

Chapter 12: Tricks, practicalities, and ethics of teaching outdoor walking research, including interviews and group tours.

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Abstract

In the context of a growing literature and practice around walking research, this chapter considers how to transfer such momentum into teaching outdoor walking methods within Higher Education. Presently there is a relative lack of teaching resources. This writing therefore offers reflections from three incremental and complementary techniques aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate students. These include setting an assessed task from a 30-minute independent walk, using the psychogeographical *dérive* to structure group walking within a fieldtrip, and equipping postgraduates with the knowledge to scope out their own walking research projects. These approaches are largely grounded in ethnography and aimed at a broad disciplinary field. From these examples I summarise the logistical challenges and need to develop learning materials and courses.

Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature relevant to teaching walking techniques and finds opportunities to develop new resources. From my own teaching experience I detail three incremental techniques designed to be incremental and to allow students to progress and develop their use of walking. Students will progress from solo observational walks to exploring the city in groups and thirdly the ethics of using

walking technique in original research. Each case is accompanied by reflections shared within the workshops and from marked assignments. The conclusions outlines opportunities for future work.

Walking pedagogy within higher education

Outdoor walking has grown in popularity as a tool for social research and within other aspects of higher education. Methods-focused papers explain how space triggers conversation between people (Moles, 2008), the art of ‘go-along’ conversations (Carpiano, 2009) and the advantages of participatory walking interview (Evans & Jones, 2011). Such work has led to walking methodology textbooks, including: accounts of interdisciplinary social research (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017); more than-human approaches, including affect and movement (Springgay & Truman, 2018); and a focus on ethnography and participation (O’Neill & Roberts, 2020). However, there is smaller literature focused on walking pedagogy. Existing writing considers teaching physical sciences such as biology, chemistry and physics (Beavington, 2021), furthering the study of affect (Beyes & Steyaert, 2021), critical criminology (O’Neill, et al., 2021), and embodied methods for business students (Hindley, Knowles, & Ruth, 2019). There seem to be few textbooks which help teachers to guide students with methods and how to progress.

My biography is important to how I developed the techniques presented in this chapter. For over a decade I work on place-based initiative working with architects, engineers and urban designers on landscaping schemes, cycle routes and other built environment projects. To broaden my methodological range, I took a MSc in Social Research Methods. I was introduced to walking through a two-day ‘critical urban ethnography’ course (NCRM, 2016) which built on Bates and Rhys-Taylor’s *Walking Through Social Research* volume (2017). Teaching in this case involved ethnographic methods, such as paying attention to sounds, smells, and the visual, set within the context of an urban setting. Virtually all learning happened outside and on foot, save for the final group presentation. Later in this chapter I explore the balance of outdoor walks and indoor reflection.

Walking now appears on the agenda of conferences and there is a wide range of workshop sessions for walking methods. For example, the fundamental principles are covered in a blog aimed at university teachers (BERA, 2020). The teaching presented here is from the perspective of working in Geography. Though the Geography Benchmark Statement is not explicit about walking, it hints at accessibility and ethics in guidance for fieldwork (QAA, 2022, pp. 12-14). Such factors influence the examples which are now outlined. The first case is an introductory technique aimed at undergraduates.

Technique One: Setting and assessing an independent walking task

This approach is designed as a first step to walking practice. A classroom lecture or seminar of approximately one hour prepares students to take an independent 30-minute-long walk.

The taught element is framed within ethnography; a broad approach which includes participant observation and interviewing techniques adapted to specific contexts (Pink, 2009). The researcher aims to take a holistic approach by going to different settings to understand 'the significance of the meanings people give to objects, including them-selves, in the course of their activities, in other words culture' (Hammersley, 2018, p. 4). Walking is a vantage point from which to observe others. However, walking through a place means that students can get involved in the phenomena that are observing.

To observe means to watch what is going on around and about, and of course to listen and feel as well. To participate means to do so from within the current of activity in which you carry on a life alongside and together with the persons and things that capture your attention (Ingold, 2014, p. 387).

Here Ingold, an anthropologist, helps to equate observation with being outside the phenomena and participation to being inside. There are degrees of 'insideness'

(Seamon & Sowers, 2008) and walking a line allows the individual to explore the intersections between positions as they move from one space to another. Partly so that the teacher does not have to organise specific risk assessments, and partly to encourage learning, students are free to choose where they go.

