

We are where we are: Learning through walking, talking and interacting with place

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Going to conferences is integral to academic life and yet the literature is quiet in respect of why we attend. Perhaps the reasons are too self-evident to warrant attention. Conferences are a place to meet up, to share, to discuss, to debate, to network, to learn; all of these and more, most likely. It is possible that conference attendance is destination-focused too, with location a consideration and international venues regarded as more prestigious than those closer to home. And yet, having experienced a raft of conferences between us, there is a sense that it is the conference theme and focus which is the primary driver for attendance while the whereabouts of the conference is peripheral. That may be too strong, but it is a thought which provokes questions about how much the location matters and the extent to which the locale and the opportunity to engage with it is part

of the experience. In posing these questions, it is important to clarify that we are not speaking here about the venue itself, for example, the hotel. Rather we refer to the geographical situation – the place, the point in space where the conference locates. Just how much, we wonder, do the place and the conference connect? Or is there a separateness between the two, maintained so as to differentiate the space for academic 'work' from the surrounding place? The question might be then: what happens when they are deliberately, purposively connected?

This paper outlines the construct of a conference 'walkshop' and its underpinning intentions. It also overviews other elements of the walkshop, including how technology enabled pictures of place and people to come into the conference space and how a play activity added to unfolding

conversation. Next, the outcome of the discussions focused on assessment and feedback practice and creativity as an approach to facilitating thinking is presented. Finally, the applicability of this type of location-based, outdoor activity to enhance learning is considered.

Constructing the walkshop

Intentions

There were three primary intentions underlying the walkshop:

- 1) *To bring together place and conference by rooting the session firmly in the Edinburgh context and by providing an outdoor activity for participants to experience*

This was achieved by offering an opportunity for participants to leave the conference hotel to explore

a central Edinburgh destination, Calton Hill. This space is significant in Edinburgh's history and culture. At the top, there are several iconic buildings, memorials and monuments relating to the history of the city and country, including the Scottish National Monument, an impressive partially-completed structure modelled on the Parthenon in Athens. There are also fine vistas across the city and beyond and an opportunity to see some important landmarks which are nearby including the Scottish Parliament building and the Palace of Holyrood. Calton Hill is only a short walk from the conference hotel and bears a similar name which emphasised the link between conference and activity. The link with context was also clear from the workshop's outline and learning outcomes and also references provided which included a book focused on Calton Hill (McHardy and Smith, 2014). An important aspect of the workshop was the intention for pictures of place and people, and for reflective words, to contribute to the overall experience, and for this to be effectively enabled through technology.

2) *To relate to the conference theme of Assessment and Feedback*

This was enabled through the different stages of the workshop activity, which actually began in advance of the session itself (see below). On the day, participants in pairs were asked

to engage – as they walked – in an active professional conversation about their assessment and feedback challenges, dilemmas, successes and plans. To ensure this opportunity was of most value for participants, a pre-session communication with those registered invited them to nominate an assessment and feedback topic of their choice or to choose from the topics suggested within the session plan. Participants could also choose a nominated partner for the walk, opt for a pairing based on their topic choice or request a random pairing. Most participants responded to this communication, with random pairing the most dominant option taken. In advance of the session, one of the workshop hosts organised the pairings on the basis of the information provided and prepared a list so the participants could identify who they were to walk with as they came into the conference room, before heading off to Calton Hill.

3) *To test the findings of recent research into the beneficial effects of active exercise on creativity*

By providing the opportunity to take part in an invigorating walk, the session enabled participants to test for themselves the outcomes of Stanford University's research which concluded that 'walking opens up the free flow of ideas'. Specific experiments indicated that there was a very significant

increase in creative thinking while walking rather than when seated and, there was a residual creative boost when people were seated after the walking was experienced. The research also evidenced that walking outdoors produced the most novel and highest quality creative thinking. The nature of the research was clarified in the session outline and outcomes and a reference provided (Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014).

Planning

In order to maximise the 90 minutes available for the workshop, to best benefit those taking part, we prepared extensively.

