

Using the Urban To Span the Boundaries Between Diverse Disciplines: Drama Education and Business Management

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of the urban space as a key resource in the postgraduate education of trainee drama teachers. It outlines the evolution of a distinctive approach to enhancing reflective thinking. After an initial stumbling in to traditional methods of learning by walking about, this was augmented by an approach proposed in the 1950s by Situationists in France, namely the “dérive” - literally “drifting, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord, 1955). This marked the second stage of development in which the approach was directly translated into the postgraduate education of business management students. From that point onwards the approach was further evolved collaboratively between two academics in two widely separated disciplines, but who are both concerned with professional development. Our use of the dérive is centrally to provide a vehicle to enhance skills in professional reflection. In drama emphasis is also placed on generating creative practice and identifying a focus for practitioner research whilst in business it is placed on multimedia recording and team analysis. There is an aim in each discipline for the dérive to act as a transitional object, moving learners away from transmission of the known to coping with the unknown. It is intended to make curious through a questioning of the “given”

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and we draw here on Freire's (1984) concept of 'epistemological curiosity'. We suggest that the *dérive* is one way through which time, space and place can be created to generate a form of person-centred, informal, dialogical learning.

Keywords: *dérive*, active learning, action research, reflection

Introduction

It needs to be emphasised from the outset that the collaboration is entirely between the two academics, there is no collaboration between the students who are separate by discipline and geography, Drama in Chester, Business in London. The context for the collaboration is that both authors share a common close interest in innovation in learning and teaching in higher education that transcends disciplines (Latucca, 2001). Having taken an interest in each other's work at the National Teaching Fellow Awards (2003) we quickly established that we are not primarily seeking to understand each other's disciplines, but have rather been attracted by the distinctive ways in which we think about learning, teaching and research within them in so far as this opens up new insights and possibilities for both us and our students. We acknowledge that many academics advance their fields without stepping outside of them. Despite 'interdisciplinarity' having been increasingly advocated (Segal, 2009), in practice it is perfectly feasible for academics to spend their entire time on research, teaching and learning working only with other academics from closely related disciplines, or a single discipline. Schwaber Kerson (2002) argued that comparative advantage can be gained by pooling and focussing disparate sources of expertise, "spanning multiple functional, occupational, hierarchical, and inter-organizational boundaries"

Before turning to trace the origins and development of our particular use of the urban to allow for boundary spanning (Bray, 2008; Granovetter, 1978), we highlight the intentions informing it. Firstly we are concerned with innovation and change that benefits students in both our disciplines and the ways we model learning with them. Innovative activity does not only take place in the worlds of education or business in isolated institutions as evidenced by current developments in knowledge transfer and exchange in the UK higher education sector. The relationship between formal and

informal knowledge exchange is important and ability to innovate involves interacting with and translating ideas into contexts that have originated from several knowledge sources (Bodas Frietas, Claussen, Fontana & Verspagen, 2009). On a pragmatic level we are concerned with developing learning, teaching and research approaches which are novel in the departments used, but not necessarily elsewhere in the university and which offer novel approaches to augment the student experience.

Secondly we seek to promote learning as an active process in which learners construct the world through dialogue, action and reflection as they interact with other people and their environment. Freire's focus on the development of critical consciousness helps define our pedagogical position in the sense that learners concrete realities are central to the learning process, but the job of the educator is to enable learners to 'read' that reality differently. He argues that when immersed in daily life '...our minds do not work epistemologically', in other words we have no great need to '...ask ourselves anything' (Freire, 1998: 81). One key role of the educator is to enable learners to step outside the experience of daily life, to 'emerge from it' in order to '...distance ourselves from it... The distancing ourselves from the object is epistemologically "coming closer" to it' a technique of productive 'alienation' (Willet, 1964). We engage in this process of using the urban to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar to improve our own research practice and because it is an enjoyable approach to collaboration.

