Evaluating Synthesis Initiatives and their Sustaining Dialogues

Possible questions as a guide to criteria of evaluation of any synthesis initiative

The following checklist is a draft that will be revised and reorganized in the light of feedback and further insight

Introduction

The questions below have been partially explored in related papers focusing on comprehenion (Documents relating to Comprehension and Communicability) and transdisciplinarity (Documents relating to Synthesis, Transdisciplinarity and Integration) and on dialogue (Documents relating to Dialogue and Transformative Conferencing). The challenge of information of higher quality (Musings on Information of Higher Quality, 1996). The checklist was produced in the light of the Synthesis Dialogues initiative (Dharamsala, 1999) and of earlier conferences on transdisciplinarity and general systems thinking. The concerns were first articulated in Distorted Understandings of Synthesis: Reconfiguring the challenge of wholeness (1997).

1. Nature

To what extent is synthesis understood as:

- an affirmation of a reality or belief (irrespective of any supporting experience)?
- an experienced reality?
- a process of integration?
- a process of understanding in the name of synthesis (irrespective of the emergence of any synthesis)?
- an ordering of concepts imposed upon experience?

2. Excluded dimensions

To what extent is the synthesis achieved through a process of exclusion of dimensions of reality, rather than their inclusion, whether through:

- repression or denial?
- deliberately designing them out?
- inadvertently designing them out (through benign negligence)?

and how are these possibilities acknowledged and counter-balanced?

3. Primacy

What dimensions of the synthesis are accorded primacy? How does this effectively marginalize those upholding perspectives treated as secondary.? How is this justified?

4. Cultural constraints

How culture-bound is the understanding and articulation of synthesis and how is this determined? To what extent is any effort at synthesis more a measure of the quality of the group engaged in it than of the adequacy through which reality has been drawn into a more meaningful pattern for all?

5. Approbation

To what extent is the articulation of synthesis subject to the approbation, benediction or influence of a particular belief-system or peer group?
6. Challenge
To what extent does any current articulation of synthesis:

- allow for challenging contrary perspectives that call it into question?
- recognize a dynamic through which deeper synthesis may be achieved?

7. Depth and scope
To what extent does any synthesis allow for:

- more limited understandings of synthesis (possibly more appropriate for the current learning process of some person or group)?
- more fundamental understandings of synthesis that are inadequately reflected in current articulations (and possibly precluded and condemned by them)?

and what is the degree of integration achieved by the synthesis?

8. Superficiality
To what extent is the articulation of synthesis effectively a 'motherhood statement' redefining 'the good, the true, and the beautiful' in a manner that no reasonable person could deny, such as to inhibit any response or dialogue other than affirmative belief or a declaration of faith --minimizing cognitive dimensions and challenges through which richer future understanding could emerge?

9. Marginalization
To what extent does the articulation of synthesis seek deliberately to occupy the high ground of wisdom, cognitive insight, or ethical principles, so as (perhaps inadvertently) to demean (or demonize) the insights of those who do not subscribe to it?

10. Quality of dialogue
To what extent is the insight into synthesis sustained by a rich pattern of evolving dialogue rather than as a dogmatic formulation locked in time such as to inhibit emergent understanding? To what extent is the quality of dialogue amongst those subscribing to an understanding of synthesis distinctive as a reflection of that synthesis?

11. Conceptual richness
To what extent does the articulation of synthesis call upon the full cognitive wealth of the many explorations of fundamentals of complexity and universality rather than limiting itself to conceptually shallow over-simplifications and reliance on affirmations based on unchallenged experiential belief in unity? To what extent is the synthesis achieved through ignoring diversity and promulgating simplistic understandings of unity?

12. Relationship to diversity
To what extent is a synthesis initiative driven more by a need for control, a fear of diversity, and inability to respond to its challenges, than by the desire to respond to the richness of reality and experience?

13. Operational significance
To what extent is the articulation of synthesis of any operational consequence in the development of:

- richer patterns of conceptual integration?
- more integrated communities of higher sustainability?
- dialogue of higher quality (notably between belief systems, ideologies, or disciplines)?
- more harmonious group relations?
- improved interpersonal relationships of higher sustainability?
- improved personal individuation processes?

14. Coherence of articulation
To what extent does the form and structure of the articulation of synthesis itself reflect the integrative insight it purports to hold?

15. Behavioural consistency
To what extent is the individual and collective behaviour of those advancing an understanding of synthesis consistent with that understanding?

16. Temporal framework
To what extent does the articulation of synthesis recognize:

- the historical learning pathways from which it emerged (and which others may need to follow)?
• alternative insights from other pathways that might be considered complementary?
• the future insights by which it may be superseded (for some)?

17. Doubt
To what extent does the understanding of synthesis allow for doubt or inhibit questioning? And how does such understanding affect the quality of dialogue?

18. Disagreement
To what extent is the dialogue sustaining such synthesis based on new insights into ways in which disagreement may be used to enable the emergence of more fundamental insight? To the extent that the initiative seeks to make a difference through the new articulation, to what extent does that difference engender unprocessed disagreement of a new kind?

19. Complementarity
To what extent does a given synthesis initiative acknowledge the existence of complementary (and possibly incommensurable or antagonistic) insights that may be necessary to hold a more fundamental synthesis insight that can only be encompassed by a pattern of such initiatives rather than by any one of them alone?

20. Imposition
To what extent is any synthesis initiative conceived, designed or promulgated as a new pattern of belief in ways that ignore learnings associated with analogous religious initiatives and the violent consequences to which assumptions of the primacy of particular beliefs have led?

21. Transparency
How transparent is the dialogue process through which any synthesis is articulated whether in terms of those engaging in it or through the selection of constraints on its design?

22. Group think
To what extent does any synthesis initiative seek to encounter challenges such as those implied above rather than isolating itself in a pattern of mutual reinforcement and group think?

To what extent is it appropriate to evaluate or question a pattern of synthesis that works for those sustained by that dialogue?

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