# Running an Interdisciplinary Competency Group

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**Summary**

This paper presents a translation of part of a report written by a CRE colleague in Belgium. It concerns the development of a distinctive method of conducting interdisciplinary research, known as a Competency Group. A Competency Group brings together a range of individuals with differing experiences and knowledge of a particular problem. The Competency Group aims to move thinking about the problem forward through group interaction. This translation outlines four key principles for working in this way: the narrative form; intersections between systems of reference; putting knowledge to the test and mutual learning; and the suspension of strategic interests.

**Running an Interdisciplinary Competency Group**
**(L'animation du groupe de compétences inter-disciplinaire)**

## Foreword

The original version of this paper appears in the final report[1] of a research project entitled *Alimenter le lien entre consommateurs, éleveurs et animaux*[2], run by Claire Lamine and Pierre Stassart (SEED[3], University of Liège), Nicole Bartiaux and José Wavreille (Walloon Centre for Agricultural Research) and Yves Beckers (Department of Animal Science, Agricultural University of Gembloux). The work it describes was conducted in Arlon, Belgium, between 2004 and 2006, and funded by the Fondation Roi Baudouin (King Baudouin Foundation) under a programme named *Alimenter le Dialogue* ('Feeding the Dialogue'). [4]

Pierre Stassart was the project coordinator. He has a particular interest in deliberative research methodologies and what he calls 'intervention research' (which might be understood as a form of 'action research') in the sphere of agri-food studies, and especially in human-animal relations among animal breeders in agriculture. This paper outlines a distinctive approach to conducting dialogue known as a Competency Group. A Competency Group brings together natural and social scientists and non-academic participants to create a forum for mutual learning, questioning and consideration of a problem.

The focus of the Competency Group in this project was the framing of animal welfare issues raised through different forms of animal breeding and types of farming. These issues were drawn out through the specific case of the Belgian Blue (Blanc-Bleu Belge). The Belgian Blue is a breed of beef cattle that produces very lean meat. It is the leading breed of cattle in Belgium, where it represents 35 per cent of the livestock population. The breed originates from the crossing of Belgian dairy-type cattle with British Shorthorn beef cattle in the latter half of the 19th Century. The current breed was officially created in 1973 at the artificial insemination station at Ciney in Belgium. Initially raised for both milk and meat, selective breeding has led to the current form, which is focused entirely on meat production. Systematic selection of the 'culard' gene has produced hypertrophy of the muscles in the

[1] P. Stassart (2006) L'animation du groupe de compétences inter-disciplinaire *In* "Alimenter le lien entre consommateurs, éleveurs et animaux", C. Lamine, P. Stassart, N. Bartiaux, J. Wavreille, Y. Beckers. Fondation Roi Baudouin, Bruxelles , pp. 14 – 24.
[2] Building connections between consumers, breeders and animals
[3] Sociologie, Economie, Environment, Développement
[4] A short summary in English of the programme is available from http://www.kbs-frb.be/uploadedFiles/KBS-FRB/Files/EN/PUB_1572&1573_SYNTE_Alimenter.pdf

hindquarters, known as 'double muscling', which has given rise to controversy around the Belgian Blue. The massive muscular development necessitates delivery by caesarean which means that breeding cannot be undertaken everywhere as it entails the attendance, and expense, of a veterinary surgeon. Because of this, certain Nordic countries forbid importation of, and crossbreeding with, the Belgian Blue on animal welfare grounds.

Further information about the case of the Belgian Blue can be found in other publications based on this research.[5] In this paper we are more interested in the method of the Competency Group and the principles for conducting interdisciplinary public science that can be derived from it. CRE researchers are currently involved with a project that is experimenting in developing the Competency Group method in relation to knowledge controversies around flood risk and rural land management in the UK.[6] This translation serves as a means of making public to an English-speaking readership one source of the ideas which underpin this current project.

**Organisation of the interdisciplinary Competency Group**

The animal welfare debate conducted within the Competency Group raises two separate questions for the social sciences. These concern the legitimacy of the experiment and the way in which it was run. The question of legitimacy involves the justification for exposing the actors to this type of investigation as well as questions of accountability.

This subject, which brings into play powerful economic interests as well as different ideas about lifestyle, can have serious consequences for the actors in a Competency Group. It is easier to ask challenging questions about the impact of intensive breeding practices on animal welfare than it is to ask how these breeding practices might be affected by the contents of one's fridge.

