

# Framing Learning Conditions in Geography Excursions

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate and frame some learning conditions involved in the practice of geographical excursions.

The empirical material from this study comes from several excursions made by students in human geography and an ethnomethodological approach through participant observation is used. The study is informed by theories from human geography as basis for reflection and discussion.

The results from this study show firstly that conditions for learning in excursions are conditioned by the particular method of learning.

**Keywords:** Excursions, Learning condition, Ethnomethodology, Non-cognitive learning, Geography

## 1. Introduction

We know that excursions and fieldwork are appreciated by students. Excursions and fieldwork are also important learning tools in geography. Excursions are based on the idea that the context for learning is made in the particular context where the object for learning takes place and is placed, geography thus embodies the practice of in situ learning. (Kent et al., 1997). Boyle, (et al., 2007) concludes for instance that field courses in geography are effective in learning since they are affective. Fuller (et al., 2006) and Scott (et al., 2006) also argues that there is a need for rigorous research into this issue. Common arguments used in describing the concern and the effectiveness of learning in field, in terms of understanding of the subject is: providing first-hand experience of the real world, whichever part of the world the students are in; skills development (transferable and technical); and social benefits. Apart from the social aspects, there are other experiences from geography field work that emphasize the dynamics of groups in learning (Brown, 1999). Bringing students into field may serve as a bridge between the popular and the academic (Smith, 2001). It is also argued here, that it may be fruitful to give some attention to performative and non-representational aspects of excursions, as Basset (2004) does when he tries to relate social theory and fieldwork practice, especially through the practice of walking, as a form of movement through the city with aesthetic and critical potential.

Walking is a practice that allows questions being asked in between practical work and theory, and allow for the transferring and putting theory into practice (Thrift, 2008, p.22). Clark (1997) sees how this integration of diverse theoretical approaches and the simultaneous consideration by students of both local (often personal) details and national (or even global) aspects plays an important role in the field trail. Savin-Badin & Van Niekerk (2007) use narrative inquiry in field work as a reflective learning process. Marvell (2008) reports that the *in situ* presentations made by students helps to widen the experience and develop a range of transferable skills, encouraging a greater sense of place and facilitating reflective learning.

Excursions, as an *in situ* learning and teaching practice thus involve precognitive conditions that make up what is human, and what is human is, at the same time, made in the making of teaching in field. Learning in excursions is in one way characterized by what Kolb (1984) defines as *assimilation*; however in this case, precognitions are mixed with theoretical understandings of a city. The result of this is that the excursion is used as means for producing *accommodation* of knowledge. As such, excursions in geography involve the active engagement in real world perspectives through the presentation in role playing (Livingstone, 1999).

Excursions involves more than just presentations of settings and pointing to interesting spots in a landscape. Performing excursions also involve acoustic, semantic, group dynamic, aesthetic, political, symbolic, emotional, verbal and gesture aspects.

There is a reason for not making any clear distinction between the teacher, the group of people involved in the excursion and the students, because students are given the assignment to collect information about specific places in the city, Copenhagen, before the excursion takes place. Students in human geography and from the teachers' education are taken to Copenhagen every semester, since 2003. Every group consists of 15-25 students and they prepare a presentation in groups of two to three related to a particular place on a route through the city. Every presentation must be related to the literature in human and social geography, and every student produce an excursion

guide as part of the examination. The students thus perform the excursion by taking the role of guiding and presenting places along a given route, to some extent similar to Burgess and Jackson, (1992), but with the teacher as dialogue partner. In this particular situation, the learning experiencing and the performance of excursions and fieldwork are all juxtaposed into the practice of performing an excursion, and it is therefore difficult to separate teacher from student, or members of the group and the group itself, and even so, the learning context from representations, concepts and the object of learning. The teacher thus has the role of a group member that has the option to qualify the dialogue through questions. Excursions are thus also aimed at merging knowledge basis with the students in one shared experience, who starts at a different point of understanding (Ellis, 1993). The aim of this paper is to investigate and frame some of these learning conditions involved in the practice of geographical excursions. In this particular task, the students write a report after the excursion and this report is examined for grades.