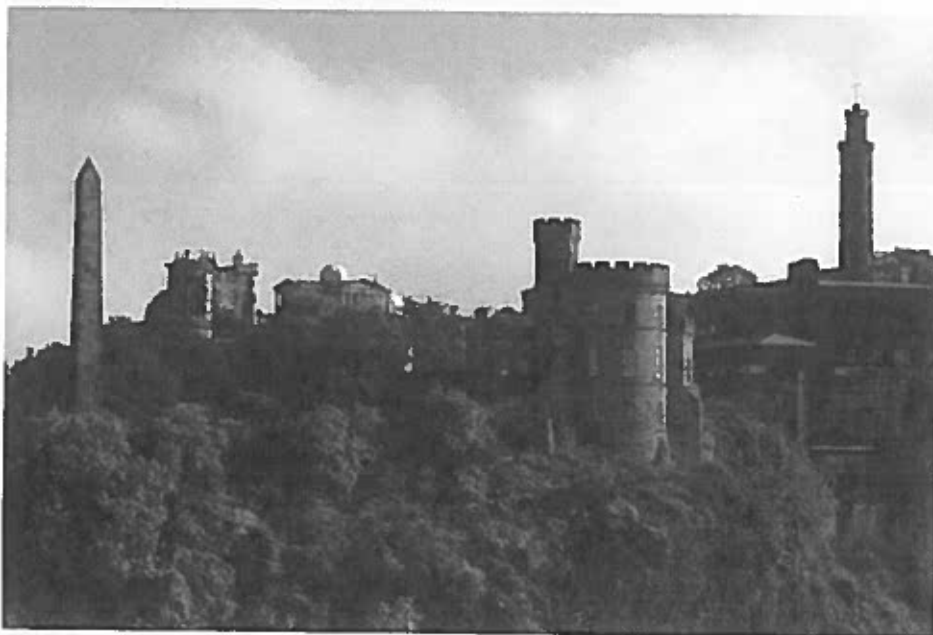
Rehearsal

We walked the walk to be sure of what could easily be achieved by those participating and to consider how they would experience it. We also looked into alternative destinations in the event of inclement weather; it was reassuring to know we had them up our sleeves and had directions to them, as well as to Calton Hill itself if need be.

Roles and responsibilities

We decided that on the day, one of us should stay back at base to help marshal the incoming Facebook posts, Tweets and photos from participants and to initiate the badge-making activity when participants began arriving back after the walk, while the other should follow participants on the walk to bring up the rear and encourage people to return in time for the final plenary element of the session and also to help if any issues arose. We also enlisted the help of a colleague with IT prowess to assist in the event that a technological gremlin disrupted the plans. This proved invaluable because of the volume of posts, Tweets and images sent through as participants were walking and talking and which he was able to assemble into a draft Storify page during the course of the workshop.

In advance of the workshop we set up a closed Facebook page and a Twitter account. Details of both were sent out in pre-session information to all of the conference delegates registered for the workshop. The same



Calton Hill, Edinburgh

communication also included the request for information enabling us to pair participants for the walkshop in advance.

Finally we developed a 'pack' for each participant detailing the walkshop intentions, the route, the timetable, and suggested assessment and feedback discussion options for the walk (if needed) and activity planned for the final plenary session when participants returned. We also included some safety advice. The information also encouraged participants to post via Facebook, to Tweet and to send photos reflecting on their experience of the walk and their conversation during it. The information made clear how the posts, Tweets and photos would be used and included guidance in the event that individuals did not want an image of themselves to be included in the Storify page.

Enacting the walkshop

The day for the walkshop dawned sunny and warm and proved to be the hottest day in Edinburgh for the year so far. We were delighted to be able to dispense with the alternative indoor destinations we had investigated in the case of adverse weather. No doubt influenced by the lovely weather, additional participants signed up on the day and the session was over-subscribed. But we took all-comers; in total 34 conference delegates participated in the walkshop. This caused us as the walkshop hosts some unanticipated activity at the start of the session because of the need to organise pairing of the new participants, but we managed to do this speedily to avoid any delay to proceedings.

We were overwhelmed by the excitement of those taking part. The conference room was buzzing; there was a distinct schools-out, demob-happy feeling in the air. Everyone seemed enthused by the prospect of the walkshop and the opportunity to leave the conference venue and to explore a part of the city nearby. After we had briefly described the intentions of the session together with the practicalities and provided each participant with a walkshop



Ready for badge making

pack, people very quickly introduced themselves to their partners and set off from the hotel with springs in their steps.

During the walk, people engaged enthusiastically in professional discussions around assessment and feedback and very, very soon were sending posts, Tweets and photos back reflecting their experience of walking in the area and discussions on assessment and feedback. Our technological expert, Laurence Patterson, formerly of Edinburgh Napier University, began their organisation into the Storify page to allow them to be viewed before the conclusion of the event.

