What follows are a number of questions that I believe are left open by the Szostak chapter, “Communicating Complex Concepts”, followed by a sketch of an argument that I believe poses a problem for Szostak’s approach. Full disclosure: the Toolbox Project is one of the “assumption first” approaches to ameliorating communication difficulties with which Szostak contrasts his view.

Main questions:

• How does the analytic process work? That is, how do you analyze complex concept into basic concepts on this view?

• What does “broadly shared understanding” (37, elsewhere) mean? Does this support a bright line between complex concepts (CC) and basic concepts (BC)? Could a concept be complex in one context but basic in another?

• What is the relationship between assumptions and concepts? Szostak allows that concept analysis and reliance on assumptions are “symbiotic”, but does he take concept analysis to be logically more basic?

• How can ambiguity be accommodated in the approach without undermining the commitment to concept analysis?

Lingering ideas:

• Should we think of basic as a relative term? Maybe all the analysis needs is the idea that we are analyzing CCs into concepts that are more basic.

• Formal point: a concept could be basic in one discipline and complex in another, in the sense that it is part of the analysans in the former but the analysandum in the latter; if these two disciplines work together, it is not clear how this conceptual difficulty would be addressed.

Argument sketch:

• The argument would be to challenge the presumption (?) that one can bracket the relevant assumptions (or otherwise ignore them for the time being) and proceed with concept analysis as a logically prior process. This allows for the possibility that one could not do it for real in isolation of considering assumptions.

  1. In order for basic concept to provide a meaningful foundation for analysis, basic concepts must either be (relatively?) unanalyzable for all or they must be unanalyzable relative to the context of use.

  2. If the former, then we either have no basic concepts or the ones we do have—they would need to be more basic than thing, stuff, or event, all of which are
debated in philosophy—are so content-free as to be inadequate to the task of supporting more complex concepts

3. If the latter, then we must identify the context (and presumably the relevant “broadly shared understanding”) with the help of the assumptions made by those relevant people who occupy the context; but here, the assumptions are logically prior, setting the stage for concept analysis

C. So either the approach is impossible for lack of basic concepts or it reduces to an assumption-based view

It is certainly important to understand what terms mean, and to make sure that we are not talking past one another by using terms differently when we think we’re using them in the same way. This will entail the importance of concept analysis. But one can only conduct that against a backdrop of agreement pre-established among assumptions. So it isn’t just a single individuals that must be involved; rather, it is multiple sets of assumptions, which must be reconciled to make it possible to do the concept analysis in the first place!

So there is no doubt that concept analysis is an important part of clarifying the landscape of interdisciplinary research; however, the approach to this defended in Szostak’s chapter puts the cart before the horse. We need to position the concepts of interest in the context of assumptions that frame the interdisciplinary research project and then begin the work of analysis; failure to do this will result in wasted effort or worse.