The disposition of the chapter begins with the assembling of an assemblage of methodological and theoretical tools for understanding the vocabulary of excursions from a performative and non-representational and non-cognitive perspective. After that, the chapter continues with thicker descriptions from excursions in Copenhagen. These thicker descriptions are then used as means for illustrating and analyzing further the vocabulary of excursions and fieldwork.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 An ethnomethodological approach

Field observations for this study, and analysis of findings, are influenced by ethnomethodological and text analytical approaches (Goffman, 1970; Silverman, 1993). The fundamental question of observation is “**what is going on there?**” (Silverman, 1993, p. 30). Obviously, it is not relevant to observe just anything that goes on in an excursion. If one is foremost interested in a particular “action”, such as fault answers or brilliant explanations made by a student, it is unlikely that observations will result in anything, more than a confirmation of what one already knew before the observation started. But, if one is interested in details of actions and the interaction between students as individuals and as a group interacting with knowledge and the landscape that they are passing through, observation can be used for specify things that are otherwise easily taken for granted. Preconceived notions about how to interpret actions in excursions can easily become oriented towards what is conceptually right or wrong. All preconceived notions can, however, not be eradicated, but it is a choice to make is whether one is willing to know as much as possible about these notions in order to perhaps produce new knowledge, or if one is only interested in reproducing the same knowledge over and over (Jonasson, 2000).

I did not use a video camera by making systematic observation studies of the excursions because it could have meant interpretation only of second hand data. It is tempting to leave a camera on for much longer time than a first-hand observation can manage and the video recording also has its limited visual and audio perspective. Instead, I have relied on first hand observations and interpretations of them in two stages – first in the observation situation and then in the back from the street situation.

Considering the sensitivity of contexts thus requires a shift of attention away from “investigators’ problems” like technical issues of validity and reliability, to the performing students’ problems, specifically their efforts to construct coherent and reasonable worlds of meaning and to make sense of their experiences in a learning situation.

The study does not discriminate between the observer and the students performing their excursions, we meet at an epistemological level as placemakers. The goal for me, as an inquirer, is to qualify the practices and knowledges so that they can be presented within a social scientific framework. Thus there does not exist any dramatic boundaries in terms of knowledge between different participants, only differences in resources and interests, which is one of the interesting and critical dimensions for an investigator to examine. Concepts and actions presented in this study explicitly bear the marks of my interpretation made in the back from the field context. They also have been subject to qualification and scrutiny from a scientific community (Jonasson, 2000).

The methodological approach has a strong spatial situatedness, which means that categories have been produced within specific situated empirical contexts through, for instance “thick” description and mobile movement. Situatedness in this sense is not only physical placement. It also refers to the site where actions and relations are placed. Sites of action are thus to be discovered and brought forth through interrogation of the empirical material. These interrogations consist of the placement of different themes into tension with one another, the deconstruction and manipulation of time and place contexts, and so on.

The attempt made here is to represent excursions from a position in between, the naïve positivist’s inability to reflect on the influence scientist wields over his/her inquiry, and the empiricist’s attempt to control this issue by being

totally absorbed in his/her objects of inquiry. It is also an attempt to escape from theoretical works that use empirical stuff merely as evidence or as rhetorical means - a standpoint that could produce an unmitigatedly critical standpoint against representation that does not regard this or that particular perspective. In this middle way, the scientist's as an objective self-defined interpreter with a mandate to classify and order reality is put under scrutiny. He or she is also seen as a potential collaborator in the process of ongoing negotiation among different voices in different landscapes – placemakers among placemakers. Representations are hopefully made with an awareness of the author's exercise of finale decision making over what is to be said and in what way it is presented in this text. The imprint of the author's own personality and personal goals inevitably permeates work of this kind. These goals should not, however, be hidden in some meta-narrative level. Rather, they should be explicit in order to be negotiated by the reader. A reflexive standpoint of power relations in scientific representation should not be interpreted as goal in itself – leaving a short message of how wrong all kinds of scientific representation are - since asymmetric relations are difficult to avoid. Anxieties and hyper-precautions could produce re-presentation as a search for epistemologically correct opinions. In a simple way, it just happens to be in inquirer's interest to grapple with the categories he or she is engaged with together with other participants at a particular moment and place. But this does not necessarily exclude or reduce the importance of the other voices (Jonasson, 2000).

