

Arts and Methodology; *The importance of art-based practices*

*Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing (DSIS),
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A World in Transformation

Policy makers are facing a world in transformation. Climate change is but one of a whole range of global challenges, which also include environmental degradation, a biodiversity crisis, marked increases in inequality, the rise of authoritarian populism, rising geo-political tensions, the disruptive impacts of transformative technologies such as AI, and ongoing wars and conflicts. This rapidly changing context requires policy responses and behavioural changes which can effectively address not simply the symptoms of but also the root causes of these diverse crises.

The DSIS Project

The EPA funded DSIS (Deep Societal Innovation for Sustainability and Human Flourishing) project holds that global responses to this historical moment of crisis have so far fallen short. The limited effectiveness of these responses has highlighted the fact that many of the fundamental social institutions upon which societies have relied for decades for stability and direction - including politics, economics, technology, religion and spirituality, gender and care, and education - are not optimal, either for human flourishing or for the protection of our planet.

The DSIS project aims to respond therefore to an urgent need to critique and reimagine key social institutions so they can be configured to meet the challenges of our time. DSIS is developing a model to reframe the narrative from sociotechnical transitions to deep global cultural transformation. It argues that achieving sustainability requires more than just technological advancements; it necessitates a profound and global re-evaluation and reinvention of these foundational social institutions.

With regard to the scale and dynamics of the necessary change, the DIIS model sees fundamental transformation as essential for avoiding mounting crises and preventing systemic rupture of our political, economic and social systems (Hopwood et al., 2005). With regard to scale and speed of change, DIIS envisions the need for 'transformation of global society to be achieved within rapid time frames' (Linnér and Wibeck, 2020). To achieve such deep and rapid change, it has affinity with models that can achieve rapid global transformation by activating contagious and fast-spreading processes of social and technological change (Otto et al., 2020).

Hopwood B, Mellor M and O'Brien G (2005). *Sustainable development: mapping different approaches* *Sustain. Dev.* 13 38–52

Linnér B O and Wibeck V. (2020). *Conceptualising variations in societal transformations towards sustainability*, *Environ. Sci. Policy* 106 221–7

Otto I M et al. (2020). *Social tipping dynamics for stabilizing Earth's climate by 2050* *Proc. Natl Acad. Sci.* 117 2354–65

Transformative Policy

Transformative policy goes beyond incremental adjustments, seeking to create deep and lasting change. Due to the systemic aims of transformative policy, it necessarily requires wide stakeholder engagement, learning by doing, and co-creation of pathways towards more desirable social institutions and systems. Transformative policy has the additional challenge that each individual social system is deeply interlinked with all the others. In fact, a growing body of literature views the crises that are currently facing humanity as deeply rooted in our systems of politics and economics, in the norms of technological development, and in cultures and values of modern industrial societies (Morin and Kern 1999; Hughes et al. 2019; Kanger and Schot 2019; Escobar 2017; Homer-Dixon et al. 2021; Dussel 2012).

Dominant narratives, however, typically limit themselves to emphasizing isolated innovations in individual parts, without stressing the mutual interdependence of each of these social systems and the need for deeper whole-of-society transformation. The DSIS project aims to engage with policy makers, alongside other diverse stakeholders, to discuss the challenges of devising effective transformative policies and together co-create pathways to more sustainable social institutions which are more optimal for human flourishing and the care of our planet.

Hughes, I., Byrne, E., Glatz-Schmallegger, M., Harris, C., Hynes, W., Keohane, K., & Gallachóir, B. Ó. (2021). *Deep institutional innovation for sustainability and human development*. *World futures*, 77(5), 371-394.

Kanger, L., & Schot, J. (2019). *Deep transitions: Theorizing the long-term patterns of socio-technical change*. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 32, 7-21.

Homer-Dixon, T., Renn, O., Rockstrom, J., Donges, J. F., & Janzwood, S. (2021). *A call for an international research program on the risk of a global polycrisis*. Available at SSRN 4058592.