The teacher provides a brief as a framework for feedback and development. The main task is for an individual to walk for 30 minutes. As they walk students are advised to take photos, record notes, and to track the route by GPS if they desire. This results in a 500-word digital submission, including five pieces of visual media. A key part of the submission is to be reflective, such as describing the setting and how they feel. Additionally, the brief requires them to address four broad elements:

1. Place (built form, trees, water, parkland, uses etc)
2. People (what they are doing, ages, relationships between people etc)
3. Signs and directions (visual notices, warnings, sounds etc) and
4. Atmospheres (weather, events, moods, light etc)

The teacher gives an example of what could be found from a short walk. In the case of Swansea University Singleton Campus, there are different forms of built and natural environments within 1km. For example, there is a beach, residential areas, sporting facilities, and a busy hospital. The complexities of being around the hospital will become apparent later.

I have set the same task and marked nearly 70 assignments across two different academic years. Altogether there is clear evidence of students paying attention to place and the natural environment (Beavington (2021)). To a lesser degree there is attention to signage, using photographs to back up visual stimuli. Students embrace the freedom of ethnography by walking in unfamiliar places or challenging atmospheres, such as being tourists, being caught up in events, walking when other people are on a night out, or venturing out early in the morning. The students bring the earlier definitions of observation and participation (Ingold, 2014) to life as they engage with their feelings, including fear, pleasure, boredom and more. Some students think about how to make public spaces more accessible. The highest

grades are given to submissions which reference published literature – such as connecting their experience of weather, tourism, nature, and other subjects to essays from the *Routledge Handbook of Place* (Edensor, Kalandides, & Kothari, 2020). Such a task could contribute 15% of the work for a 10-credit module.

Some submissions have challenged the notion of being physically located in a specific place. There have been cases seemingly composed from online maps and structured as walks. Whilst this misses the opportunities and multiple dimensions of being outside, this reveals opportunities for digital media to complement outdoor walks. Teachers are considering ethnographies of the internet (BERA, 2022). There are also some precedents of assignments which combine digital images, mobile tracking devices, and online maps (Bell et al., 2019). In the following description there are examples of students using digital technologies as walk (and work) together on group projects.

Technique Two: Psychogeography for groupwork and fieldtrips

Group walks complement the individual tasks. By working (and walking) together they can broaden their understanding of ethnography, namely ‘relationships rather than numbers, quality rather than quantity’ (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 186). The following case study offers a framework where students can explore positionality and gain feedback from their experimentation.

This example reflects on a human geography fieldtrip to Berlin, a city to which very few students had a prior connection. I introduce the broad discipline of psychogeography to extend prior learning on observation and participation. Psychogeographical tactics are playful, such as the walking method called the *dérive* – or drift. This approach typically comprises a set of instructions which the walker must follow. The aim is to pursue Guy Debord’s 1955 definition of psychogeography:

The study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’ (Coverley, 2018, p. 116).

A potential psychogeographical *dérive* could explore how a place has changed over time and through ongoing use by millions of people. I explored Berlin's history and composed four walking routes. The *Pink Route* (excerpt in Box 1) explores how the Berlin Wall once split the city and how Berlin has reinvented itself since its removal. The *Red Route* is a different section of the Berlin Wall. The *Green Route* follows the final stages of the Berlin Marathon, and the *Blue Route* follows a gay rights protest march. The walks are plotted as coordinates which can be accessed through Google Earth.

Box 1 - Pink Route

The Berlin Wall was constructed in phases and was designed to prevent people escaping from the east to the west. Broadly, the wall on the western side was a big flat slab of concrete. There was a space of approximately 100m between the western side and the eastern inner wall. This 'death strip' gave people no cover and made it easier for East German border soldiers to shoot people trying to escape.

You will be exploring the space between that inner wall and the outer wall. Most of these spaces have since been built over, in which case find the nearest road or footpath. The purpose of following the old line is to sense the juxtapositions between the old(er) and the new(er) architecture of the city. Does any evidence remain of the wall or any memorials?