Finally we view our collaboration as part of the process of revitalising professionalism in education and business and improving practice through artistic inquiry and action research. The students we work with usually have substantial experience in the world of theatre or business. We are seeking to develop approaches that ask them 'to reach behind that experience in order to develop a more profound understanding of that experience' (Sachs, 1997). This is in contrast to the competency based models of education developed as part of the 'new managerialism' inherent in the public sector since the 1980s (Randle & Brady, 1997). The emphasis is on educating reflective practitioners rather than training technicians and places our approach firmly in the learner centred as opposed to teacher centred camp, for example in the on going debates about teacher quality and teacher education in many parts of the world (Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008).

The *dérive*

Guy Debord's paper "Théorie de la *dérive*" was first published in 'Internationale Situationniste 2 (1955). A French Marxist living in Paris in the early 1950s, Debord was a leading member of the Situationists, the political and artistic movement he founded with colleagues. One of the basic situationist practices is 'the *dérive* [literally: "drifting"]', a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances (Sadler, 1998). *Dérives* involve playful constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.' (Debord, quoted in Knabb, 1981, p51). A key intention is to break usual habits of urban movement to 'create new habitual axes'.

The key elements of the *dérive* are that one or more persons undertake it during a deliberately limited period of time, ranging from a few hours or less to a day, and let go of their usual motivations to move such as work and leisure activities to 'let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there... the *dérive* includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities' (Debord, quoted in Knabb, 1981:50).

Debord argues that the seemingly random nature of the *dérive* may not be as aimless as it appears, 'Progress means breaking through fields where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favourable to our purposes' (Debord, quoted in Knabb, 1981:50). Other specific elements include: conversation; drift within a specific area; responses to weather and the use of public transport and taxis. The area in which the *dérive* takes place can be limited or not according to the agreed purpose- to research a specific area or as a means of emotional disorientation.

Similar approaches but without the agreed purpose, deliberate randomness and urban focus of the *dérive* include St Augustine's use of 'solvitur ambulando', Synectics and Medicine Walk. Academics will perhaps recognize for example the experience of physically walking into a colleague's room not visited for some years, a distraction re-visited mentally to give a freshness of ideas; literally going for a walk in order to "let go",

a faculty retreat away from the workplace allowing for walks and randomness; the common practice of field visits in some disciplines such as Art and Geography.

Translating the activities to quite different academic disciplines

It was not until some way into our developing collaborative practice that we became aware of the theory behind what we were intuitively doing. The origin of the work was at Chester where tutors of the PGCE Drama and PGCE Art courses decided to take their students on a European study tour organised for Fine Art BA students. The notion of 'study tour' was replaced by that of 'subject enrichment week' and the Art PGCE students week fitted in well with the BA scheduled gallery visits, critical and contextual study elements and sketchbook documentation. The Drama students had a rich cultural experience, but theatre performance visits by definition are not as readily available as gallery exhibitions and their visual and written documentation appeared clumsy in comparison to their peers in fine art.

A distinctive feature of the original fine art study tour was that it was learner-centred with tutors providing information, opening up possibilities and talking with students formally and informally in various city locations. Backstage tours of theatres, scheduled sessions with theatre practitioners and a session in school provided a distinctive set of experiences for the drama PGCE students on the first three subject enrichment weeks in Venice, Florence and Prague (2002, 2003, 2004). However, this bordered on over-scheduling, ran the risk of becoming a prescriptive tutor-led tour and so losing the key independent learning that was so valuable for the art students. As a result of the uneasy fit of the fine art gallery/sketchbook model, but desire to replicate in some other way the learner-centred dialogic approach, the *dérive* evolved to meet the drama education student needs.