At the summit of Carlton Hill, participants walked (and talked) around the circular path enjoying the 360 degree view and exploring the



Some of the badges

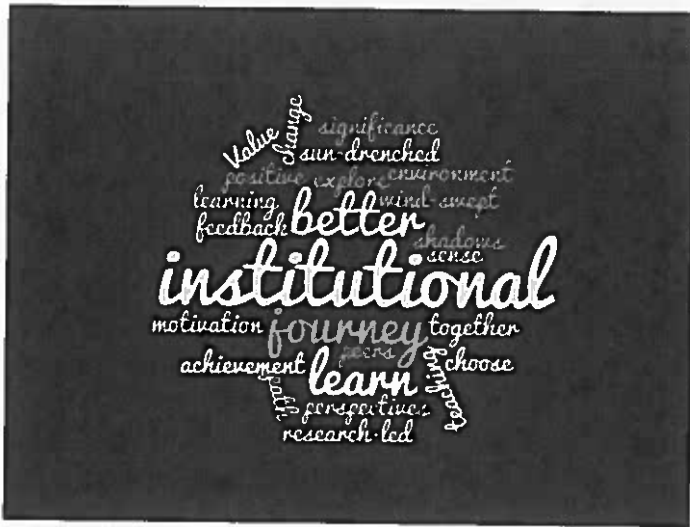
monuments. Others added to their enjoyment with an ice cream or a pint en route – well, it was a very hot day.

After the walk, participants returned to the conference room and engaged enthusiastically in a badge-making activity and the plenary discussion. The idea for badge-making was borrowed by one of the walkshop hosts from the Educational Caucus Developers Conference in Windsor, Ontario in February 2016. Its purpose in the walkshop session was to extend conversation about assessment and feedback, and experiences of the walk, using a different medium. And yes, it was meant to be light-hearted, fun, even silly; experiences perhaps not associated with the everyday life of the academic. Using a range of materials provided by the walkshop hosts badges were created and pinned with pride, it seemed, to chests.

With badge-making still in process and the Storify page playing on the screen, the plenary discussion session focused on four questions.

- Have you gained new insights about assessment and feedback and your practice?
- What changes do you plan when you return to your institution and your students?
- Was your creativity enhanced through walking?
- Have you experienced a creative boost following your walk and now feel reinvigorated for the conference programme ahead?

Participants engaged in the discussion with obvious enthusiasm. The discussion was lively, reflective and profound. The walkshop hosts captured the headlines on a flip chart, later converting them into two word clouds.



Thoughts about assessment and feedback



Walking and creativity

Reflecting on the workshop intentions and the outcomes

Intention 1: To bring together place and conference by rooting the session firmly in the Edinburgh context and by providing an outdoor activity for participants to experience.

Participants undoubtedly enjoyed the Edinburgh context of the activity; this was evident as they talked on their return to the conference room and as we engaged in the plenary discussion. Tweets confirmed that just the experience of 'getting out there' had been enjoyable, with most people seeing the views from Calton Hill for the first time. One Tweet spoke of 'dreamy views', and another related 'beautiful out here'. A third said 'what better place for a "walkshop" than Edinburgh?'. But it was not just the views, the beauty and the novelty of the locale; participants also valued the space created by the walkshop and the opportunity to talk with someone who they did not previously know. One said 'lovely walk, stimulating conversation' and another '(v)ery engaging conversation'.

Intention 2: To relate to the conference theme of Assessment and Feedback.

There was a clear purpose for the walkshop: it was not just about leaving the conference venue on a lovely spring day with the opportunity to talk. What the participants were asked to do was to focus their discussion on assessment and feedback. One

participant Tweeted 'creative conversations about assessment'. What surprised us was the number of metaphors shared via posts and Tweets and returned to in the plenary discussion. It was as if the very enactment of the walk brought to mind comparative images about assessment and feedback practices and student experiences which were insightful, and for us as hosts, unexpected. For example, one Tweet noted 'improving assessment...an arduous climb'; another, 'a pillar of HE must involve students in assessment...but how?'. Someone else, cleverly and creatively integrated the focus of the discussion with the location by referencing a sculpture seen on Calton Hill, 'Nelson: Admiral. Assessment enhancement: Admirable'. Others spoke of the shadows, reflecting the unknowns for students of what is required and of the weather, pulling in the challenge of the elements and their potential to make something harder: the implication being, harder than it needs to be. There were also references to pathways, going in the wrong direction and the journey of assessment, alluding to the expectation that students are meant to get better during the time of their studies.