We walked as a collective of twenty students and two teachers to the location where the four routes started. The students split into four smaller groups (of between three and six members) and stayed in these groups throughout the fieldtrip. Backed up by a printed handout, I explained that each route is designed to explore the society and history of the place. For this reason, these lines on the ground are often not the most direct route from Point A to Point B. As such, this *dérive* could provoke emotional

responses such as frustration, delight, or indifference. I advised students to embrace this feeling as it could open their senses to what they discover (Ingold, 2014). They are asked to chart these spaces in a reflexive and experiential sense, considering the following factors:

- Built form and use of space. Looking out for prominent buildings, tourism businesses, monuments, forms of transport, and other features in the environment which connect to the past and present uses.
- Position. Difference between walking alone and being in a group of two or more people. What happens when you swap between walking alone and walking as a group?
- Recording. Taking photos, notes, record voice notes on mobile devices, and interviewing each other.

We briefed each group in turn and gave students three hours to follow their mission. Though not immediately known to the teachers, three groups chose the Pink Route, and another one mixes the Green Route with elements of Pink Route.

Post-walk feedback sessions

We held an early-evening collective debrief to follow the *dérive*. The students reported how the Pink Route linked open-air interpretation and memorials to the Berlin Wall, and so stimulated conversations (BERA, 2020; Beavington, 2021). One group explained how the Pink Route also revealed newer architecture, such as banks and universities, built in the former 'kill zone' between the outer and inner wall. Another group recognised that the route took them away from the signposted route. As a result, they appreciated their position as tourists and reflected more deeply on wayfinding and how transport systems are explained or not.

Across the three days it was noticeable that students gained confidence from each other to try different methods - such as recording experiences as voice notes or interviewing each other. However, the accessibility of outdoor teaching was tested when one student got injured and could no longer walk. An over-reliance on being

able-bodied has been noted in writing about field trips (Rose, 2023). Connected to the opening for digital materials noted in Technique One, one student stated that he would edit some videos from their walks and link within their group assignment. This same Berlin walk could be modified and used by sociologists, historians, political scientists, architects, economists, and others. It is important to stress that this *dérive* is designed to encourage (independent) group work. Overall, the students showed evidence of learning through their assignments submitted after the fieldtrip.

In contrast to the previous two cases, the third technique involves a teacher being present throughout. I reflect on what is achievable with postgraduate students who may not be familiar with walking but do have a degree of research experience and knowledge of the ethical considerations.

Technique Three: Developing social research methods

This account centres on a two-hour outdoor session on a qualitative research methods module. Again, the case study is Singleton Campus at Swansea University, Wales. Some weeks in advance students received background reading – such as those referenced in this chapter. Starting from a classroom, students were briefed that the session focuses on interactions between people and place, incorporating a degree of observational ethnography. The first practical exercise explores the ‘go-along’ (Carpiano, 2009) through peer-to-peer conversations.

Go-along walking interviews

This 20-minute walk takes students from the campus, through a park and over to a nearby residential neighbourhood. The group are briefed to walk side-by-side in groups of up to three. They are invited to let the conversations be ‘framed by place’ (Evans & Jones, 2011, p. 849) and be stimulated by specific buildings or being in the park. Students were asked to notice what happens as the spaces change, such as stopping to go through a gate or when the way is blocked. In a safe space away from other people, I invited them to gather in a circle and to reflect on their experience. The following responses demonstrate the broad findings.

- The walk helps to develop empathy between people who may not know each other.
- People get into detailed conversations fairly quickly.
- Memories are triggered by being in certain spaces (Moles, 2008) One person recalled being chased by a dog some years ago in one location. She laughed and explained that the story helped to build a rapport with the other person.
- There is much less eye contact than in a normal conversation (BERA, 2020). One attendee expressed that this allowed 'attention to be used on the walk itself.' They suggest that this could be good technique for people with autism.

This feedback stresses the opportunities and qualities of the peer interview. Of note, all students have some connection to spaces near to Swansea University, which differs from the Berlin Fieldtrip (Technique Two). The next stage of the exercise takes the students away from the park and into busier urban space.