It was in Prague 2004 that we began to see the potential of the city itself as a site for observation, reflection, provocation and alienation. AO and a group of 20 PGCE Drama students set out from the city centre to walk to the Charles University Drama Education Department. Part of the route passed through a large high-rise soviet housing estate. Walking in small groups, trying to read the map we talked as we skirted round furniture

and personal possessions left in the street, trying to think of parallels in the UK that might offer explanations for such displacement. At the end of the day the students felt that this urban experience was as important as the time spent in the university. One student went on to use an object found on the walk as the basis for a scheme of work in the subsequent school placement.

Conversations based on this student's reflective sketchbook during a visit by CH to Chester in 2005 led to further systematic considerations. CH took up the approach as an induction exercise for MSc Business students. Subsequent drama enrichment weeks in Barcelona (2005) and Venice (2006) were paralleled with *dérive* developments at Cass Business School. In 2006 a book review in 'The Guardian' introduced us to psychogeography and Debord's work. This caused us to re-think together the ways in which we could best present this particular form of urban action learning in each of our programmes. The result was the first clear articulation of potential of this form of collaboration for PGCE Drama students in Amsterdam (2007) and MSc students in London (2007). It also started the series of *dérives* that we as two academics would subsequently undertake and use to model this creative form of learning and critical thinking (e.g. Chester 2007; Liverpool 2008; Nuneaton 2009; London, 2010).

Current developments in our use of the *dérive*

The approach now used is very different from the fine art model on which it was originally based and from the detailed original recommendations of Debord. It now informs the subject enrichment core Drama subject specialism assignment at Masters Level, in which students are expected to submit a piece of original research. It also informs the MSc and BSc. Management induction courses. In contrast to the other PGCE subject students who objectively identify a specific area of subject specific research and then set about researching it, the Drama students use the opportunities to *dérive* during subject enrichment week to surface their research focus and then move towards clarification of the question.

In terms of assessment the PGCE Students work culminates in the creation of a drama workshop that forms the basis of a research project. In the MSc and BSc Management courses the *dérive* focuses on the financial business centre of the City of London and is a key part of the induction programme in introducing core course concepts such as the need to develop personal intuition and curiosity in order to model it professionally for those they will be managing. Using the *dérive* in both professional programmes presents students with a different set of challenges than those currently prevalent where end points are pre-determined and prior learning outcomes specified.

Research methods

The main body of empirical work that we have undertaken and review here took place over a six year period (2004-2010). It centres on the way we have modelled our own experimental work with postgraduate students in Drama Education and Business Management using the *dérive* as a key part of their informal and formal reflection process.

Particular attention is given to the processes of creating and sharing professional knowledge primarily through the use of the *dérive* as a key vehicle for reflection and critical thought in both domains. The approach taken is participatory and collaborative action research. The choice of the words 'participatory' and 'collaborative', suggest a particular leaning, informed by Stringer's notion that action research might be defined as 'the search for understanding in the company of friends' (Stringer 1996: 161).

The data sources which form the empirical evidence base and that have been used to generate and interrogate theory includes: our own reflexive narratives in response to the developing work; interactions and *dérives* with the students as recorded in our own reflective sketchbooks (an example is given in Appendix 1); students written reflections and narratives of involvement documented in their sketchbooks completed as part of their own practice based research; student feedback. The sketchbooks typically involve a wide range of media from handwritten text, photos taken on the walks, and collages of collected materials. There are also formal computer produced written reflections.

Below, there are direct quotations taken either from student sketchbooks or from the formal reflective reports.

Student voices: PGCE Drama

The following presentation and interpretation of voices are from data collected in the period 2006-2010. The majority evidence an enthusiasm for the approach. Expressions of freedom from accustomed restraint include: "It was the most liberating thing" (Venice, 2006); "Time to go where I wanted when I wanted with people I like" (Barcelona, 2008); "Now I'll never be bored when I am somewhere I don't know" (Amsterdam, 2007). "Exciting, spiritual, a sense of discovery...but hard work, you have to be prepared to step off the main track, not only to turn the corner but carry on and right round and then some more." (Venice, 2009)

There is a sense of curiosity and discovery, for example: "When we saw those four huge figures carrying the weight of the building and the king on top we knew we had do something with it" (Venice, 2009); "I found a pile of shoes on a bench near the harbour. At first I thought someone was coming to get them, but no one came and I sat next to them...I'm thinking how I can use it in school somehow" (Amsterdam, 2007); "It started in the airport for us before we passed customs - the ETA posters as we were coming through the security gates"(Barcelona, 2008).