Engagement Methodologies for Transformative Policies

The DSIS project is developing approaches that can open up new perspectives, and enable participants to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and engage in more open, creative discussions. The collective, creative nature of the activities in the workshop aimed to foster a sense of community that supports collaboration and exploratory thinking. Such methods also shows strong potential for making complex, transformative theories more accessible to policy makers by presenting them in an engaging, imaginative context.

The increasing use of art-based practices in the humanities points towards their ability to express a reality that traditional scientific methods seem less able to communicate. To further investigate this hypothesis, we organized a workshop in which participants were asked to express themselves through poetic practices, so to investigate whether the arts can facilitate alternative ways of seeing.

The workshop therefore contributed to the broader effort within the DSIS project of developing innovative and creative methodologies for co-creating and communicating transformative research to policy audiences.

The workshop is situated within a larger effort to create workshop methodologies that can better communicate and disseminate academic findings on transformative research to policy-makers. As such it forms one of a series of workshops in which the 'different ways of seeing' element of the DSIS-model, for example perspectives from the arts, or from integrative or indigenous knowledges, is used to inspire novel workshop methodologies. (See Box: Use of Participatory, Futures Oriented, and Arts-based Methods by Policy Makers)

An Example – A DSIS Arts-Based Workshop



This workshop highlighted the importance of the 'different ways of seeing' element within the DSIS model, particularly through arts-based practices. The latter proved effective in opening up new perspectives, enabling participants to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and engage in more open, creative discussions. The collective, creative nature of the activities fostered a sense of community that supports collaboration and exploratory thinking. This methodology shows strong potential for making complex, transformative theories more accessible to policy makers by presenting it in an engaging, imaginative context. Overall, the workshop contributes to the broader effort of developing innovative, artsinformed methods for communicating research to policy audiences.

The workshop focussed on engaging participants' artistic and creative skills, fostering novel forms of collaboration, and introducing new concepts and different ways of seeing. It brought together participants from outside and inside academic circles and included students, academic researchers and policymakers from various backgrounds to engage in discussions, hands-on activities, and artistic practices centered around the idea of the arts as another/a different way of knowing the world. The workshop was conceived as a dialogue between short theoretical interventions, based on the literature described above, and arts-based exercises for which we found our inspiration in 'a toolkit for arts-based methods for transformative engagement' created by Pearson et al. (2018).

Further points that were stressed were that the created art-works functioned as icebreakers and prompts for conversation and self-reflection. They formed a simple but effective tool to approach and discuss topics from different perspectives and novel angles, freeing participants from the practical and theoretical confines of their disciplines and backgrounds.

Pearson, K. R., Bäckman, M. Grenni, S., Moriggi, A., Pisters, S., de Vrieze, A. (2018). *Arts-Based Methods for Transformative Engagement: a toolkit*. Wageningen. Susplace.

Examples from the Workshop

Poem (anonymous)

Tu Bishvat Today is the new year
The call of the Shofar
wakes you (and me) Celebrating the life you give
Green,
brown, fruit producing, You are only to be cherished
And celebrated Never destroyed.

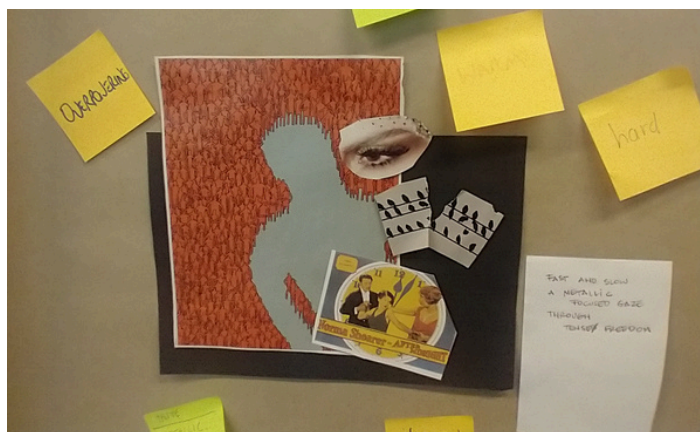
Note to this poem: Tu Bishvat is a minor Jewish holiday, celebrating nature. It is the day of the year that people also went out to plant trees. It was explained to us that the trees were sacred and could not be destroyed. The poem has to be read with today's geopolitical context in mind.

