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Inside, in between and out: How can psychogeography be beneficial to teaching and learning in higher education?

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Abstract

Traditional pedagogic approaches to the teaching of everyday life and cultural theory raise the question of whether they allow students to fully experience everyday life if they're always taught in a physical classroom. Might being consciously engaged with the everyday environment help students gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical lessons taught? By looking at psychogeography practices within different conceptual learning spaces and how psychogeography-influenced writings can be used to learn more about the city, this article examines how psychogeography can be beneficial to learning and teaching in higher education.

Keywords

psychogeography; pedagogy; urban walking; the city; everyday life; cultural theory

Introduction

This article is an extract from a longer undergraduate dissertation, which looked at the possibilities of how one's mind and body can be influenced by the surrounding environment or irresistible changes in the world around us. Initially I was intrigued by psychogeography simply because I understood it in its literal sense: where psychology and geography intersect. The entanglement of these two fields of study constantly triggered my curiosity as a Design Management and Cultures student.

Psychogeography was first conceived in the 1950s by Guy Debord as the study of the influence of the geographic environment on humans (Debord, 1955). As I read more into psychogeography and its relevant concepts, I realised that psychogeography is more than just the psychological impacts that the urban environment has on our mind and body. It might have created the conditions of imagination and creativity that transformed forty-two days under house arrest into a miraculous journey for the eighteenth-century writer Xavier de Maistre in his text *Voyage Around my Room* (1794). It could also have been the thought-generated factory that gave Virginia Woolf ideas for her literary works when she moved to Bloomsbury, London in 1924. Her novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and the essay 'Street Haunting' (1927) are two exemplary pieces of literature that were influenced by the act of urban walking.

In the literary world, the urban city becomes a conceptual space for thoughts and wonders, for questioning and observing. Outside the pages of a book, the urban city then becomes an unconditional context where everyday life takes place. The challenge of understanding everyday life is that it often invites a set of 'rigorous', 'systematic' or 'structured' analysis promoted by theorists (Highmore, 2001, p.3). There is a worry that these characteristics might be 'antithetical and deadening to the aspects of everyday life' (ibid). Thus, it is necessary to challenge the norm of theory by questioning its ability to attend the everyday life, 'not via its systematic interrogations, but through its poetics, its ability to render the familiar strange' (ibid). The ideology embodied in this approach to everyday life is in line with psychogeography's playful sense of resistance to the banalisation of modern society (Debord, 1955). It forms an explicit link between psychogeography and the study of

everyday life and cultural theory. Firstly, both are set in an urban context. Secondly, psychogeography's main praxis - drifting or walking - is essentially an empirical aspect of the city experience as outlined in Michel de Certeau's theoretical account of walking the city from his notably critical 'The practice of everyday life' (de Certeau and Rendall, 1984). For this reason, whether in words or out on the pavement, there is a possibility for psychogeography to be considered as a learning method - one that can help us to see everyday life in all its rawness, and experience the city in a new light.

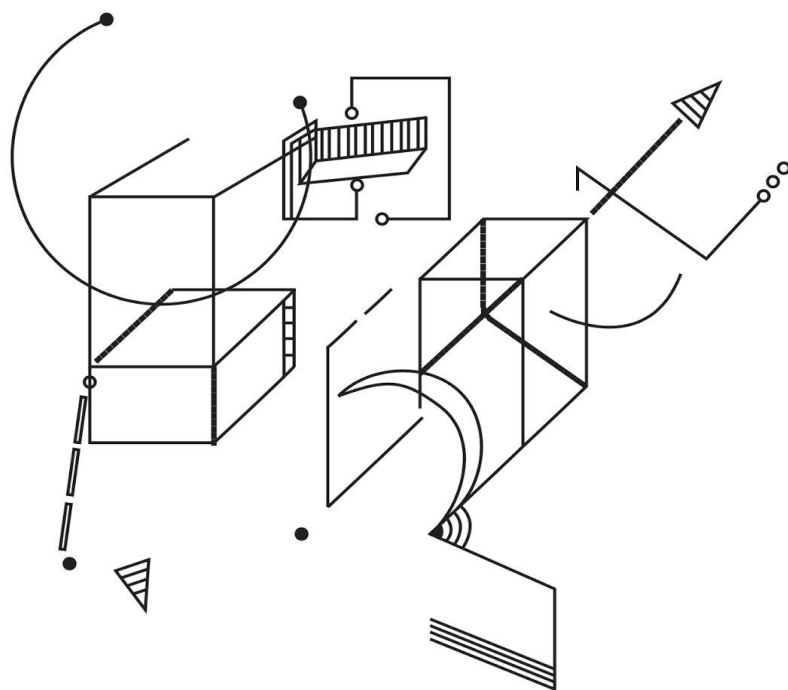


Figure 1. Ngọc Triệu, *Diagram of a Thinking Process* (2016).

Walking is about seeing, contextualising and learning. The above diagram helps visualise my thinking process. Just like walking, it reminds me of what makes the process more than the sum of its parts. The world as I see it, is a peripatetic sequence of entangled curiosity – I am always questioning, wondering and making connections.