The fact that the Fondation Roi Badouin has made this a beacon project in its 'Feeding the Dialogue' programme is an affirmation of the importance of this research. In fact, this particular project addresses the aim implicit in the title: we have tried to widen the debate by giving priority to the 'voiceless' – the breeders and consumers, who are usually not directly represented. Indeed, it was striking how frequently in the course of our interviews we heard organizations say that they have delegated the representation of consumers to the militant animal welfare groups. Similarly, breeders who are represented by professional organizations see these as tending to represent, in the name of economic rationality, the supply chain as a

[5] Stassart and Whatmore (2003); Stassart and Jamar (2008)
[6] http://knowledge-controversies.ouce.ox.ac.uk/

whole, rather than just the views of breeders. For the producers, it is a pragmatic matter of responding to the market – in other words, meeting the demands of the processors with whom they have to deal directly.

Apart from the question of the project's general legitimacy, which concerns the selection and framing of the subject matter, there is the question of the legitimacy of decisions made in the course of this two-year project: where should the report be written? Who should be involved in writing it? What form should it take? To whom should it be accountable? In short, in which domain do the research questions actually belong?

*Constitution and evolution of the Competency Group*

In this project it was originally the natural sciences (animal technology, agronomy, nutrition) which invited the social sciences (sociology in particular) to explore this question. But what prevents us from reducing the question to a social one, is the range of perspectives that must be considered: ethical, economic, technological, sociological, ethological and philosophical.

This complexity makes questions about the welfare of breeding stock simultaneously difficult and stimulating. It is also what frequently prevents much sharing between specialists and others: between 'fundamental' disciplines, which would construct the question and separate the 'true' from the 'false', and the 'applied' disciplines, which would adapt and/or adopt the solutions proposed by the first; between the natural sciences, which would develop satisfactory technical solutions, and the social sciences, which would determine whether or not the solutions were socially acceptable. On the one hand, nobody is really concerned by so-called 'fundamental' problems, because they can be considered too abstract to have real political implications. On the other hand, operational problems do not necessarily oblige us to call fundamentals into question. It was to break this vicious circle that we set up a Competency Group.

The Competency Group that accompanied this project was made up of thirteen scientists: three animal technology researchers, three sociologists, two agronomists, one philosopher, the presidents of two supply chain councils and one ethologist. [7] This group was composed of seven women and six men. Two members were prominent academics. Finally, after the third seminar, we attempted to bring in a representative from the consumer associations (through CRIOC[8]), but with limited success.[9]

The idea of a Competency Group was forged to try to put into practice a concept borrowed from the philosopher Isabelle Stengers.[10] Our ambition was to create a situation which would allow the emergence of a group with new competences. We describe these competencies in terms of the capacity to bring into the open and put at risk the knowledge that informs our understanding of welfare of breeding stock.

On the one hand, this presupposes that individual group members have specific necessary competencies, but not enough to cover the whole complexity of the animal welfare question. On the other hand, it supposes that they are capable of interacting as participants rather than as representatives of their respective professional institutions.

**Five sessions**

In the course of this two-year project five sessions were held, plus a visit to an original experiment in Alsace.

Session 1: Participants shared accounts of their relationship to the animal welfare question: 'How have participants come across animal welfare issues in the past?' Arlon, ULG, 26 January 2004, 14 scientists.

Session 2: This involved setting out the positions of those present: 'What is the cartography of the arguments, and what type of animal welfare forum is this?' Gembloux FUSAGx, 15 April 2004, 14 scientists.

Exploratory exchange: How can consumers and breeders construct a new relationship with animal welfare in a context of economic profitability? Alsace, 8-9 October 2004, 6 scientists.

[7] Ethologists research animal behaviour

[8] Centre de Recherche et d'Information des Organisations de Consommateurs *(Centre for Research on Consumer Organisations)*

[9] The hybridisation of the scientific forum and the association with the social actors seems necessary, but difficult to establish within a relatively short period; it would only be feasible in a longer time frame. It would also require work in terms of defining different categories: citizen, consumer and animal rights defender.

[10] I. Stengers, 1999, Le développement durable, une nouvelle approche, Alliage no. 40 [Sustainable development, a new approach]

Session 3: Considered what the breeders had to say: 'How can the affective aspect of the relationship with animals be taken into account?' Gembloux, FUSAGx, 24 February 2005, 13 scientists & CRIOC.

