Disorienting the conference format

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:


Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/20319

Version: Submitted for publication

Publisher: © Taylor & Francis

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workshop, a peer learning space was created, along with a fresh perspective on the experience of teaching. This was not dissimilar to entering the Tube as someone else's guide for the first time. The role of empathy in fieldwork and researcher-participant relations has been explored in some depth in geography (Sharp, 2005). Although there are parallels, mobile methods in learning and teaching have distinctive emotional qualities. Further engagement with mobile learning practices could offer productive openings onto the co-production of knowledge and empathy.

2.4 Disorientating the conference format

Sophie Cranston

For thinking about mobilities, for exploring how, why and what happens on the move, habits often provide an appropriate lens of analysis. Trying to understand our habits, the way in which we habitually do things, then is perhaps understood by doing things differently. For me, what the Co-Producing Mobilities session enabled was a reflection on the way in which we understand knowledge dissemination and production in an academic environment.

Habits or our habitual know-how often form the basis of the way in which we do things, the journeys that we take. My turn as leader took place, 15 minutes in, when we were en route to the Tube Station. In this first section of the walk, I was on ‘auto-pilot.’ Following someone is easy. You don't really have to think, to pay any attention to what is around you. Similarly, the usual routes we travel are easy. We know where we are going, how to get there. It often means we switch off to what is around us.

However, when I took on leadership, I had no idea where we were and no idea what direction to take. I had to really think about where we were going, paying attention to the clues to the route around me. My notes recall my discomfort at this. Changing or challenging habits often means we experience negative emotions. When leading, I followed the path that we were already taking and in meeting the main road looked left and right and saw the Tube station sign. A wave of relief hit me. As Jack Katz (1999), the social psychologist, suggests emotions such as anger expressed in road rage are not directed towards the other driver, but are an expression of the driver’s ‘own dumbness,’ the disruption to their habitual journey (p. 26). While not feeling anything like rage, throughout my notes from the session, my discomfort is evident, a discomfort which upon reflection is illustrative of my ‘own dumbness.’

At first, I thought my discomfort was due to lack of knowledge about navigating London, that I was frustrated by own inability to undertake the task at hand. However, upon reflection this wasn't it. My discomfort was due to my lack of knowledge about London, my feeling that I lacked expertise. I felt disorientated. My discomfort then came literally from my own feelings of ‘dumbness.’ This dumbness was something that was caused by the disruption to the usual habitual experience of the conference.

In academia, the way in which we ‘do’ conferences often becomes habitual; although not part of our daily routine, it is part of our routine as academics. We go to the conference, we pick
up the programme, we rifle through it, we go to talks, we do the small-talk, we fall back into our friend groups, we do our presentation, we network, we try not to embarrass ourselves, we ask questions, we think, we plan for the future. We understand the format of conference, the paper presentation, flashcards for time, PowerPoint slides, questions at the end. Usually, with perhaps the exception of those attending for the first time, we know the drill. The conference space is something that feels reassuringly familiar. The Co-Producing Mobilities session, however, did not follow this format, the standard, often comfortable-because-we-know it format. Breaking us into groups and sending us out on a journey challenged usual conference habits. It was disorientating.

This disorientation, however, I feel was one of the main benefits to Co-Producing Mobilities. Often it is only when our habits are disrupted that we really reflect on what they are and what they mean. In the standard paper then question session, the speaker stands momentarily upon a pedestal, packages up their research and hands this to the audience. Knowledge then is seen as a possession, something over which the speaker claims expertise. This is a position that is subject to defense through questions. Through journeying together in the Co-Producing Mobilities session knowledge became something different. It was something that became applied, something that was contributed to a wider goal. There were no experts and no claims to authority over what we were producing. We were all contributing our experiences, our backgrounds, our opinions rather than defending our potential limitations. In that way, my own (feelings of?) dumbness actually didn't matter.

2.5 [INSERT SUBTITLE]

Helen Fitt

I tuck my elbows and knees in and clutch my bag on my lap. I’m hot, not boiling but just a little warmer than is comfortable. I can smell soap, the kind of soap that is trying to be very minimally fragranced and not quite achieving it. I look around and see blank faces. About half of the people on the Tube are doing something, they have headphones in or newspapers open, but the other 50% of passengers show no external signs of activity. They may be deeply absorbed in thought, but from the apparent vacancy of their eyes it’s hard to tell. Nobody speaks.

Change context.

I throw my arms out wide, raise my voice, and start my seminar with a deliberately controversial exclamation to try to wake the audience from their slightly soporific post-lunch passivity. I see a fleeting glimmer of surprise in a few eyes around the room, but in a moment it is gone, replaced with blank faces. For the most part eyes appear focused but betray little of the thought processes that, I hope, are going on behind them. Occasional flurries of scribbling in open notebooks suggest that I may have triggered…something. I try to work out which parts of my lecture are having an impact and what that impact might be. No-one’s telling.

In their seminal piece on the role of assessment in classrooms, Black and Wiliam suggest that a teacher’s approach should begin with the question “Do I really know enough about the understanding of my pupils to be able to help each of them?” (2001, p. 8) They describe