Inside: Classroom psychogeography

Richard Reynolds suggests that the facilitation of inclusive psychogeography in a traditional classroom plays a key role in the development of learning and teaching (Reynolds, 2016). According to his study of a cohort of around fifty students at Central Saint Martins, 'students' characteristic attitudes and approaches to learning are influenced by, as well as, expressed by the seating position that they elect to occupy' (Reynolds, 2016, p.3). Reynolds' research into seating and the psychology of this space suggests a great potential for an inclusive approach to psychogeography, which could contribute to development in both teaching and learning, either by intervening in the dynamics of learning space or reinforcing patterns of attention and engagement among students.

Reynolds conducted two surveys, the first one aimed to identify the psychological impact that different geographical seating occupations have on students; and the second aimed to find out the student's personal rationale for choosing this position. Given a regular rectangle lecture space, he analysed students' attitude towards learning based on a system of 'axis of attention' and 'axis of engagement' (ibid). The 'axis of attention' runs from the front of the room to the back, and expresses the degree to

which any student feels personally involved in the content of a lecture, seminar or group presentation. Meanwhile, the 'axis of engagement' runs from side-to-side in any learning space and represents students' learning attitude based on their positions relative to the classroom door. Those who sit close to the door 'feel fully engaged with the lecturer's pedagogy or methodology of the course', however, those who sit on the other side further away from the door, tend to 'challenge' that pedagogy and methodology (Reynolds, 2016, p.4).

In addition, Holliman and Anderson from the University of Southern Mississippi found that there is a correlation between student seating occupation and academic performance (1986). Their study considered the relationship between student grades and: (a) proximity, distance from the student to the instructor; (b) centrality, seating in the centre of the room compared to seating toward the sides; (c) student density, presence of the students to the front, sides and back of the student; and (d) aisle seating. Students who occupied the front rows received higher grades than those who sat further back. Centrality, student density and aisle seating were not related to grades. Although these findings cannot be generalised freely, they indicate the value of studying ecological factors in classrooms (Holliman and Anderson, 1986, p.200).

Within a physical classroom, there is no doubt that seating position has an impact, in both negative and positive ways, on students' attitude and ability to absorb information. For instance, sitting at the front, close to the lecturer, allows students clearer vision and hearing, which is more likely to boost to their academic performance. Students who sit near the front are slightly more concerned with academic issues, but this does not necessarily prove the opposite. The reason students sit near the back might just be for physical and emotional comfort or simply mean they have no preference. To facilitate a successful and effective psychogeography-based seating arrangement, it is essential to consider every element of the learning space, from dimension, density and the nature of the discipline being taught, to students' motivations and aspirations.

In between: Reading the city

The urban city has always been a popular topic among writers and novelists, either as story setting or as subject matter. The literary legacy of psychogeography extends back over five hundred years and fictional accounts have significantly contributed to our understanding of the cities in different time periods. Andrew Green suggests that personal understandings of space and place can be used as pedagogical and theoretical lenses to read the city (2013). By reading and responding to the meaning of a literary text, readers deepen their understandings of the cities and essentially become personal constructors of urban spatiality. Conversely, authors' and readers' own experiences of cities 'lead to personal assumptions and expectations that are fundamental in shaping how texts are received and approached in personal reading and in the classroom' (Green, 2013, p.28).

Additionally, Doreen Massey observes that the city 'is always in the process of being made. It is never finished, never closed' (2005, p.9). As a manifestation of space and a spatialisation of time, a city witnesses all historical and social progress which transforms the landscape. It takes sensitivity, a keen eye and the mind of a writer to observe and record these subtle changes of the city. Literary fiction tends to describe and observe them in nuanced ways that are not captured in historical accounts.

Lauren Elkin claims that there is an undeniable connection between walking and creativity (Elkin, 2016b). The psychologies of moving through the landscape have played an important role in building our perception of cities of the past. Writers conduct their research, making observations of everyday life on and through the streets, from Edgar Allan Poe's view of London as a city 'infested' with 'many individuals of dashing appearance' in the nineteenth century (Poe, (1840) 2009, p.3); to the fashionable arcades of Paris as an 'invention of industry luxury' as explored by German writer Walter Benjamin in the 1930s (Benjamin, (1938) 1997, p.36). As these authors reveal, psychogeography

influenced literary works even before the term itself was coined. Much later, Elkin's Tokyo of 2008 contains 'a million eyes blinking in the dark', with 'helicopters [drifting] across the sky like mosquitoes' (Elkin, 2016a, p.153). It is only through textual interpretation and contextualisation that the aesthetics of past everyday life are made available to us.

According to Gulson and Symes reading is considered an act of internalisation, a response to the possibility of space and place (Gulson and Symes, 2007). With this in mind, in the search for literary comprehension it is essential for readers to position themselves in the context of the city (Green, 2013). However, as the act of reading is often consolidated by lessons that take place in a traditional classroom, most of the time students are dependent on their teacher's guidance to interpret textual meaning and develop understanding. Could the city itself could be employed to facilitate a conceptual reading environment, where readers are allowed to be the constructor of their own city, as well as of their own learning experience?