### 3. Theory

#### 3.1 *A theory of the imaginary non-cognitive geographies*

Excursions involve the relation between mobile humans, nature, and society in a relational and dialectic way. Excursions thus produce different relations between mobile humans and their environment that are being narrated for the purpose of learning.

The focus on excursions in this chapter is to open up for perspectives on space and place that are not *traditionally* considered. For instance by capturing human activities with: "...affective significance" (Thrift, 2008, p. 7) and to focus on what is normally thought of as excluded in excursions (Olsson, 2007, p. 99), and that is for instance understanding the world by divide what has been united, and unite what has been divided, and although geography is a visible enterprise, the mapping of social relations is made through the cartography of the invisible.

In order to understand these invisible and non-cognitive geographies it is necessary to look into the affective. Affective significance relates to the mapping of social relations in Deleuze's interest in the consequences, and the particular human causal powers of: "...dynamic intensities which produce different spatial and temporal intelligibilities – territories of becoming that produce new potentials" (May & Thrift, 2001). This is not to be confused with what is reduced to the emotional in relation to efforts in accommodating new knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

Rather, the affective is connected to learning in excursions, with all its efforts involved, as a non-ordinary learning situation, which normally takes place in a classroom. The intense and affective learning experience comes from the presentation of a vivid interpretation of the world that is shared with a group of people away from home. The relevance of the affective or intensities thus have relevance as causal powers in the imaginations and becoming of the worlds: "...in which the world shows up as series of overlapping *umwelts* in which behaviour and environments cannot be separated" (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000, p. 416) and where concepts, processes and facts are being mixed with visual and physical contact with the objects representing these concepts, facts and processes.

Intensities are related to in the literature of emotional geographies, which is: "...a common concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions; an understanding of the way that emotions -experientially and conceptually – are being socio-spatially mediated and articulated" (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005, p. 3). The role of non-representations and of emotional geographies is perhaps not quite obvious in the understanding of excursions, but what is important is that it can be used in order for: "... investigating what remains unrepresented in the experiences, dynamics and very liveliness of everyday geographies" (as cited in Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2005, p. 11), and can thus be used for understanding excursions.

Excursions does not simply mean a production of disengaged visual contact, it can be related to an earlier debate on a particular western culture way of gazing. Adler (1989) has shown the development of this specialized way of seeing from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and onwards, based on technologies as the camera obscura, the Claude glass, guide books, the spread of knowledges of routes, the art of sketching, photography and so on (Ousby, 1990). Places could thus be visited and consumed by looking at a distance in what Urry (1994, p. 7) calls: "...visual consumption".

An enacting oriented way of viewing learning in field can thus open up a way of understanding the relation between representations and reality, it usually does not include the elements of the world as part of thinking, but as

representations separated from us who listen and imagining. A collaborate learning in field enables us to think about representations, concepts, processes, facts, and thinking in terms of diversified what previously was regarded as anomalous; connected when it was regarded as separated; enabling when it was regarded as dividing (Wylie, 2004).

In field learning, the production of then and now, here and there, is going on in a continuous line of processes. That means that when a group of students is guided and/or are guiding through a city it may be difficult to say that they are representing history *or* places, when they refer to objects that are left for the crowd to interrogate and interpret. Instead, the enactment of learning in field penetrates different layers of existence, and therefore we do need to view the objects we are guided to more as mediators and tools that make it possible to understand what is human.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Understanding of the affective as an outcome for learning

“...a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity of affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality” (Deleuze, Giles, & Guattari, 1998, p. 123).

