

Report

The use of interdisciplinarity in solving societal problems – a focus on health

18. May 2017, LTS LunchTimeSeries

Dr. Amanda Ellison

This semester's 'LunchTimeSeries on Law, Technology and Society' (LTS) kicked off with an engaging lecture by Dr Amanda Ellison with the topic 'The use of interdisciplinarity in solving societal problems – a focus on health' on 18 May 2017. With her humorous and buoyant manner, Ellison carried the audience and made sure to leave no question unanswered.

Amanda Ellison, associated professor at the University of Durham in England, is a neuroscientist who began her career with a PhD from Trinity College in Dublin followed by a postdoctoral fellowship at Oxford University. Since 2016, she has been the director of the Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing at Durham University. Interdisciplinarity plays a major role in the work of fostering and disseminating the wide range of research aimed at improving human health and well-being. Ellison's approach to a well-functioning interdisciplinary working atmosphere is to address the beginning, the middle, and the end of problems. Therefore, it is essential to identify the potential possibilities to solve problems efficiently. Ellison introduced some projects, currently researched at Durham University, that are dealing with health from an interdisciplinary angle.

One of these projects is DREX (Durham Reading and Exploration Training), a computer-based programme for people dealing with homonymous visual field defects. Hemianopia, for instance, leads to partial blindness and difficulties in reading and overcoming simple situations in the patient's everyday life. To date there has been no treatment or therapy. Therefore, Ellison and the psychology department at Durham University developed an app that can be used by patients on their own to rehabilitate their visual deficit. The interdisciplinary aspects of this programme are that not only can patients use the app for exercise, but family members, carers, and health care professionals also have access to the app's data for assessing and spotting the patient's progress. Hence, DREX can be called an interdisciplinary app promoting the development of visual awareness.

The Dread Risk is another project of Durham University in which the value of life and the question of whether one can put a price on health is examined. The value of a life is determined by how much it costs to keep somebody alive, thus by how much is paid for everyone in regard to health care and safety. In that matter, Ellison explained the importance of interdisciplinary work.

Further, Ellison pointed out the difference between pain sensation, pain perception, and pain treatment. First, she declared that pain itself is an important mechanism to protect the body and to detain from severe injuries. However, everyone experiences pain in a different way, and there are even people who do not feel any pain at all. Nowadays, it is a common practice to treat pain by using opiate drugs. Ellison questioned that practice by posing the fact that not just opiate drugs but also various physical and non-physical elements and techniques from different academic fields have an impact on pain reduction. Therefore, pain reduction could be pursued by more alternative methods than solely by the use of opiates.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that interdisciplinary work means answering questions from various viewpoints using shared expertise. However, performing interdisciplinarity is a major endeavour for the majority of people, since not just the barrier of language but also the intricacy of the practices and methodologies that are used in the different academic disciplines often stand in the way. Interdisciplinarity does not come naturally to people; rather, it has to be exercised considerably and requires courage to look outside one's particular box.

Verena Reiter, May 2017