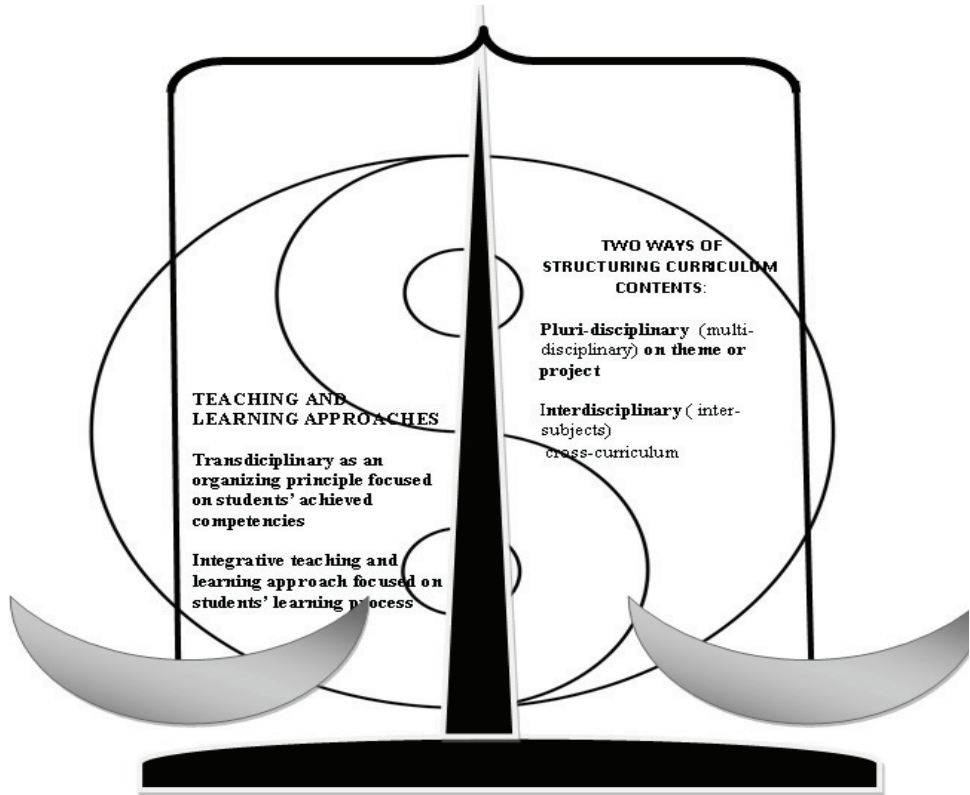
*“An integrated approach allows learners to explore, gather, process, refine and present information about topics they want to investigate without the constraints imposed by traditional subject barriers” (Pigdon and Woolley, 1992). An integrated approach allows students to engage in purposeful, relevant learning.”*

The effective **integrated approach** is possible first, if, from the strategic level of curriculum design , the structuring types as interdisciplinary or pluri-disciplinary are realized. Second, the effectiveness is possible if on the tactical level, the educators' philosophy and their trained competencies allows them to respect the principle of the transdisciplinarity as it was previously defined and to be leading actors of an integrative teaching focused on learning approach. The necessary balance between what the curriculum designers and the curriculum implementation actors must keep for

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.angelfire.com/stars5/integrated\\_teaching/integration.html](http://www.angelfire.com/stars5/integrated_teaching/integration.html)

the students' development of competencies is illustrated in the following figure (fig. 1)



*Fig. 1 Yin-Yang in designing and implementing curriculum contents within curriculum centered on competencies philosophy*

The D'Hainault vision about how the transdisciplinary principle or vision is put in practice, with a peculiar reference for pre-school curriculum is illustrated by the figure 2.