Session 4: The Archetype of the Belgian Blue: Where do the loyalties lie of the knowledges that have informed and transformed questions about the Belgian Blue?

Session 5: Discussion on progress: What is the relationship between animal technology sciences and the question of breeding stock welfare? Gembloux, CRA-W. 13 October 2005, 10 scientists.

How do we describe *a posteriori* the characteristics of these Competency Group meetings? The image of a 'round table' type meeting does not describe the way the group was set up. Yet those are indeed the principles used to create the conditions of a form of exchange, and in that, these conditions were intimately linked to the type of knowledge production.

We have identified four key principles *a posteriori*:
1. the narrative form
2. intersections between systems of reference
3. put knowledge to the test and learn from each other
4. the suspension of strategic interests and interactions.

*Narrative format: Using narratives to articulate heterogeneous knowledges*
In a milieu permeated by academic practices, where conceptual analysis is privileged over embodied accounts, and whose concern is with the generic rather than the individual case, it was important that the first meeting took place in a non-academic environment.

At the outset participants were asked to recount how they became involved with the question of the welfare of farm animals. The task was as follows: to talk from the basis of personal experience; to avoid demonstrating proof; to include *a priori* non-rational elements. The aim was to explore the links that these accounts enabled us to make, in time and space, between different forms of knowledge.

This approach revealed the origins of the question for participants – whether it arose from domestic or ethical concerns, or from being involved with the socio-economic life of a region; whether it was connected to the world of the laboratory or a specific scientific discipline, or came from a utopian motive. This enables each member who wishes to engage to clarify what they wished to stay faithful to, and tells us something about the loyalties of the knowledges.

The accounts also tell us how questions of animal welfare, and of relationships with animals, might have changed for people over the course of their lives (once again, whether in domestic, professional or political contexts, and so forth). Finally, as we can see from Session 3 (What the breeders had to say), the narrative format allows the affective dimension in the breeder/animal relationship to emerge – a dimension which norms of animal welfare usually ignore (Lamine, 2006).

*Intersections between systems of reference*

Enclosure is a characteristic of complex systems: the stakeholders construct a boundary between the inside and the outside of the system. The inside is established. It has its rules, its knowledge and its ways of making things visible. The group aims to maintain the coherence of the system (of breeding, for example) and to pass it on. This system of reference is not limited to one group of actors – so the 'lean and tender' in Belgian beef is a project shared by consumers, processors and breeders (Stassart and Jamar, 2005). However, there is a price to pay for making the reference system visible, in terms of what has hitherto been invisible to outsiders, impossible to discuss, and not mentioned by insiders. The question of caesarians in the Belgian Blue is a case in point: it is invisible (and unknown) to consumers. The consequences of this choice – which only Belgian breeders wished to make, contrary to all their European colleagues – in terms of selection, growth trajectory and ethics, are not discussed, and are difficult to discuss. The frame of reference for the Belgian Blue 'culard' gene is not just dumb, but blind, because the consequences of the choice remain invisible.

For this reason we wanted to create conditions that would allow reference systems to intersect. Structurally, we benefited from having two French researchers in the Competency Group, who brought an outside perspective. Also, a visit to Alsace allowed us to see an unconventional experiment that involved cooperation between a consumer group, a pig breeder and a distributor, to produce and implement a collective agreement on animal welfare.

Finally – and this introduces the third principle – we put the Belgian prototype of the Belgian Blue to the test before a series of French experts.

*Putting to the test and mutual learning*

The form of the dialogue is important because it helps to create conditions for learning about each other's points of view and for developing awareness.

However, mutual learning could be defined as the ability to change one's point of view, which is a more radical way of defining the ability to learn. We are not talking here about the form of 'knowledge content', but more about the form of the 'learning disposition'. This disposition is activated by the process of putting knowledge to the test, through which tensions become evident. These tensions express different ways of seeing the world. Their expression brings differences into play and authorizes learning: I learn that the other person knows from a different point of view, and knowing the reason, I can enrich or modify my point of view. In this way, the archetype of the Belgian Blue can engage points of view as different as those of geneticists, sociologists, animal technicians and philosophers.

Here we are deliberately employing the term 'engagement of point of view' to convey how the tension drives the dynamics of the mutual learning. It can do this in the context of general discussion, or discussion about specific subjects, such as breeding practices or innovations. So the castration of pigs, or use of milking machines, can offer a pretext for testing out questions about the welfare of breeding animals and of the breeders themselves.