Out: Breaking the habit

...it is not, after all, really a question about whether you can know the unknown, arrive in it, but how to go about looking for it, how to travel.

(Solnit, 2016, pp.14-15).

It is essential to look at how we behave in different learning spaces and how these behaviours contribute towards our learning experience. As psychogeography considers how surroundings influence us, this concept is relevant to the design of higher education pedagogy.

When applying psychogeography to teaching, opinions are divided on how it can be employed in practice (as opposed to in theory). Lange, Reynolds and White note that today's lectures and classrooms are often 'associated with static, immovable furniture organised in neat rows, all facing towards a whiteboard or screen', dictating specific behaviour or pedagogies of structure and rules (2016, pp.122–129). When employing psychogeography as a potential pedagogic approach in higher education, it is crucial to design the learning spaces in a way that not only encourages curiosity but also challenges the hierarchy of lecturer/student relations.

Lange and Smith define learning space as simply, a space in which learning happens (2014). They outline three different conceptual learning spaces – 'physical / geographic, virtual / on-line and conceptual / state of mind' – which each allow different kinds of learning and approaches to teaching (Lange and Smith, 2014, p.87-105). Based on the facilitation of the three conceptual learning spaces in various geographical sites within the city, Broad Vision (an art/science research and learning project at the University of Westminster) designed an experiential, student-led interdisciplinary module that aimed to promote collaboration and sharing skills between students from different disciplines. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of participants' responses showed that 'migration between the different physical learning spaces encourages different behaviour and responses to each space, by different individuals, based on unfamiliarity and imposed regulations' (Lange and Smith, 2014, pp.87-105).

As Kashdan and Fincham have suggested, some pedagogic design instructions aim to encourage curiosity by 'creating tasks that capitalise on novelty, complexity, ambiguity and variety of surprise', and by 'purposely placing individuals in contexts that are discrepant with their experiences, skills and personality' (2004, pp.482-503). This is illustrated in Broad Vision's approach, as there were also aspects of 'curiosity' and the engagement of novelty in the project, enabling the students to experience lessons relating to disciplines different from their own. These lectures were designed from a student-led perspective and took place in various unconventional learning spaces, including a café, a public place and gallery (Lange and Smith, 2014, pp.87-105).

The exhibition *Practices of Enquiry: Making UAL Teaching Visible* at Chelsea College of Arts (2016), showcased enquiry-based learning approaches taken by various members of UAL teaching staff. Many exhibits were based on the idea that designing for active enquiry provides a useful response to student curiosity and creativity. In a comparable approach to that of *Broad Vision*, its curator Elliott Burns explained this as an enquiry-based process where learning is driven by curiosity, by students and tutors asking a question collaboratively, twisting the usual roles of teachers and students. Both these projects indicate that in essence, having a conscious mindset while engaging with novelty in a space (where suitable activities can happen), engages students to ask questions and learn. By breaking the habit and venturing out of the traditional four-walled learning spaces, a psychogeographic pedagogical approach can inspire students to look beyond initial appearances or preconceptions and cultivate a new learning mindset. A creative approach that acknowledges learning can happen in unexpected places and in informal ways.

Conclusion

...It is about breaking a habit and being open to experiment [...]. If you walk the same route every day from home to work, you just switch off and you don't look anymore because you've seen everything. But if you just make an effort of going on a different route every day, you will experience the world very differently. And I think that you can translate that kind of experience to a way of living: be open, try different things, don't just get stuck in one way, in the system. Maybe psychogeography is almost like a mindset. It is about challenging yourself and becoming consciously aware of how you engage differently with spaces.

(Lange, 2017).

By looking at psychogeography praxis adopted within different learning spaces and how psychogeography-influenced writing can be used to learn more about the city, this paper suggests that the psychogeography of teaching and learning takes place both inside and outside the classroom. From my insider perspective as a student, psychogeography as a pedagogic approach or a pedagogy itself, has a lot to do with curiosity, unfamiliar context and a variety of surprise elements. Texts are not only excellent ways of researching, they can also provide ways of incorporating alternative geographic and historical frames into the classroom.

Psychogeography, when practiced in the context of everyday life, can provide a lens for observing and exploring the social processes and their manifestations that characterise a city's change and transformation. Most of my practice and research-based projects are designed in a way that encourages real-life observations and the contextualisation of design and cultural artefacts in order to investigate their relationship with our everyday modern life. Nonetheless, psychogeography practice is an act of acceptance, a way of befriending uncertainty and embracing the beauty of everyday knowns and unknowns. Without a doubt, it has become a significant part of who I am, and has essentially changed the way I see the world.

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Biography

Ngọc Triệu grew up in Hanoi, Vietnam. She is a photographer, design researcher and manager. Her research areas of interest include psychogeography, social design, visual cultures and Japanology. While she isn't busy brainstorming ideas to solve a problem, she loves to do Kendo, reading, hiking in the woods, contemplating the moon, taking pictures of friends when they don't notice, composing haiku and having good conversations over coffee. *Ngọc* graduated from BA (Hons) Design Management and Cultures, London College of Communication in July 2017.