Ethnography in urban space

Having learned the basics of interviewing others on foot, this 30-minute exercise sets out to be more observational in busier spaces. We return to the psychogeographer's repertoire and use a tool called 'other points of view' (Overall, 2021, p. 18). Facing a given street, half of the group walk via the back lane or alleyway and half walk via the main road. Students are briefed to consider certain factors: animals, including humans; text in the street or on houses; and atmospheres. Like the peer-interviewing we will regroup at the end of the street. The following account combines responses of two different groups who followed this exercise.

Reflections from the first street represented two different versions of the same set of houses. For example, alleyway walkers encountered more animals in the alleyway, compared to the front, and saw signs such as 'beware of the dog'. Those who walked the street front witnessed more text, such as street signs and road markings, and evidence of people taking care of front gardens. We then proceeded to another

street where the groups swapped over. Those who had walked the alleyway went to the front and vice versa. After regrouping students considered how the time when children go to school or when people return from work would change what they observe. Moreover, some students started to consider ethical issues: is it right to be looking into houses and gardens? These issues of 'confidentiality, anonymity and intrusion' figure in the psychogeographical teaching of Hindley, Knowles and Ruth (2019, p. 4). A different form of ethics is clear when students considered whether researchers can be vulnerable (Batterham & Singleton, 2023). In this case students asked whether the alleyway is a safe place to walk.

This learning helped students to sense that informed consent and issues of anonymity also extend to naming certain streets or places. In the final case I present the outdoor spaces adjacent to a hospital. This is a sensitive research site with different challenges.

Ethics in sensitive places

Students spent approximately 15 minutes walking in a group to the hospital. They were briefed to consider signage, atmospheres, and whether they are causing a hazard themselves. I took another tool from psychogeography and briefed them to 'walk in character' (Overall, 2021, p. 47). The aim of being in character is to imagine emotional and affective responses to spaces. They would be open to feelings of boredom or frustration as well as heightened emotions such as being in urgent need of care or witnessing births and deaths.

For one group of students there was a visceral response when they reached the hospital canteen. There was a clear smell of hot cooked food, a sensation magnified by it being cold outside. Students observed that patients and visitors could see them. In response they had an almost visceral emotional response. They verbalised that it is inappropriate to be near the canteen and we immediately moved 15 metres away. This was a real-life example of how walking allows us to experience affect (Beyes & Steyaert, 2021). Though no formal research had taken place, this demonstrated the

ethics of a group gathering in a sensitive space. In written feedback one student noted that this experience allowed them to integrate both 'bodily and intellectual knowledge', meaning that the physical act of walking and reflecting outside combined to aid their learning.

Though the hospital example is powerful, a similar response does not happen when the walk is repeated a year later. On the second occasion it was mid-afternoon rather than late-morning. Lunch had finished and there were no smells of food. This time the students were slightly younger. Perhaps they had more emotional distance from a time of heightened health awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic. This last case completes my account of incremental techniques. To conclude and summarise this chapter, I outline four main points pertinent for the future development of this discipline.

Suggestions for future work

Levels of prior experience and engagement from students will change from year to year. Moreover, advances in digital technology are certain to influence how walks are recorded, mediated, interpreted, and presented. For example, I have not detailed the potential of geographical information systems. All teaching therefore needs to be adaptable and responsive.

Outdoor teaching can be hard to organise. As a prerequisite I completed a two-day outdoor first aid course. Swansea University Occupational Health Team asked students to complete a pre-workshop fitness assessment. Institutions will have to plan and be creative if the momentum behind walking researchers is to transfer into teaching. As teachers plan, deliver, and gain feedback papers and books will emerge. In time we can develop entire modules and courses.

Choice of site is significant. The teacher having experience of one place gives students more independence to practise techniques. Moreover, the teacher can respond to feedback and amend future walks. The wider city offers a wider range of

stimulation – such as the Berlin example (Box 1). However, travel is expensive, logistics can be more complicated, and indoor teaching space can be harder to find.

Seeking feedback and sharing practice is critical. I presented to teaching peers at the Swansea Academy of Learning and Teaching Conference (Singleton, 2022). One attendee from the Medical School proposed walking as a student supervision technique and another considered using it to debrief paramedic students. However, four respondents to a post-talk survey were unsure whether their students would be comfortable going outside. Therefore, a stronger evidence base will help make these approaches more inclusive for the future.

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