'Poetry Writing Workshop'. Based on Pearson et al.'s method nr. 17: Prose Poem, we asked participants to reflect upon our discussion of the two stances through the writing of a poem. According to Pearson et al. (2018: 41) 'Writing poetry or poetic prose can be a vehicle for expressing and exploring ideas or emotions in a way that moves beyond rational, linear, and habituated thought patterns. It is a way to engage imaginatively and playfully with one's deeper knowing and intuitive understanding of, or response to, a topic. Verbal images and metaphors that emerge from the process can have an "anchoring" effect; that is, ideas or emotions that are typically expressed through rational thought can be more easily accessed and recalled if they are linked to a personal and visceral, or emotionally charged image.'



Collage'. According to Pearson et al. (2018: 42) A 'collage allows both rational and emotional reasoning to surface through the free combination of images which, due to their evocative power, can contribute inspiration to new imaginative horizons.' It is typically used to express and share emotions, themes, and ideas via an intuitive visual representation related to a specific topic. It can be an effective tool for clarifying observations or crystallizing ideas, visions, or scenarios before moving into more tangible brainstorming or definition of action steps.'

As such, it was a good method for us to conclude the workshop with as it both permitted some time for – collective – reflection, while being otherwise occupied, and an artistic method through which this reflection could be expressed in non-conceptual terms.



The collage proved an effective method for fostering creative discussions, the practice of collaging brought people together, engaging discussions about the images, and subjects of the collage, thus helping to foster a collective reflexive process on the exercises of the day. Secondly, as an artistic way of expression, it allowed for a different way to express and approach ideas that normally would have been discussed only conceptually, leading to novel and creative results that included areas of experience (affects, hopes...) that are usually excluded from reflective/rational conceptual thinking.

Use of Participatory, Futures Oriented, and Arts-based Methods by Policy Makers

Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (DCEE):

While developing the 'Climate Action Plan 2024 Action: *A Framework to Guide Strategic Climate and Climate-Related Research*', the Department organised a co-creation workshop for stakeholders from academia, community and industry. The workshop was led by Prof. Rebecca Braun from the University of Galway, and independent facilitator Orla Lehane. It used their Literary Futures method to creatively explore our planet's future considering the impact of climate change. Participants imagined themselves as a literary character, and then worked in groups to brainstorm a world in which their characters live. The groups then cast those future worlds back to identify the necessary short-to-medium term climate actions. Those actions were fed into the process to develop a list of key cross-Government climate R&I questions, which will be included in the Framework document.

Department of Education and Youth (DEY):

Questions from the DSIS model of change, aimed at fostering a reimagining of education, were used at a plenary session of the Educational Research Showcase and Futures Thinking event in February 2025. This event, organized by DEY, brought together researchers, policymakers, educators, funders, and practitioners to explore how to strengthen the role of research in shaping education policy and practice in Ireland. The event also discussed the opportunity to create a future-oriented education research network. Participants were asked to collectively discuss the questions: 'What narratives/types of transformation do you think should be the focus for future research for policy and practice in education?' and 'What new ways of seeing do we need to include in future research for education policy and practice? Whose voices and perspectives need to be included? What can different disciplines contribute to such reimagining?'

Citation:

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Further information on any aspect of this Policy Brief can be found on the [DSIS website](#) or by contacting either Prof Edmond Byrne (Project PI) at e.byrne@ucc.ie or Bob Grumiau (DSIS PhD student) at 124114586@umail.ucc.ie.