

25 Walk, talk, and connect: Exploring the potential of informal walking groups for enhancing learning communities

Andrea Cameron, Jennifer Padaruth, Fiona Stirling

Abertay University, Dundee, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted students' ability to connect with each other, impacted personal wellbeing and as a consequence, learning communities evolved. In the wake of the pandemic universities have looked for opportunities to facilitate social connectedness among student cohorts. This qualitative study investigated choice to participate in, and experiences of, a walking-based intervention for part-time mature postgraduate students at a time when classroom activities remained restricted by Covid-19 mitigation measures. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the interview data of the n= 8 subjects. Analysis is still in progress, but concepts related to movement, flow, being in nature, being with others, and being attuned to the surroundings are evident in the transcripts. It is hoped that the findings will be of interest to those who want to explore nature- or activity-based pedagogies to foster and/or enhance higher education learning communities.

Full paper

The pandemic has had a negative impact on many students' sense of wellbeing as well as their sense of community (Student Minds, 2021; Maguire & Cameron, 2021) accordingly, some academics have considered how to adjust their classroom pedagogy to foster connectedness within cohorts.

Walking pedagogies are not common practice in higher education and those who have engaged with them have had mixed experiences mainly centred on adoption and engagement (Cameron, 2019) despite others documenting the creative and cognitive benefits (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014) as well as the mental health advantages of being connected with nature (Lutyen, 2017). Walking has been noted to be particularly beneficial for managing anxiety (as well as fostering the many other health benefits that are derived from being physically active) and its rhythmic nature is thought to relax and thereby facilitate creative thinking (Goertz, 2018). Some extol the virtues of 'learn to wonder as we wander' (Lyle, Latremouille, & Jardine, 2021) and others embrace walking as a critical pedagogy and research method that enables participants to 'pay attention' and experience a form of immersive sensory learning that helps collective connectedness with landmarks, associated history and culture (O' Neill, no date).

In recognition that there could be benefits derived from walking-based activities while Covid-19 still placed restrictions on classroom practices, a group of Counselling academic staff based at a modern university in Scotland offered their part-time MSc students' opportunities to engage in a series of extra-curricular tutor-led walks during the 2021/22 academic session. Students from all three-year groups were able to sign up to one or more walks and given the dispersed nature of the student group, some of these were local to the city campus others were at mutually agreed central locations, meaning that there was a mixture of urban and rural walks on offer. In the summer of 2022, QAA Scotland Resilient Learning Communities' institutional funding was awarded to employ a student as a research assistant to explore the experiences of students who chose to participate (or not) in the intervention.

An email invite to be part of the study led to n= 8 students being interviewed. N= 6 had taken part in the walks, and n= 2 had not. Interviews were transcribed, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the resultant data. While the analysis is still in progress some early insights have been garnered which relate to 'more and new connections with each other', 'real connections beyond the screen', a sense of 'connectedness to the city', 'connectedness to staff' and that the 'unstructured' nature of the walks enabled connections to be made. An appreciation of nature also features as well as several narratives that relate to movement and flow, for example 'meandering'. 'Freedom' and 'space' are also noted particularly in relation to personal situations or the intensity of the programme of studies. Those that chose not to participate in the intervention did so mainly as a result of individual circumstances. In one case this related to disability and highlights the need for extra- and in-curricular pedagogic

practices to be inclusive. The intent of the analysis, aside from giving voice to the students' experiences, is to consider whether there could be wider adoption within the higher education system, and what infrastructure might need to be in place to best support co-curriculum implementation of a walking pedagogy.

In the post-pandemic university landscape, the mental wellbeing of students is still a matter of concern (Liverpool et al, 2023). Fostering a sense of belonging premised on being and feeling part of a community is something many institutions are focused on, recognising the impact that the required Covid-19 isolation measures have had on this (Sutcliffe & Noble, 2022). Walking already has many well-documented benefits but its role as an adjunct to the curriculum is still little explored. The early indications derived from this study suggest that for some cohorts (in this case a mature part-time group of learners) making time for a walking-based co-curriculum intervention could help foster valuable peer connections.

References

Cameron, A. (2019). 'Building Health Partnerships'. ANTF conference, Birmingham, March 2019.

Goertz, K. (2018). *Walking as Pedagogy. Integrating Intentional Walking into the College Curriculum*. Chapter in Hall, C. M., Ram, Y. & Shoval, N. (2018). *The Routledge International Handbook of Walking*. London, Routledge.

Liverpool, S., Moinuddin, M., Aithal, S., Owen, M., Bracegirdle, K., Caravotta, M., Walker, R., Murphy, C. & Karkou, V. (2023). Mental health and wellbeing of further and higher education students returning to face-to-face learning after Covid-19 restrictions. *PLoS One*, 18(1):e0280689. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0280689. PMID: 36689440; PMCID: PMC9870122

Lutyen, A. (2021). *Walking as a pedagogic practice*. Accessed on 18/5/23 at Pedagogies of walking – walk · listen · create (walklistencreate.org)

Lyle, E., Latremouille, J. & Jardine, D. (2021). Now has always been the time. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 18(2), 1–5.

Maguire, C. & Cameron, J. (2021). *Thriving Learners: Realising student potential and wellbeing in Scotland*. London, Mental Health Foundation.

O'Neill, M. (no date). *Walking as Critical Pedagogy*. Accessed on 18/5/23 at Walking as critical pedagogy | Feminist Walk Cork

Oppezzo, M. & Schwartz, DL. (2014) Give Your Ideas Some Legs: The Positive Effect of Walking on Creative Thinking. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 40 (4), 1142–1152.

Student Minds (2021). *University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic*. Retrieved from <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/latestnews/74-of-students-say-covid-19-has-had-a-negative-impact-on-their-mental-health-and-wellbeing-student-minds-shares-latest-report-university-mental-health-life-in-a-pandemic>

Sutcliffe, M. & Noble, K. (2022). Belonging, trust and social isolation: the move on-line during the time of COVID – A longitudinal study. *Heliyon*, 8 (9):e10637. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e10637>