

## **‘Walk me through your dissertation’. Using urban walks to develop students’ thinking about research**

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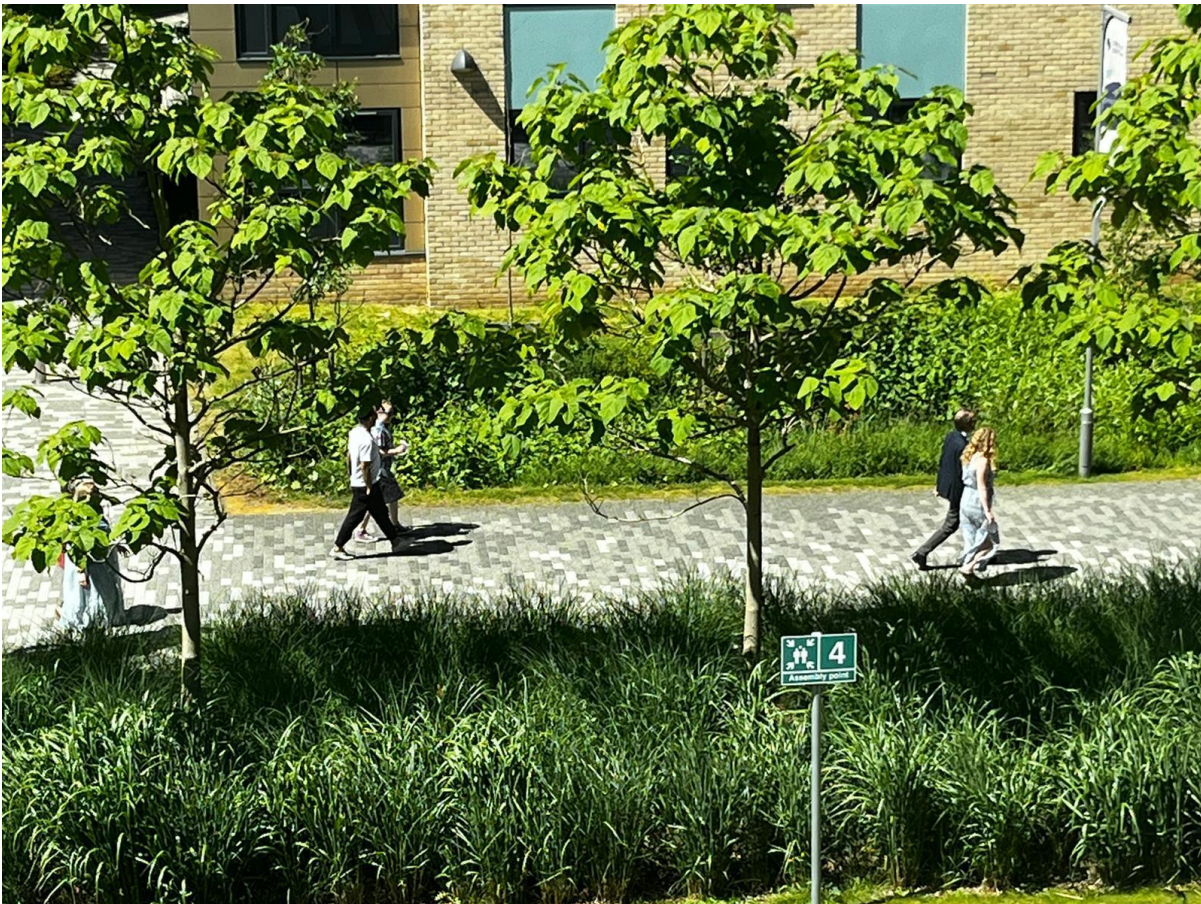
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### ***Presentation abstract***

In the Spring of 2020, during Covid-19 restrictions that were prohibitive for in-person teaching, the Learning Development Unit at a research-intensive university sought ways to support postgraduate taught students who had been learning online. Creative Dissertation Walks were in-person, one-to-one tutorials that ran from May to August for students who were undertaking research. These walks enabled students to book an appointment with an experienced researcher to ‘walk and talk’ (Stansfield, 2019) about any aspect of their dissertation. Borrowing methods from dialogic one-to-one tutorials (Boyd & Markarian, 2015; Wingate, 2019) this project focused on the development of students’ articulation about their thinking around their project and enabled experienced researchers to provide feedback about students’ ideas. The walks took place in a park close to campus because green spaces are thought to improve creativity and generate ideas (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014; Keinanen, 2015; Leisman et al., 2016;). Walking improves mental health (Roe & Aspinall, 2011) and in conjunction with meeting another member of the university community in-person, students who participated in the walks stated that they thought the walks had improved their wellbeing and the outcome of their dissertation.