The left column inserts, on distinctive lines, by category, students' actions for the implementation of which, they must develop their competencies. This means to have the fundamental knowledge about, to practice proper capacities to use knowledge, to be motivated and directed by appropriate attitudes towards high standard elaborated competences. Other columns represent the five experiential domains of pre-school curriculum, but they can imply the different curricular areas or disciplines of other levels of schooling. The intersection of lines and columns gives possible ways of approaching the curriculum structure:

1. If a subject is approached as a distinctive knowledge field, trying to develop as much as possible competencies for each mentioned actions on

lines, a focused on subject approach is highlighted. (the vertical reading of the table)

2. Competencies for each action mentioned on lines, may be developed for almost all the knowledge areas (more effective if the designed structure of contents is an interdisciplinary one, providing fundamentals for an integrated approach).

3. A consistent number of competencies connected to different actions, specified on lines, may be developed through a thematic approach ( the diagonal/ transversal reading of the table imagined by circle).

CONTENTS aimed of learner's developing according to areas of development	Experiential domains				
	Language and communication field	Science domain	Human and society domain	Aesthetic and creative field	Psicho-metric field
Capacities for the following actions (based on knowledge and guided by attitudes , consisting in intellectual, emotional, attitudinal and psychomotor approaches of the child)					
<b>Language development and communication skills focused on the following actions:</b>					
To comunicate (reception & emition), translate/ to decode on language level					
<b>Cognitive development focused on the following actions:</b>					
To examine the context, react versu environment, problem solving anticipate (events, situations, solutions etc)	focused				
To decide, chose, appreciate					
To act , apply in cognitive field					
To adapt, transform, create					
To organize, manage (cognitive issues)					
To explain connections, to infer, argue, prove, extrapolate					
<b>Socio-Emotional Development focused on the following actions:</b>					
To react to emotional and relational environment	the mentioned capacities in the left column,				
To solve problems within the social and emotional field					
To anticipate (emotional reactions etc)					
to examine the social context and emotional climate					
to decide, choose, appreciate (in socio-emotional plan)					
to act socially with emotional foundations					
to apply, adapt, create social and emotional relationships					
to explain, transform social relationships and emotional feelings					
to organize, manage (social and emotional aspects)					
<b>Physical development, health and personal hygiene</b>					
to respond to the environment	within a subject field				
to decide, choose, appreciate solve movement problems and health ones					
to examine the context in which the education through and for movement, act in motor and health plan					
to apply rules related field, adapt to specific situations					
to transform, combine movements related to personal hygiene solutions					
<b>Capacities and attitudes to learning</b>					
to react to context through appropriate responses and the right attitude, provide solutions, solve problems effectively and motivated	Approach				
to decide, choose, assess the situation and take appropriate action					
to apply known algorithms , adapt to new, and create new solutions					

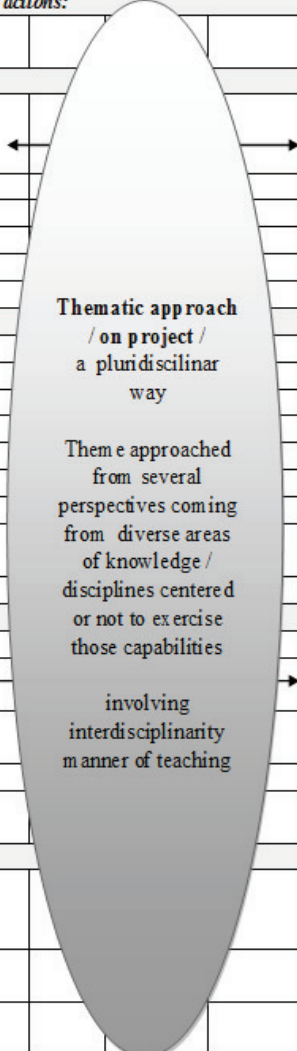


Fig. 2. D'Hainault vision about how the transdisciplinary principle or vision

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understand, having perpetual doubts and questions, not for those who don't know enough, but for them the doubts and questions do not exist.

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What is integrated teaching?

[http://www.angelfire.com/stars5/integrated\\_teaching/integration.html](http://www.angelfire.com/stars5/integrated_teaching/integration.html).

Accessed 19.03.2017 00