

# **With AIS to Amsterdam 2019: Friendship and Interdisciplinary Studies in Global Contexts**

by

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Many colleagues who have become active in AIS have experienced that their membership has entailed friendships with like-minded people, thanks to Bill Newell's creation of a welcoming atmosphere from which both individuals and the organization have benefitted. Musing upon the words behind the acronym AIS, and anticipating its historic first conference outside North America – in Amsterdam in 2019 (see <http://www.aisconference2019.nl>) – what follows is a brief reflection upon friendship and interdisciplinary studies and the ways that Bill has connected the two.

## **Association: Organization and Friendship**

If someone becomes a member of an organization like the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies, this suggests that one found sufficient overlap between one's personal interests and the mission of the organization as to anticipate benefits from that membership, joining forces with allies in promoting shared goals. This picture suggests, though, that an organization might be so static in its members' similarities as to be almost boring. However, anyone familiar with Bill Newell will realize why this picture does not apply to AIS: his energetic, motivating, and at times challenging leadership for almost 40 years and his vivid interest in promoting dynamics and diversity within the Association. So what kind of Association has this come to be?

The experience that has allowed me to answer this question is like that of many of my AIS companions. Starting as a philosopher at the University of Amsterdam's Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies in 2005, I wanted to familiarize myself with literature and conversations about interdisciplinarity. My quest brought me to the Association for Integrative Studies (as AIS was

then known) and the following year to my first AIS conference at Emory University in Atlanta. Bill warmly greeted this newbie and immediately started a lively conversation about what brought me to AIS. From this first moment on, he showed a genuine interest in what I hoped to learn from AIS and also in what I might bring to the organization, stimulating and encouraging me – as he did so many others – to become an ever-more-active member, and eventually president of AIS from 2014 to 2016.

I want to note, too, that this fruitful association has not just been a matter of our shared professional interests. The “socius” that’s the basis of “ad-sociare” (the origin of “association”) refers to a companion or ally but in optimal cases also to a friend. Friendship, as Aristotle points out in both his books on ethics, develops from a balance between similarity and difference that helps to extend friends’ critical self-awareness. As Bill and AIS grew together for almost four decades, he has embodied AIS’s integrative mission, helping all find common ground among the ostensibly unlike, while his gift for friendship contributed to AIS’s amicable atmosphere. Joining him and his wife, Susan, once at an entertaining wine-tasting evening reminded me how in Plato’s *Symposium* friends drink and talk together. And indeed, AIS has benefitted not just from Bill’s intellectual hunger but also from his Burgundian interests which have ensured that bottles and glasses would appear upon the Board’s meeting table at one point or another. This lubrication certainly has helped the organization to cope with external and internal challenges, confronting them rather than looking away from them, with productive results pleasantly achieved.

Further reminiscent of the *Symposium* in which friends are drinking and talking while lying near to each other, several male board members, including myself, have at one time or another shared (two bedded) hotel rooms with Bill during AIS conferences or midyear Board meetings. These nights provided as much chance to discuss AIS matters and to grow into more senior roles in the organization as to enjoy exciting March Madness basketball matches and more wine, exchange travel experiences, and share events from personal life. AIS’s flourishing has certainly benefitted from these companionable experiences during which ideas and imaginations have been exchanged and modified.

### **From *Integrative* to *Interdisciplinary*: Continuity and Change**

During one of those nightly conversations I first mentioned my doubts about the name that AIS had carried since its birth in 1979: Association for *Integrative* Studies. For my European colleagues, as for science funds and

university libraries, the term “interdisciplinary” has more recognition than “integrative.” The latter term is mainly used in the context of medical and life sciences, often referring to explanations or treatments of diseases and associated with a form of holism that is met with scepticism. In contrast, the word “interdisciplinary” shows up at least twice as much in library searches and in programs of scientific organizations in the European region.

Being one of AIS’s founding fathers and also its walking memory, Bill recalled how they discussed these options for the “middle name” of the organization in the preliminary meetings leading up to AIS’s birth. He recounted the philosophical arguments for “integrative” rather than “interdisciplinary”: Observing that in many cases “interdisciplinary” education or research referred to combining disciplinary perspectives superficially without attempting to synthesize or integrate their insights, the group of AIS’s founders preferred to reflect its conviction that integration is key to interdisciplinarity in the organization’s name.

Considering a potential negative trade-off between a “middle name” that captures an essential part of the organization’s mission and its ambition to bring together companions and friends who may fail to recognize their shared mission due to confusion caused by that same name, Bill agreed to discuss the idea of changing the name for which he proposed a careful procedure. Involving both current and past AIS members and presidents in the conversation, the AIS community experienced the intriguing paradox of Theseus’ ship which is being intensely repaired while under sail. The result of the consequent complex interaction between its long-term mission and the contemporary opinions of the companions it had brought together? The renaming of the organization as the Association of *Interdisciplinary Studies* occurred in 2013, and its peer reviewed journal was then renamed *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*.

