Chapter IV
Ambient Video, Slow-Motion, and Convergent Domains of Practice

Jim Bizzocchi
Simon Fraser University, Canada

Belgacem Ben Youssef
Simon Fraser University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The chapter describes the synergistic integration of distinct research and creation agendas, each firmly grounded in its own set of practices and methodologies. The authors participate in three separate domains of practice: humanities scholarship, scientific research, and artistic creation. They have continued to work within their respective specialties, but have also aligned their research and creation activities within a larger context that enriches their individual work. Humanities scholarship, artistic creation, and scientific research support each other at various critical junctures in the overall arc of the research. The chapter analyzes the details of each individual research or creation strand, and identifies the instances and the dynamics of mutual support and synergy. The mechanisms and attitudes that support the success of cross-disciplinary collaboration are identified and explicated.

INTRODUCTION

Digital convergence has transformed existing practices and driven new and emergent practices in all phases of our culture. In particular, it has transformed the details of practice in the three domains covered by our research agenda: humanities scholarship, scientific research, and artistic creation. Has the evolution of convergent perspectives within disciplines affected the process of collaboration across disciplines?

Fifty years ago, C.P. Snow argued that there was a growing gulf between the culture of the arts and the culture of the sciences (Snow, 1959).
Many have disagreed with the particulars and with the implications of his argument. However, most would agree there is necessarily a certain level of real difference in the general approach and the particular methodologies pursued within the two spheres. Nonetheless, they do share a common overarching goal: an increase in understanding of and insight into our selves and the world we share.

This chapter examines one attempt to work within separate disciplines with integrity, and at the same time to work across disciplines in order to maximize the cumulative impact of both individual and shared research agendas.

COLLABORATION AND CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

The topic of collaboration has been examined through various lenses. Bennis and Biederman examined collaboration in the business world (Bennis and Biederman, 1997). They found a number of factors which aided the development of successful collaborations. Their list included quality of participants, quality of leadership, shared purpose, ability to focus, optimistic stance, commitment to finishing, development of esprit-de-cors, and a sense of great work as its own reward. Schrage examined the same domain and found a similar list that included shared goals and a general level of competence, but added mutual respect, trust, effective communication, clear roles leavened by flexibility, and the examination of multiple representations of critical phenomena (Shrage, 1995).

Others have considered the question of collaboration across the two domains in question in this chapter (the arts and the sciences). Some have identified success factors that echo the findings drawn from the business world, but they also add other factors as well. Candy and Edmonds have the following list: shared vision, complementary interests, communication (including the development of a shared language). Significantly, they also include “time” within their list of enablers, indicating the need for a sustained effort at cross-discipline collaboration (Candy and Edmonds, 2002). In separate studies, Vera John-Steiner (John-Steiner, 2000) and Oppenheimer (Oppenheimer, 2007) also stress the importance of common vision and shared values to dynamically harness distinct roles and traditional discipline-based approaches into a shared agenda. The Bridges Project brought together a group of artists and scientists to discuss their experience in arts-science collaborations. They stress the importance of language as a potential unifier, or disruptor, citing the need to maintain disciplinary language for purposes of precision, but also a concomitant need to clarify meaning across practices (Pearce, Diamond and Bean, 2003).

Finally, Wilson disagrees with Snow’s basic assumption of fundamental differences. He maintains there is significant commonality in the two approaches: “…scientific and technological research should be viewed more broadly than in the past: not only as specialized technical inquiry, but as cultural creativity and commentary, much like art” (Wilson, 2002). We lean towards this interpretation, and although we each respect the perspectives and methodologies of our core domains, the history of our research program illustrates commonalities and intersections that join our interests and enquiries.

DISTINCT METHODOLOGIES

Divergent Methodology

On the face of it, the individual threads of our shared research practice are indeed rooted in separate domains and methodologies. Bizzocchi’s methodologies includes classic humanities scholarship and his own artistic practice. Ben Youssef’s methodologies derive from his background in both science and engineering.