*Suspending strategic interactions*

How did participants agree to engage on the terms above? This question brings us to a fourth principle, which is, in a sense, a pre-condition for engaging with the previous three.

Here is what our French colleagues said about it. Several, at different times and in different places, said that they particularly appreciated how the way in which the group was run, and its collective membership, had the capacity to generate what one described as an 'open and stimulating group, and all the more so for being convivial'.

This reflection conveys an important methodological point: a Competency Group only functions if strategic interactions between members are suspended. This implies that participants, at least in part, move away from a strategic discourse where the challenge comes down to talking someone else into a position where they are wrong, thereby minimising the element of risk. Our French colleagues also spoke of the 'very Belgian' way of running the debate. We would add that our task was greatly eased by the fact that the support from the Fondation Roi Badouin was very open and came without academic demands.

**Results of the Competency Group**

Without making any statements about the changes brought about by the Competency Group, which would require further work, we can underline the fact that the debates were led by a series of questions which, when not neglected, are often considered as minor. These relate to:

- Plurality of perspectives
- Relationship between science(s) and society
- The question of affectivity
- The impact of experimentation

*Plurality of perspectives*

Let's leave it to a Competency Group participant (animal technician) to make this point:

> 'The first hurdle you have to cross so the debate can move on is to recognise this necessary multiplicity of objects and points of view (looking at them as a whole, not just through the results or conclusions they lead to, but also taking into account the problematical substratum on which they are based), the inevitable, and completely legitimate, tensions and disjunctions that they engender in the scientific knowledge produced, and in the interaction of the actors concerned. There are conflicts between disciplines and between points of view. The scientific knowledges produced are all partial and provisional in character, like the knowledges and values carried by the other individual or collective stakeholders. In other words, the debates can't be blanketed in the pseudo-generality of a single universal – and, moreover, definitive – scientific knowledge.
>
> Surrounding the complex questions of agriculture and breeding – such as that of the welfare of animals and breeders – are various overlapping cultures: that of farmers, of course (in terms of both production and cultural heritage, which comprise tacit know-how, are combined in the short and long-terms, and are simultaneously local and global); that of rural society, that of agronomists (constructed round mastery and technical engineering of nature), that of economists, administrators and financiers, biologists (now divided into sub-groups of ever increasing number). But also those of chemists, doctors, legal professionals, ecologists attentive to the futures of ecosystems and resources; of urban society, made up of unwieldy tendencies but also tensions and diversity; of politics, et cetera. Today's increasingly legitimate convergence of these different cultures around what is at stake in agriculture and the living world leads

researchers to construct, to privilege and to study highly diverse subjects, even within a single discipline. This is why biology is a plural science.' (Session IV)

In symmetrical fashion, the question was returned to the social sciences, asking them to state their relevance to this debate.

*Relationship between science(s) and society*

As underlined in the introduction, the assertion of the classic relationship between the irrational consumer and the rational scientist independent of attachments or values was profoundly questioned. At the end of seminar IV a participant (sociologist) commented on this reductive polarisation:

'At certain times, consumers or citizens can use the strategy of not wanting to talk and, even more frequently, not wanting to understand – because to understand is to engage with, and renounce, things that are close to our hearts. People reject information because to accept it would mean renouncing a world they are attached to. The role of the human sciences is not to arbitrate between values and say, 'Here are the true ones.' We might dream of the social sciences serving as an intermediary between scientists and 'the people', but we do not think that is our role. On the contrary, those involved in the human sciences can be spokespeople for consumers or breeders, explaining their preferences, the reasons behind the interests of a number of groups. That puts us in a difficult position because we seem to be pleading a cause. But that does not prevent it from then being discussed. To invent means of discussion that can include the general public and the researcher in the laboratory – there's a serious challenge for us. But today we have no such model; what we have are models of confrontation and Yes/No choices like the referendum model or the – slightly more complex – consensus conference model. But that's hardly effective, because you're talking about techniques that already exist.'