One balance that is always difficult to strike is that between informality of deriving and the formality of scheduled sessions. This largely depends on the individual make up of particular year cohorts and usually varies within them. For example, "We went everyday, smaller groups are best, there is too much disagreement otherwise, but with the three of us this morning we could move around and we found lots" (Barcelona, 2008); "It's expensive and a full organised programme of events would have been good" (Venice, 2009); "I would like more things planned for us to do, watching performances" (Amsterdam, 2007).

In each cohort of 15-20 there are usually 1-2 students who express negative views, for example; "It was okay but the novelty wore off, Venice is expensive"(Venice, 2009); "It

is a pseudo intellectual thing - why don't we just do what we need to do" (Amsterdam, 2007); "Good fun but we could have done more in a really intensive study week (Venice, 2006); "I didn't get it at first it just seemed a waste of time" (Venice, 2006).

The open ended and yet potentially intimate nature of the *dérive* also causes anxiety for some students; "You are suddenly thrown in close with people you think you know or don't know even though you are on the same course- you soon find out things about yourself and others." (Amsterdam, 2007), "I was really scared, I have not been away from my children since they were born, just to go somewhere on my own and meet up with the others" (Venice, 2006); "You just have to trust yourself and the others and not worry, it works out right in the end and you never know what you are going to find" (Barcelona, 2008).

Review of the *dérive*: benefits and limitations

Collaboration and deliberate movement through an urban environment generates dialogue that academics and students find professionally and personally relevant and stimulating, often arising from the psychogeography of the area being experienced and the personal stories that are prompted by it. Seeing a familiar area anew or making an unfamiliar area familiar is one of the ways in which new insights are generated. Stimulus arises not only from oral interaction but also includes silence and reflection. *Dériving* leads participants to talk about the experiences with others who have not been involved.

Moving speedily through the city can paradoxically lead to slowness as place is discovered. Leaving places conventionally associated with learning and walking about can lead to a letting go of fixed points and willingness to adopt a new mind set, albeit temporarily. Debord writes flamboyantly and attractively and the sense of agency and questioning of norms permeate the approach even when it is not followed to the letter. Breaking free of the matter in hand and using the unknown as a source of ideas enables participants to see first hand that thought and practice are not built in a linear way and how synchronicity can be of value. Trivial knowledge is surfaced, but other knowledge is generated.

Most art is not instrumental and the use of *dériving* as a form of artful inquiry challenges the Google-finding- information- to -solve- problems approach. The move is made instead towards curiosity and imaginative thinking, bringing components in critical thinking, in investigation and observation, in team work, in working with chance, accident and intuition, the importance of place, of history, of culture, of memory and the connections of the observer with the observed. In this approach distraction can lead to concentration and total focus on the matter in hand, physically or emotionally.

A curiosity in terms of professional and personal learning can readily arise from the initial pointlessness. This is marked by an observable intensity of engagement as connections are made in countless ways that “render ridiculous any attempt to tidily specify learning objectives or curricular outcomes” and “expose the poverty of a curriculum based on competencies” (Barnett & Standish, 2002: 221). Such intensity of engagement should arguably be at the core of study in higher education. “Positive pointlessness may be the secret to intensifying the life of the imagination, in any field” (Barnett and Standish, 2002: 221).