Meanwhile, as Bill has noted on many occasions, AIS is no longer a rather lonely vessel on largely disciplinary waters. Bill himself has initiated and supported connections to other people and organizations with kindred interests and to other global regions than North America. This project is reflected in increasing internationalization of presenters at AIS’s annual conferences and of authors represented in AIS’s journal. This increased connectivity does pose another challenge, though, as it may force AIS to reconsider its mission or even its business model, since other interdisciplinarians may critically challenge the ideas of those in AIS and since other organizations might not just be complementary but sometimes also competitive. Prioritizing associating over competing, however, like Bill himself, AIS co-established the International Network for Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in

2009 and is currently involved in the new inter- and transdisciplinary ITD-Alliance.

In scheduling its conferences, AIS is also expanding its scope as it first crossed borders to Canada in 2017 and is now heading for the first conference outside North America. In keeping with the evolution of AIS described here, and as one of the local organizers of the conference, I am proud that we have chosen “Interdisciplinarity in Global Contexts” as the theme for the 2019 conference in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, hoping to bring together a veritable armada, full of a wide variety of interdisciplinarians, transdisciplinarians, action scientists, team scientists, and others who believe that we need collaborations across multiple boundaries when we aim to address the complex problems our societies are facing.

### **Studies: Navigating between Different Perspectives**

Travelling (literally as well as metaphorically) and collaborating with other interdisciplinarians might be easier said than done, though. Integrating insights and methods from different perspectives is a difficult task that requires mutual reflection and discussion. A defining characteristic of interdisciplinary studies is not approaching problems in isolation but treating them in their real-world context. Since this context is increasingly globalized and complex, conducting interdisciplinary studies has also become more challenging. In the last decade, many AIS members have contributed to analyzing and developing a multi-step process to facilitate dealing with this challenge, for which Bill’s scholarship has provided important materials and insights, arguing convincingly that a shared and structured process is valuable even though adjustment to specific project details and local contexts may be necessary.

We are expecting that the opportunity for shared engagement of like-minded and also differently-minded interdisciplinarians offered by “Interdisciplinarity in Global Contexts” will bring a large and international group of scholars, teachers, students and other “travelling companions” to Amsterdam, erstwhile maritime capital of the globe. Three conference days of plenaries, panel discussions, workshops, poster sessions, and innovative *solution rooms*, will be devoted to four main themes: 1) From Local to Global; 2) People, Concepts, and Methods Crossing Borders; 3) Methodologies of Interdisciplinary Education and Research; and 4) Adjusting Interdisciplinarity towards Future Challenges. Related to these themes are urgent questions that need interdisciplinary answers like: How are humans always citizens of both local and global communities? What prevention measures can we

derive from simulation models that integrate disciplinary insights in a particular infectious disease? How can we advance the role of interdisciplinary studies in the pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals? What best practices are available for integrating creative arts with results from the humanities and sciences? It is our ambition that individual participants not only learn from each other during their conversations about such topics, but also facilitate friendships stemming from mooring together during this conference. In line with the classical *Symposium* and Bill's style of leadership, we will offer abundant opportunity for "ad-sociare" to the participants so they can feel inspired by convivial companionship that may continue after they have weighed their anchors to voyage home. With great pleasure, we invite you to submit a proposal for the conference (see the conference website for further information) by April 1 and look forward to welcoming you October 24-26, 2019, in Amsterdam.

**Biographical Note:** MACHIEL KEESTRA holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Amsterdam. He is a tenured assistant professor at the UvA's Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies, teaching in several interdisciplinary bachelor programs, and the Master of Brain and Cognitive Sciences Master program. He is also a researcher at the University's Institute for Logic, Language, and Computation and a member of its research group Neuroaesthetics & Neurocultures. Having studied philosophy and psychology in Amsterdam and Heidelberg (Germany), he was a staff member of the International School for Philosophy in the Netherlands before joining the UvA's Studium Generale department. He published three edited books on the cultural history of mathematics, on breakthroughs in the history of physics, and on pioneers in philosophy, besides other publications on tragedy, the history of philosophy, and the philosophy of action. His most recent books are *Sculpting the Space of Actions*, *Explaining Human Action by Integrating Intentions and Mechanisms* and the co-authored and co-edited *An Introduction to Interdisciplinary Research: Theory and Practice* (AUP 2016). He has been an elected board member of the Association for Interdisciplinary Studies since 2012, was AIS President 2014-16, and co-hosts its 2019 annual conference in Amsterdam. He was Guest Editor of a special section on Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the 2017 volume of *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies*. During the Fall of 2018, he is visiting fellow at University of Pittsburgh's Center for Philosophy of Science. He may be reached at [m.keestra@uva.nl](mailto:m.keestra@uva.nl).