Speaking of the relationship with natural sciences, the same speaker concluded:

'In opening up the discussion about the use of techniques, and in view of increasingly intensive breeding practices, shouldn't we go further and explain the position of 'scientists'? There are choices in terms of how research is conducted; the public debate cannot progress unless we put forward the reasons why a particular research or technology makes sense. Behind this statement is a call to re-culturalise research; that is to say, to explain what kind of world view, choices and preferences we want to stay faithful to; where do the loyalties of our knowledge lie?' (Session IV, 2005)

This interrogation, which occurred in a wider framework – that of the relationship between technological innovation (GM foods, genomics) and society, is really at the heart of our question of the welfare of breeding stock, because it interrogates the values underlying the 'animal production' project, which have allowed the animal technology sciences to develop for a hundred years. At the same time, this brings us back specifically to the opacity of choices, and the barely reversible consequences of practices such as systematic caesareans in Belgium. To speak of opacity is not just a figure of speech. In fact, if Belgian breeders see the Belgian Blue culard breed, for which systematic caesarian was one of the levers, as a world-level feat of technology, for others – the consumers – it is the very image of technological monstrosity.

*Taking affect into account*

The scientists in the Competency Group together raised the question of the impact of an affective vision, as in Session V, where we saw how the visit which these researchers had made together to the breeder in Alsace gave them a direct experience of the question, which was then taken up in the ensuing discussions – and which could be taken up precisely because it had first been experienced in a real sense.

> Speaker 1: 'Is sensitive breeding, and a close relationship between man and animal, incompatible with economically viable production? Can you be pre-occupied with agricultural activity at the same time? If you put questions of feeling first, isn't that sweeping aside the economic arguments? I find it pertinent to farms, but you have to stay profitable ... Can you put the question of feeling before profitability? Can you make generalisations based on what we saw at Th. Schweitzer's? But elsewhere I can't accept that breeding could disappear as a result of becoming unfeeling ... How can you gauge whether Schweitzer's place is more sensitive than others? What are the parameters for measuring sensitivity?'
>
> Speaker 2: 'Can you generalise about the question of sensitive breeding? Can you ask whether a system of breeding is developing towards the exclusion of feeling, or towards greater sensibility? I think that there is a difference in Schweitzer's methods; there is a difference, and later we might discuss what that difference means, but it's that he has agreed to put the question of sensibility first in his discussions with the consumers.' (Session V)

*Implications of the experiment for the welfare of breeding stock*

Another exchange between scientists focused on, 'What do experiments in animal welfare teach us about experimental science? What are its limits?'

> 'When we carry out experiments, they are often not about real questions. It is possible to carry out experiments on real questions, but very often they are not real questions. We say, "it will be more convincing if we have scientific proof". But does that make it a scientific act or a political act? What I mean by that is, that's what experiments are like, they concern questions that you know, but which lend you the power of conviction. There is also a difference between profane knowledge and the production of experimental knowledge, which is actually a difference of political power; objectivity is an instrument, and experimental verification has become a weapon of disqualification and of status.
>
> The problem is as follows: maybe you say that you are conducting an objective experiment on welfare, and at that moment, and in relation to that aspect, you are faced with the problem of objectification, notably of the feeling aspect. How do you write that into the way you devise the experiment? [.... ...] Why doesn't the research look beyond the economics relationship? So, what I really want to say, what you should note, is that in fact all research on animal welfare focuses on the animal in relation to a device which is defined by a reactive model when, in fact, the domestic animal doesn't exist. The domestic animal doesn't exist as such ... You can't understand what a domestic animal is unless you look at it in relation to the person who looks after it.' (Seminar V, 2005).

This position brings us back in very concrete terms to the question of the impact of our research on animals and consumers, etc. But more fundamentally, it makes us ask ourselves about the real questions for research.

**Afterword**

The initial translation of this paper informed the organization of the first Competency Group run by the Knowledge Controversies project mentioned in the Foreword. The Competency Group discussed in this paper differs in form and content from those run in the UK. The Belgian group members were all certified experts, whereas the UK groups have consisted of a mix of academics and local residents who are personally concerned with the research questions. The UK groups have also focused on issues of flooding in a particular locality, whereas the Belgian group addressed a less spatially specific question.

However, the key principles outlined on page 6 of this paper contributed to the conceptual framework of the first Competency Group run in the UK. It was intended that: the first session would be used to establish the narrative of flooding; the second and third sessions would be used to find the overlaps and intersections of participants' systems of reference; and the fourth and fifth sessions would be used to put knowledge to the test or 'try things out'.

Competency Groups are an evolving methodology for bringing people together to conduct research. The results of applying lessons from this paper to collaborative engagement in a different context with 'non-certified' experts, suggests that the principles could be used to facilitate research in a wide range of localities and areas of controversy. The core of the approach is about changing the way that research questions are asked and answered.

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