

#SCIENCE
APOCALYPSE

BRIDGING DISCIPLINES

NAVIGATING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

In January 2022, CAPAS jointly organized the workshop “Navigating Interdisciplinarity” with Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re) in Aachen and Marsilius Kolleg at Heidelberg University. The questions this workshop sought to address include: “Where is interdisciplinarity warranted; where may a disciplinary approach be preferable? What makes interdisciplinary work succeed or fail? How do we negotiate diverging criteria of validity of knowledge?” Philipp Schrögel, head of the CAPAS Science Communication team, spoke with the organizers of the workshop in the aftermath and asked, if and how these questions were answered and if their expectations have been met.



these problems: What are their ideas and their experiences?

Stefan Böschen (co:re):

To add to this thought about grand or big interdisciplinary, I found it interesting that, although my Co-Director at co:re, Gabriele Grammelsberger, and I are really close together, as she is

The organizers of the workshop “Navigating Interdisciplinarity” (from left to right): Stefan Böschen (co:re), Thomas Meier (CAPAS), Nina Boy (CAPAS) and Tobias Just (Marsilius Kolleg).

To begin with: What was the motivation, the idea for the workshop? And what is the relevance of the topic from your perspective, or the perspective of the organizations you are representing?

Thomas Meier (CAPAS): I think interdisciplinarity is an important topic in all three institutions, they have interdisciplinary at their core. And all of the three institutions are engaged in what I would call grand interdisciplinarity, or big interdisciplinarity, meaning to bridge all disciplines of the university from the humanities and social sciences to the natural sciences and life sciences. This is much more complicated than just two more or less epistemologically neighboring disciplines. That was the idea for the workshop — to talk to people who also have

a philosopher of science and I’m a sociologist of science, what seemed to be near could actually be far away. I was astonished, and thought it would be really good to focus more on interdisciplinarity within Science and Technology Studies itself. It’s not only about this co-work between humanities and sciences, as we typically say it. But, of course, this is also an important aspect, since the funding line for co:re and CAPAS also includes the co-work between sciences and humanities.

Speaking of the organizations, the Marsilius Kolleg basically is built around the core mission to enable interdisciplinarity. How do you go about that?

Tobias Just (Marsilius Kolleg): Because it was our mission from the very beginning,

the motivation to join forces for this workshop was to share experiences with others, learning how to improve. We always see that interdisciplinary is an ongoing process of learning, this workshop wonderfully adds to that.



We are in the midst of talking about interdisciplinarity, but perhaps it is time to take one step back. What was the concept for “interdisciplinarity” you started with when you were thinking about the workshop? How are you thinking about interdisciplinary now – what constitutes it?

Nina Boy (CAPAS): I think that was the question at the heart of the workshop. My motivation to get involved was that I’ve worked in lots of interdisciplinary settings, and I feel like often there’s no room to actually reflect on the process of what happens. This is what we wanted to do here. To build that room and make that opportunity for reflection available. From the attention that you could feel from everyone in the room you could tell that everyone is interested in these questions. It’s somehow the call of our time, a call we need to respond to. We need to build more of these spaces, especially more continuous spaces.

Were there answers you have found during the workshop? What was one example of an important takeaway for

you from a theoretical perspective? Or a more practical concept or idea you took away from these days?

Nina Boy: I really like Stefan’s formulation of the epistemic quality of interdisciplinarity. To me, that sums up this whole problematic of: “How do we make the various criteria of validity of different disciplines compatible?” That is something I’m definitely taking away.

Stefan Böschen: For me it was about this really tricky relation between the complexity of real-world problems and how we translate these into scientific problems. This includes a lot of difficult questions, like the validity of evidence and the question of justification, which bring all the complexity of socio-epistemic orders to the fore. And what really struck me is that, although I’ve been a sociologist of science for years, I do not have a good answer to this question.

Thomas Meier: I find it interesting, Stefan, that you’re starting from real world problems and translating them into academic problems. I had the impression that, not only in this workshop, but in most of the literature, people often start from academic ideas or theories and then at some point realize that they should somehow relate it to real world problems. My impression is that the starting point for interdisciplinarity often comes not from the problem, but from a theory, then trying to arrive at a problem.

The participants of the workshops discussed in plenary and in small groups questions such as “Where is interdisciplinarity justified; where is a disciplinary approach preferable? What makes interdisciplinary work succeed or fail? How do we negotiate divergent criteria for the validity of knowledge?”