Not only is Deleuze presenting a useful way of understanding individuality, he also present a way of understanding learning bodies with capacities to interact in subtle ways than just with talk, as well as understanding the causal powers of proximity to other learning bodies and to the object of learning in space. The challenge lies in the understanding and representations of these emotional experiences that produces effects that are spatial as well as cosmological, accommodated, and as such play an important role in learning.

Conducting traditional studies of emotions would probably involve a characterization like

Rowles (1978):

Immediate – highly situation and specific and relevant for only a short duration;

Temporary – of rather longer duration and often repetitive in character; or

Permanent – where there is stability in a deeply ingrained emotional identification attached to place.

Moreover, relations to places can be classified as personal (from individual and unique experiences) or shared by involving other humans in order to create an intersubjective sense and knowledge of a place (Milligan, Bingley, & Gatrell, 2005, p. 51)

But, the understanding of learning in field must also involve more than just an interrogating of different representative practices. It also involves different aspects of everyday experiences that do not necessarily depends on internal processes of representations” out there”.

At a quick glance, the focus of the presentation on the street above revolves around representations of buildings from different times; interrogating monuments, narrating roads, names, buildings and famous peoples’ homes. At a closer look, learning in field also involves the transformation of what is seen, to something that was there before, by narrating and interpreting. Learning in field thus produces a vivid and imaginative situated interpretation by finding suitable analytical frameworks, grouping and categorizing, and organizing similar or different objects. Learning in field, in turn, *intensify* the understanding of an event and a place, by indexing (pointing), narrating, walking, timing, placing bodies in relation to objects – activities that can be categorized as non-representational activities, *or embodied and situated performative intense activities aiming at producing time-spaces as learning outcomes*.

Teaching in field is thus not just an unproblematic way of transforming information, it involves the creation of new time-spaces, which in turn means new forms of socialities which involves emotional, narrative, sensorus, gestures, vocal and rhythmical movements, that cannot be reduced to the objects we meet during an excursion (Smith, 1997). The affective goes beyond the: “... attentional filter of representation that seeks to capture experience as something inner, personal, subjective” McCormack, 2004, p. 496).

Affect and intensities in learning processes are not absolute dependent on physical or mental proximity, nor do we depend on evidence of actual events in time and space in order to achieve understanding of processes at play in places, but as Heath & Alfredsson (2008) concludes, experience based or intensified learning produce conditions for new *ways* of learning.

With the help of a complex theory of field learning we can understand intensities by looking into the difference between emotion and affect, so that while: “...emotions is the personal capture of feelings of intensity, then affect is unqualified intensity, an intensity that is actualised in the sensible materiality of the body, but which opens up this actualised intensity into something mutual between bodies, or between bodies and things, a passage between intra- and inter-corporeal intensities” (Paterson, 2005, p. 164).

It is not that the state of intense experience produced by learning in field is a perfect ground for studying excitement. Nor does it necessarily present a visually evident change in the landscape being penetrated, though these

experiences may occur. Intensities, in the process of learning in field, rather produces a state that permits a subtle but yet profound change in student's micro-political geographies with help of the emotional.

Often without intention, learning in field can be insidious from an influential perspective. The teaching in field produces an intensive momentary engagement on a level with an individual's view of a building or a painting, underpinned by commentaries and associative interpretations from both a student group and teacher. Individual and collective emotions and values are embedded in the walking and talking, where politics becomes emotions of identity and belonging, disguised as rational scientific explanations, economic necessities and the momentary focus on the visual representation. But instead of focusing on the manipulation and management of landscapes per se (Hochschild, 1983; Mestrovic, 1997), the focus here is on time-space-landscapes that are creatively and co-actively being produced through visual, vocational, rhythmical, mobile group effects in the path of excursions. The learning result from excursions are what is left from the experience itself, like concentrated clusters of memories layered up through the matrix of human thought.

