

What can the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Bring to Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research?



Introduction

This guide outlines some of the ways disciplines in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences can contribute to inter- and transdisciplinary research addressing societal challenges.

Summary

Inter- and transdisciplinary research describe a range of practices involving collaboration across disciplines, and between researchers and other groups such as citizens, creative practitioners, enterprise and non-governmental organisations. Researchers often use inter- and transdisciplinary methods when they want to address complex social problems, such as climate change or migration.

Inter- and transdisciplinary research have historically, been conducted by researchers from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines more accustomed to working in research teams. Until recently, Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) researchers were less likely to participate in these kinds of collaborative research. Even if they were involved, AHSS researchers found that their roles were often limited to assessing the public acceptability of a new technology, or disseminating research results at the end of a project.

How humans behave

Starting from human experience when framing problems

Acceptability of new technologies

Complexity of identities, behaviours, meaning-making

Risks of new technologies

Historical perspectives & long-term thinking

Public engagement

Reflexivity & questioning dominant narratives

The role of emotions

Critical thinking

Creative alternatives

Experimental forums for discussion

Narratives & representations

Cultural sensitivities

Storytelling & communication

Intercultural & intergenerational dialogue

Research funders and others have recognised these problems and now advocate for the involvement of AHSS researchers in research addressing societal challenges (e.g. AAU et al, 2014). In particular, the European Commission has developed processes – including flagging funding call topics where AHSS contributions are desirable and monitoring the resources allocated to different

disciplines for these flagged topics – to encourage the ‘integration’ of AHSS researchers in inter- and transdisciplinary research funded by the Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programmes (Net4Society, 2016; European Commission, 2021).

However, despite these interventions, those from outside the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences do not always understand what these disciplines can contribute to inter- and transdisciplinary research, and this remains a barrier to the participation of AHSS researchers in such projects.

SHAPE-ID has identified a range of different types of expertise that art, humanities and social science researchers can contribute to collaborative research, including projects focusing on societal challenges. These include:

Reframing problems to centralise human experience

Many of the specific competencies of AHSS researchers can be most valuable if engaged in projects or funding call design at an early stage when they can be used to reframe problems to focus on human experience and values rather than solely technological, scientific or economic imperatives.

Understanding the complexity of identities, behaviours & meaning

Values, emotions, identities and identifications drive human meaning-making activities and behaviours and these need to be understood through the complex intersection of history, languages and culture from which they have emerged. The AHSS understand that communication is about interpretation and translation between different views and experiences.

Historical perspectives & a long-term view

Historical memory is directly relevant to many societal problems. Disciplines such as History and Archaeology permit a long-term perspective on past failures, including the causes of past crises. Learning from the past can counter short-term solutionism and encourage the consideration of longer-term consequences.

Ethical perspectives & addressing inequalities

Prioritising an ethical perspective informed by societal and individual needs can contribute to technological and scientific development that serves these needs instead of exacerbating existing inequalities.

Critical perspectives & reflexivity

Many AHSS disciplines are sensitive to how knowledge and truth are historically produced and often determined by access to power. This critical perspective helps identify underlying concepts, values and narratives that are taken for granted and opens up the potential for alternatives based on an acknowledgment of the contingency of current narratives or values.

Focus on discourses, narratives & representations

A core competency of some AHSS disciplines is the analysis of discourses, narratives and representations. This can help interrogate the language used to describe phenomena and the assumptions embedded in such language and

narratives, leading to greater reflexivity (self-understanding) and reframing how a problem may be understood.

Foresight based on cultural sensitivities

A better understanding of human societies, behaviours and values can enable greater predictive power in anticipating likely or unforeseen consequences of an intervention.

Fostering intercultural & intergenerational dialogue

Contextual knowledge sensitive to differences at the level of identity and values can serve as a strong foundation for fostering dialogue between groups with conflicting interests or values and facilitating participatory work with these groups.

Contextual knowledge for policy application

AHSS knowledge can facilitate the scaling of policy to local levels based on a nuanced understanding of regional and local issues and stakeholder participation.

Storytelling and communication

Facts alone do not constitute effective communication and stories can appeal to the emotional aspect of people's relationships to their world. Storytelling competencies can contribute to building trust, connecting with people and showing them their place in things. This can be used to re-present a problem, challenge or solution.

The Arts as an experimental space for exchange

The creative and performing arts can create experimental spaces for exchange and dialogue to foster new relationships between partners in collaborations and between societal actors. Creative play can loosen hierarchical structures and build trust.

The Arts as creators of new knowledge

The Creative and Performing Arts have their own modes of knowledge creation that can bring unexpected perspectives and see challenges in ways others might miss.

The Arts as a means to access emotions

The Arts recognise that we often act for emotional reasons and can play an important role in integration by helping to creatively connect different groups and enable better understanding of different cultures, allowing us to explore conflict and difference, engaging emotion and providing opportunities for reflection. The Arts can also contribute to integrating emotional factors.

Examples that further illustrate a number of these points can be found in the **Case Studies** featured in the SHAPE-ID toolkit (see below) and also in the toolkit section on **Understanding Inter- and Transdisciplinarity**.

Further Resources

- SHAPE-ID Project Report [Draft System of Preconditions for Successful Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Integration](#) (Taylor Wesselink & Wallace, 2021) includes a summary of AHSS-specific expertise (p. 31-32)
- SHAPE-ID Project Report [Final Report on Understandings of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research and Factors of Success and Failure](#) (Vienni Baptista et al., 2020) discusses different roles assigned in IDR/TDR (p.74)
- SHAPE-ID toolkit: the [Case Studies](#) page includes a series of our own case studies that illustrate some of the forms of expertise listed above
- SHAPE-ID toolkit: the resources page [Understanding Inter- and Transdisciplinary Research](#) includes other examples of relevant research projects
- European Commission (2021) [Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, Budgets and Disciplines – 5th monitoring report on projects funded in 2018 under the Horizon 2020 programme](#)
- AAU, AEARU, LERU, GO8, RU11, Russel Group & the U15 Canada (2014) [The Leiden Statement: The Role of the Social Sciences and Humanities in the Global Research Landscape](#)
- Net4Society (2016) [Keys to successful integration of social sciences and humanities in H2020](#)
- Net4Society (2021) [Success stories in SSH integration](#): a series of factsheets on projects involving SSH integration from across Horizon 2020 work programmes