Intention 3: To test the findings of recent research into the beneficial effects of active exercise on creativity.

Creativity featured in the walkshop with the badge-making activity clearly

set up to facilitate it. And as intended, it was fun too. One Tweet said '... and we got to make badges', another 'making badges, making memories', and a third 'ends with badge-making, joy'. But the creativity extended beyond the obvious place for its expression. It featured during the walk where, for example, one participant took a shadow selfie of herself to illustrate assessment as a shadow practice which students do not fully understand and also in the metaphors described above. As the generation of novel analogies was the test in the Stanford research for the highest quality creative thinking resulting from exercise, these outcomes would suggest that walking outdoors did make an impact on participant creativity.



Shadow selfie

Creativity also featured in the plenary, therefore seeming to support the suggestion that there is a residual creative boost which can follow on from the act of walking itself and the free flow of ideas it can enable (Oppezzo and Schwartz, 2014). One participant got us all thinking when they likened the advantages of activity of the kind offered by the walkshop to the benefits of *flânerie*: the nineteenth-century practice of aimless strolling in order to better observe and experience life (Stephen, 2013). One Tweet reflected on a more formal use of the walkshop concept, saying 'walk and talk, learning the value of meetings on the move'.

Speculative only at this point is the extent to which creativity was further enabled by the multi-tasking which was a deliberate feature of the walkshop. For example, while the pairs walked, they were asked to focus on a particular topic – assessment and feedback – and also post or Tweet. And the badge-making overlapped with the plenary, increasing activity and noise levels, but without seeming to disrupt deep thinking shared in the discussion. It is something which we are thinking further about, but note it here believing it might be useful to others contemplating the use of a walkshop. What we can say for sure is that there was an agreement amongst the participants in the plenary which reflected the view that conferences which do not interact with their location and/or provide no opportunity for participants to experience for themselves the locale in which the conference venue is based, can inhibit rather than facilitate creativity. This was also reflected in a comment in the conference evaluation which recommended that a walkshop should be included as an option in future SEDA conferences. It is these observations which invite consideration of the possibility that creativity might be enabled (or disabled) in other settings too, including university buildings. It is a thought which leads to the final section of this paper which outlines

the potential for the walkshop outside of the conference setting.

Considering wider applications

Before reflecting on the wider potential of the walkshop, it is worth emphasising that its success owed, at least in part, to the preparation. It took time to create the opportunity for a focused conversation between pairs, and the activity around this. We also know that the weather was on our side. Although we are confident that the alternative venues we researched would have been inspiring too, they would not have taken the participants outdoors and we do think this mattered. There was something beneficial it seemed about the randomness of the participant pairings. In the plenary, one pair spoke about thinking the fact of not knowing someone could have stifled conversation, but, in fact, seemed to do just the opposite. There was something important too about choice and also trust. The former was reflected in various ways including choosing a walkshop partner or not, posting/Tweeting or not, badge-making if desired, but not required. And trust – in us, as walkshop hosts, to create the opportunity for a valuable learning experience, and in participants, to stay on task and to leave the sunshine behind to come back to the conference room.

Whether a walkshop, as we have described it, has wider application may well depend on a number of factors, but we can imagine its use with staff and students in a range of academic contexts, including formal learning spaces. We think what matters is the clarity of its purpose so that it does not just present as being something different, something else for a group divided into pairs to do, without the purpose of the activity being identified. We also see that it presents as a way to use technology to enhance reflective activity. In our case, it enabled the sharing of paired thinking into the wider group so that patterns of contemplation could be

discerned, and used to stimulate further discussion both for the participants and more widely. The Storify we created exists as a legacy document – <https://storify.com/ellpee/calton-hill-walk>. We also see that it was a way to learn which takes us back to where we started. Why do academics go to conferences? We can now add to the list of possibilities – to explore the locale in which the conference venue sits, using it deliberately and purposively so as to gain different perspectives on a familiar topic. And let's not forget, a walkshop can be fun too, providing an exciting opportunity to get outside, creating a space for laughter and silliness, as well as for creativity and for learning.

References

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