#### 4.2 Localizing learning in ontological projects

Learning in geography is intimately connected with an individual's existential project of producing time-spaces, or as Hård af Segerstad (2007) says, a driving force that help individuals to handle different situations in life. Learning in excursions, as an existential project, is thus the, being in the world and representing as: "... the intertwining of subjects and objects through times and spaces (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 5). Production of times-spaces is something that never exists to end and learning in field is a way of intensifying the on-going-ness of this production, by weaving together the past and the present, the visible and the invisible, the new and the old, and subjects and objects through time and spaces. It involves the shift from interrogating, deciphering or decoding places, to the understanding of how time-places become meaningful for students. The move is quite radical, towards what, Ingold (2004) calls a constructivist view on how spaces are represented, and to an ethological view of how spaces are populated when people are guided through them, and the role it plays as *umwelt*, or function as life-world of humans and non-humans, where the most fundamental in life does not begin here and end there (Ingold, 2004, p. 266).

Instead of emphasizing the deciphering of visual representations, guiding can be seen as a modulating practice, of the kind that Ingold (2004, p. 279) call: "co-aptive making". The difference between co-aptive and constructive making is that in the former there is an already existing object fitted to a conceptual image of an intended future use, in the mind of a user. In constructive making this procedure is reversed, in that the object is physically remodelled to conform more closely to the pre-existing image (Ibid). This is also aligned with what Kolb (1984) calls accommodation of knowledge.

Opposite to what we may assume then, teaching in field may thus well be fitted into a process of agency-in-and-environment, or what the phenomenologists call: "...being in the world", instead of just being self-contained individual confronting a world from 'out there' (Ingold, 2004, p. 267). Urban landscapes are thus not built *before* we guide people in them, they are never ready and they are built again and again for every time we pass through them. In this process, the students are not any longer passive receivers of knowledge, they are co-producers and collaborators in knowledge production, beyond engaged relativistic learning environments (Olstedt, 2001).

Learning in excursions enables for students to invest in an engaged ontological and physical movement that is rewarded by affordances of new learning experiences and new landscapes. Listening and walking coordinates the communication and learning through a collective act in-between the symbolical, the visual, and the material: "...a socialized movement" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 204).

Students involved in learning projects in the form of excursions produce connections between different places, joints and intersections of places, juxtaposing of elements and complete time-spaces. They change scales by combining globalization with references to newly built urban environments; they convert materialities to symbols by comparing the content in shop windows with identity and food; and they interfoliate the past to present time-spaces by reflecting on the influence of history upon the organization of goods in a harbor.

Students are permitted to speed up or slow down temporalities and spatialities – and to displace them from their trajectories, and shuffle them around in creative and multiple contexts in order to produce new ways of being in the world, and, at the same time, in order to refer to theories and comparisons with other places. This is done within the narration and presentation of a place, for instance by referring to different events in time and relating them to other events in the city, without losing contact with the reference point where they are standing.

The learning environment produced in excursions, with its proximity to the facts and processes referred to in theory, perhaps makes it possible to reunite past and distant time-spaces into new cosmo-topological hybrids. In turn, these intense co-produced cosmo-topological hybrids are perhaps one important answer to how geographical knowledge is

being accommodated and internalized. As such, learning in excursions, as mobile and situated ontological projects, is the embodied affordance of new ways of being in the world (identity) – and at the same time it is a way for individuals cleave spaces to shapeable elements made ready for accommodation (knowledge).

#### 4.3 *Leading, co-producing and learning*

Leading and following are parts of the process of learning, perhaps these are important conditions for achieving displacement of limits between what is, and what we want reality to be. This is perhaps the most difficult thing to do for a teacher, but letting the students in makes it possible to create co-associative connections and co-emotional intensities when producing different time-spaces, and the gain outscore the losses in control. Emotions and affects intensify learning and the production of time-spaces.

Allowing the students to both lead and learn aid the performance of narrations about the-world-and-its-content. Listening, learning, and walking in excursions and fieldwork is thus also a geographical activity filled with meaning and power, articulated through the bodily movements expressing knowledge about masculinity and femininity (Cresswell, 2004, p. 205; McDowell, 1995). In such a learning situation, it becomes possible to draw on implications for what Merleau-Ponty describes as the relation between subjects in relation to their world, especially the differential embodiments of mobility (Cresswell, 2004, p. 208), and to involve the figures *flâneuse*, the imperial traveler, and *flâneur*, the masculine literary figure associated with the poet Charles Baudelaire. Other types of important differential embodiments of mobile subjects can also be used, such as the ones that produce emotions by attaching to key places as “home” and “away” (Urry, 2005, p. 67).