There are limitations to the approach. It can be uncomfortable and there are issues about engaging less motivated students. Care has to be taken with the way in which the concept is introduced. Students who cannot generate their own questions and focus are at a disadvantage. The approach is not so good for a specific focus and requires time even if only a couple of hours.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need in the professions to promote curiosity, creativity and more critically reflective approaches both individually and in trans-professional teams, but too little discussion in the everyday mechanics of research about what gives rise to curiosity and how ideas are stimulated, discussed and refined. There can be little doubt about the growth of virtual and remote media and technologies, including the phone, web, blogs, video conferences etc. Yet technology has not provided more time to create and critically reflect. Often busy, distracted and stressed, how are academics to model the acts of creativity and critical reflection associated with innovation and change?

Experimentation with novel methods needs to be increased in the face of government departments, professional bodies and university systems that demand explicit, functional, discipline-formulated objectives. The *dérive* is one way through which time, space and place can be created to model creativity and critical reflection through a form of learner centred, informal, critical learning not always valued in the self-pressurising technicist state of Initial Teacher Training in England and Wales (Hill, 2007) and Business Management training in the UK.

In the current higher education context physical contact between researchers' remains of profound importance and an initially unanticipated key application of the *dérive* has been in fact to act as a mechanism supporting research collaboration.

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Appendix 1 Example of a *dérive*: excerpts from notes written afterwards

Hampstead, London

22/10/10: Start 18:40 Frognal– Finish 23:05 Finchley Road

Clive Holtham and Allan Owens

Walked up Frognal / Arkwright Road/ main street towards heath. AO talking about Freud's house on nearby Maresfield Garden's and the famous carpeted coach with psychoanalyst's listening chair placed at right angles to it- iconic learning space. CH talking about journeying during week and amazed the walk from Finchley Road to Hampstead so short - concluding there are 3 travel-London –Tube London, Bus London and Walk London.

Past impressive high street buildings - admire the ex Milk Depot, up High Street to find turning for Hampstead Theatre where CB (ex-colleague) worked with Steven Berkoff- CH talking about seven arches promenade performance- AO sharing Jan Cohen Cruz's notion 'Engaged' theatre' more inclusive than the term 'applied'?

Drawn down small side road by a row of town houses into Flask Walk - took photos of tiled street signs as walked down in search of Goldfinger's house- modernist masterpiece which CH had heard about and produced GPS on phone to find - Never used GPS on a *dérive* before -did not stop conversation as we passed a horse trough and worked out when replaced by cars- argued about the colour of bricks in a wall and to bottom of the Heath where somehow missed John Keat's house (Found out later by Clive re-tracing route on phone).

CH took photo of art deco number 13 cut-out on gate - AO talked about wealth of Hampstead- then up to Hampstead Police Station where CH thought looking at a fake exercise in art deco before spotting the date and realising the building was way ahead of its time. Down Roslyn Hill to Belsize Park, past the Royal Free Hospital with huge Virgin Mary and into Bernard's Brasserie where we ate, planned conference session and photographed CH's clutch of reflective sketchbooks and equipment.

Down Belsize Lane, up a long, beautiful mews houses- ex-stables for gentry - very dark, Clive illuminated by GPS - very Rembrandt - passed some excited guests on the cobbles brushing their teeth - Doubled back as lost the red spot on GPS - down past the Tavistock - AO thanked CH for sending him a text about Freud's House/museum now very close again - turned from quiet into the noise and light of the Finchley Road. Admired classic art deco building now housing Waitrose- CH on to tube and home, AO back to hotel on Frognal - end of *dérive*.

In terms of our usual form we walked slowly and randomly with no conscious effort; observing carefully what was there, what came to us by chance or by design and got a feeling for Hampstead as a place of work and pleasure for over 500 years (15th Century recorded dwellings). AO reminded in this *dérive* that London is a series of villages- huge socio-economic and cultural difference between each- Hampstead a place privilege and power, home to business people, professionals, artists - Freud and Keats just two- the urbane side of urban.