This practical session provided delegates with the opportunity to experience how walking and talking can develop thinking and how learning developers might adapt the model for their own context. The session also discussed practical considerations when planning walking one-to-ones and reviewing questioning techniques that lend themselves to an environment that moves beyond the bounded notion of the campus (Leander 2010; Healy et al. 2015).

**Image 1. Participants taking part in walking discussions (photograph by Alistair Morey, Queen Mary University of London).**



## ***Community response***

Four themes were identified in this community reflection: general feedback; emerging ideas and insights; the impact of the session on the audience; and questions, suggestions and recommendations for the author. The audiences' quotes have not been changed but split into the relevant themes.

### **1) General feedback**

The format and content of the session was well received by the audience. The author not only developed a different way for students to learn outside the classroom but also explored an innovative method to deliver a workshop for the conference delegates. The audience also acknowledged the potential complications of running such a workshop and appreciated the presenter's efforts to ensure a smooth walk and chat around the campus.

'This was a brilliant session, both in terms of content and format.'

'I enjoyed the practical aspect of it as a delegate and a practitioner. It was great to be able to try out the technique, especially on a nice, sunny day.'

'This was a really thought-provoking session despite the logistical and practical restraints. The presenter was passionate and enthusiastic, and the presentation was clear and well structured. The maps were not that clear and the walks took a bit longer than billed. Creating a walk in an area that has not been visited before is challenging, so the presenter did a great job.'

'This session will be a memorable one for me - how often do you get to go on a walk with a workshop? I had chosen the gentle route, but found it quite pacey. It was a comfortable walk, but I was almost out of breath due to the conversation that was part of the purpose of our walk. We just made it within the allotted time (and were one of the first back). Obviously, this was not by design – and was related to the presenter designing a walking route in an unknown town. I respect them for that. I think it was risky, but they pulled it off – the whole session really worked.'

## **2) Emerging ideas and insights**

The audience compared walking versus sitting to think, reflect and develop new ideas. Although some used walking as a strategy for thinking of new ideas in the past, the workshop allowed them to walk and dialogue with other colleagues in a targeted way; the audience recognised that walking and talking with a colleague around the campus boosted their creativity.

'The concept of using walking and thinking is great.'

'Walking with a colleague made us think some quite big and daring thoughts in response to a problem, so it was definitely a worthwhile exercise.'

'This is a really innovative approach to talking through issues around research. It removes the typical power dynamic of sitting across a table from someone (or on the other side of the screen) and listening to their advice and becomes more of a conversation.'

'My position on that originates with the task – where we were to discuss something on our walk. It was nice to be able to chat something through and reflect with someone in the great outdoors. I think the walk gave us more 'thinking time', and we perhaps spoke a little less as there were things to look at on the walk. This did not feel awkward and worked well. The walking conversation was a strong contrast to a traditional workshop conversation where you are trying to talk with someone in a tiny room alongside 15 other pairs trying to do the same. Somehow, I think the watercourses of Northampton added to the experience, but so did the weather. I do not think I would have been as enthusiastic about venturing out in the rain.'

'Walking has long been a strategy for me for thinking through ideas. The combination of being away from books, computers, etc., and the activity of walking frees up the mind to mull over possibilities. However, I had not used it to dialogue with another person in the targeted way we were encouraged to do. The exercise demonstrated many positives:

- It encouraged a more organic discussion than might be had sitting together in an office or via a screen.
- Not looking at each other produced a different dynamic and made occasional silences easy to be with.
- The informal contact blurred barriers, allowing for a mix of personal and professional discussion, dialogue and quiet enjoyment of the outside space.
- The activity allowed time for the articulation of ideas.'

'I imagine there is a huge wellbeing benefit for staff and students involved.'

### 3) Impact of the session on the audience

The workshop inspired the audience to implement the walking and thinking method in their practice. Some thought about the barriers to doing something similar, but they still were willing to find ways to experiment further. Using the outdoors as a thinking space in the area of learning development and a collaborative research project to explore exploiting the external spaces by learning developers emerged from this session.