As many of the students we have been taking out in the field are teacher students, excursions becomes a practical exercise in carefully and temporarily discipline the group’s bodies through the use of movement and non-movement. It practices them to coordinates bodies as well as narratives by means of a trust an active and creative ontology that allows the other students to engage in the imaginative learning.

The learning situation is thus not only based on communicate information, the walking performance of negotiating the material and the symbolical; the social and the economical, the historical and future visions; the visible and the invisible; the passive participation, sympathy and empathy to the told, the here and there and nowhere, the emotional and the affective, the personal and the collective, the social and the material, helps to produce a mobile situated and intense “co-presence” through the active engagement of learning (Urry, 2004, p. 232).

#### 4.4 *Rhythms and movements in field learning*

Rhythm is perhaps not too well considered as producing conditions for learning. Rhythm is both mobility and rest linked together at the same time by the production of slow arrivals as well as abrupt stops. A teacher, thus, may well want to manipulate temporalities through the expanding of steps, in pauses, and in accelerations of time (see Lefebvre, 2004, p. 78), in order to refer to theories or practical examples. In excursions, the group of students in temporarily leading the group and presenting a place, thus produce a: “rhythmic landscape” that presupposes participation and sympathy (Duffy, 1999).

Rhythms do not only arrange the coordinated movements in the landscape, rhythms help the students to be drawn in to an event in order to experience its theoretical and material content. The mobile group itself produces a sense of inclusion (the student group) and exclusion (people from outside looking at the group of students), and this in turn, produces a desire to take part and be included in a context of being gazed at. As such, the affective powers of being together in the group produce intensities related to the movement of the group in rhythms, and thus shape the conditions for learning.

Rhythms also help students to co-connect the personal with the political, the aesthetical with the material, and the individual body with the mobile collective project of learning. Field learning thus allows for an alternative engagement between the “self” and a landscape through the distance towards the everyday routines and experiences of other forms of ecologies and life rhythms (Conradson, 2005, p. 103).

Ideally, learning in excursions is exercised as a smooth form of movement aiming at vitalization and the affordances of new configurations, that distract emotional resistance through its smooth movements, rather than wearing students out. These smooth collective movements facilitate and allow the necessary ontological transition to states of embodied affordances, of learning new experiences, and new ways of conceiving and accommodating the world.

Rhythms are thus important elements of altered states of being, which in turn are elements of engaging and learning. Learning in field is on the one hand, a complex matter of rhythmic recasting, timing, pitching, matching of time-and-space and event-spaces, and on the other hand a rhythmical dismantling of them and a flow through time-spaces.

## 5. Conclusions

We do know from experience and from assessments that many students enjoy excursions in geography, and we also strongly believe that geography students feel that they have achieved effective learning while being in field. This study shows that there are several non-cognitive aspects of excursions that may be important as shaping the conditions for learning, although these aspects are not easily discovered at first glance.

By investigating the student made excursion as a practice of representing, making and co-making, which allows for displacements, connections, intersections and hybrids of different time-spaces, we also know now that there are several parallel processes working in shaping learning:

the proximity between representations and concepts, facts and processes produce a learning situation which is extraordinary in producing connections between the social and the economic; the individual and the collective; the symbolic and the material; the past and the present; and the visible and the invisible in landscapes;

The intensity produced by being in a group and sharing the experience of being away from home shapes the conditions for learning;

The intensities produced by co-producing realities shape both the identity and the learning outcomes – the existential project becomes a learning project;

The wearing of shoes and the rhythmical muscular efforts shared by the group produce bodily intensities that also shapes the conditions for learning;

Excursions have an importance for shaping the conditions of learning by accommodating knowledge.

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