

7 Principles of Interdisciplinary Working

PRINCIPLES



1 Respect:

Disciplines and activities should not be considered in a hierarchical fashion.

TOP TIPS

Keep an open mind, listen deeply and ask questions; avoid pre-conceptions, assumptions and patronisation; co-develop project guidelines for respect and equality; acknowledge and demonstrate appreciation for all contributors involved in achieving goals; write an early joint publication to provide an immediate shared goal.



2 Take time:

Additional time is required to learn and understand different backgrounds, methods and language.

Build additional time into project timelines, both overall and for specific interdisciplinary activities; build additional time into meetings for extended discussions; explicitly budget for the extra time, resources and activities required.



3 Communicate:

Don't assume that the forms of communication within your discipline are universal, different disciplines may use the same words but with very different meanings.

Collaboratively develop a project-specific dictionary; do not be afraid to admit that you do not understand; listen actively and repeat back what you have heard in your own words to ensure that you have understood; visit a field site and ask each team member to explain what they see – listen to the differences; remember that simplicity in communication is not the same as being simple, explaining complex issues to non-experts requires skill.



4 Embrace personalities:

Successful interdisciplinary working is not just about bringing two or more disciplines together; it is about bringing two or more people harmoniously together.

Create opportunities to get to know each other outside of the usual work place, e.g. outreach and STEM events are valuable as they place people in an impartial space, often outside their comfort zone, and create a shared experience; remember that no one person embodies an entire discipline and it can take time to find a suitable disciplinary representative for your team/project.



5 Prepare:

The development of an interdisciplinary collaboration can require unfamiliar procedures which need additional consideration.

Take time at the beginning of a collaboration to determine if an interdisciplinary approach is required, what disciplines are needed, and how they will be organised; ensure roles and responsibilities are clear including who will be delivering what and to whom, and when; have an agreed publication strategy with an emphasis on inclusivity.



6 Adapt:

Interdisciplinary working can be unpredictable requiring adaptability.

Jointly develop and regularly revisit a Gantt chart, if an activity is struggling be proactive and do not be afraid to change direction if needed; include risk management strategies in the proposal to address delays and non-delivery, or the delivery of alternative outputs; maintain open communication and encourage partners to vocalise concerns without the risk of reprimand.



7 Share:

To support success, the sharing of experiences is critical before, during and after a project is undertaken.

Discuss with other people who are working in an interdisciplinary context; keep a record or diary of what works well and what works less well; take time to read some of the extensive interdisciplinary literature; write up and publicise your own interdisciplinary experiences.