



Key Advice

Travelling concepts

Travelling concepts are theoretical ideas or terms that move between different academic disciplines. As they travel, they often change in meaning, scope and function. These shifts reveal how knowledge is shaped by different disciplinary traditions, assumptions and methods. The idea was introduced by cultural theorist Mieke Bal, who described concepts as “miniature theories” — not neutral labels, but dynamic tools that help us understand and talk about the world. Their meaning is always situated, contested and evolving.

Working with travelling concepts is not about finding fixed definitions. Instead, it's about using the differences as a starting point for dialogue and co-creating understanding across disciplinary boundaries.

In interdisciplinary education, travelling concepts provide a way to:

- Make disciplinary assumptions explicit
- Compare how different fields construct meaning
- Explore where common ground can be found
- Reflect on the process of meaning-making itself

Example

The concept of *sovereignty* means something very different to a legal scholar than to an anthropologist. In law, it often refers to the legal authority of the state. In anthropology, it may involve the lived experience of power, autonomy or marginalisation. Exploring these meanings side by side shows how the same concept can reflect different ways of seeing the world.

Law	Anthropology
Legal authority and jurisdiction	Everyday experiences of control or resistance
Territorial integrity	Indigenous governance and autonomy
State autonomy in international law	Power relations in postcolonial contexts
Recognition by other states or international bodies	Informal or non-state forms of authority