'I felt really inspired to explore how something similar could be implemented in my own institution! The main thing I came away with is the idea of discouraging power structures, allowing for more organic conversations.'

'Nevertheless, I am thinking about how I can use this in my practice – and I intend to give it a go!'

'I would love to implement this into my work, although it may be less feasible generally because I work with PhD students. I can still think of some instances in which it would be useful though, and if my students are willing, I will put it into practice.'

'The Northampton Campus worked REALLY well as a scene for the 'walkshop', and it did make me reflect on possible routes at my own institution.'

'I hope to find ways to experiment further with this format. This exercise was conducted with someone I had just met. I would like to see how it works with someone I know well, perhaps with the members of staff I line manage. I have attempted this once, in a one-to-one with a direct report, where we discussed his progress and plans while walking around a wildlife sanctuary equidistant from our homes. This certainly proved effective as a dialogic approach for many of the reasons outlined above, although it took up more of the day than I would usually give over to a one-to-one catch-up.'

'It made me rethink the way I, as a learning developer, had not considered using the great outdoors as a space for thinking, particularly during Covid-19 when staff and students were in a persistent state of confusion as to when and where people could

'go outside'. Living by the coast, the beach offers an opportunity to have open-air discourse in a natural environment, which was not considered at the time. Whilst this external space offering is not suited to all students or staff, it is a creative opportunity to have dialogue outside the four walls/online box. In terms of research, this speaks to further research on learning developers, natural spaces, and wellbeing, particularly as academic work can add pressure to those already experiencing challenges.'

'Consider a collaborative project across the UK with learning developers exploiting their very focused external spaces (one learning development team do woodland walks, another team do coast walks, another uses museum space, another in cafes only etc.). From that, create a reflective comparison paper/blog/etc. – I would be interested in participating in something like that.'

#### **4) Questions and recommendations for the author**

The audience's insight into the walking and thinking method resulted in sharing some ideas and suggestions with the author and raising some thought-provoking questions.

'I am wondering if rather than offering it as a specifically billed service whether it could be used as a general coaching tool. For example, say you are working with a student who has become stuck or lacks motivation. Would walking and talking help them? Is it sensible and practical to offer this 'off the cuff' in response to a situation or the needs of a student?'

'I do wonder how successful this would be if funding was not available, especially as it seems quite time-intensive both for the PGR tutors and staff.'

'Many dissertation briefs are issued in the Spring. How far ahead did you notify the students that this Walk Opportunity would be available? Where was it promoted?'

'Apart from the route planning, Health and Safety, Risk Assessments etc, with whom did you clear the Walks practicalities with – for example, the Health and Safety Committee? Dean of Education?'

**Image 2. The return to the workshop (photograph by Lee Fallin, University of Hull).**



### ***Author's reflections***

It is always quite nerve-wracking presenting; this time it was even more so since I had not done it for so long. Many assured me that the people attending would be supportive and this proved to be true.

I have always been really intrigued by how learning might take place outside of the classroom/campus as the container (Leander et al, 2010). Places of learning do not need to be restricted to time and location; the development of smart mobile technologies provide opportunities of learning 'in the wild' (Kidd, 2019). I hope that this project is a precursor to exploring different ways students may learn beyond the campus.

Often projects such as these, projects that are unusual, different and do not use writing are seen as 'passion projects', quirky side-hustles that do not fit into the traditionally academic

or show tangible impact. I was worried that delegates might have the same idea, that they would think it was something fun to do but ultimately walking one-to-ones would not fit within their context. It was wonderful to be proved wrong. I really enjoyed delegates' insights about how we might expand on using walking within learning. There was a fascinating suggestion of doing the walking one-to-ones on a telephone call when the tutor and the student are not in the same location and would therefore walk different routes. Another suggestion or area for exploration is how we might be able to expand the walking one-to-ones to group walks (or as Stansfield, 2019, calls them 'walkshops').

It was even more rewarding when a couple of people reached out to me after the conference because they were thinking about implementing walking one-to-ones in their provision.

### ***Further reflections***

I have been delighted to hear from two different colleagues who are looking at implementing walking appointments in their offering. As I understand, they are using my approach as a model and adapting it to suit their context. I look forward to hearing about how their walks with students go.

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