

“Doing things outside the academic box”: teaching sensory geographies in practice

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Content

- Contemporary geographical debates
- Sensuous scholarship
- Active learning
- Assessment

...and a few challenges along the way

Course description

- Aims
 1. To introduce the students to the broad range of scholarship on the senses currently circulating within geography and related disciplines
 2. To illustrate the ways in which our understandings of distinct sensory perceptions are historically, culturally and geographically situated
 3. To consider the methodological implications of geographers' theorization of the senses and the challenge that new and emerging approaches present to older paradigms
 4. To encourage the students to reflect upon their own sensory engagements and make connections between knowledge gained in class and the wider world
- Strives to be as sensorially engaging as possible in its pedagogy

Active learning

- Students learn most effectively when they are active participants in the learning process
- Embedding lectures in the real world increases the relevance of what students are learning

...and yet traditional lectures remain the most common mode of instruction

- Significant role of the body in knowing

Concrete experiences



- Props provide a tangible hook
- Explore and question elements of their lives that they may take for granted, ignore, or give no critical thought
- Develop their sensory dexterities
 - Taste tests, skin sensitivity tests, optical illusions, smell-identification tests, smell-infusions ...
- Help clarify their understanding and assimilate the subject matter in meaningful ways

Student centred

- Student-centred - redistribution of roles and competencies
- Support learning
- Students must take control over, and assume responsibility for, their own learning
- Enhancing the value of the task by making it important to them
- Making connections between their everyday lives and knowledges

Fun (!)

The course has been a fantastic eye-opener to the way in which the senses influence our everyday behaviours [...]. I particularly enjoyed the activities we had in the tutorials. This made learning easier and more fun (Course Evaluation 2014-15)

It has provided a new way of approaching all geographical tasks, and has made appreciate the nuances of the everyday lived experience in understanding geographical notions (Course Evaluation 2017-18).



Reflexivity

- Confronting students' assumptions regarding learning and their discipline
- Knowledge as constructed and shaped by individual's positionality
- BUT we also share cultural characteristics with one another (social norms, shared values, common practices, rituals, and ways of knowing, etc.)

Fieldtrips

- Fieldtrips an essential component of geography undergraduate education
- Learning as embodied and 'emplaced'
- Mundane, familiar everyday spaces and places
- Short-duration (c. 50 minutes) fieldtrips
 - Smell/sound walks, listening exercises
 - Visits to anechoic/reverberation chambers, art installations, Blair Street Vaults, Barney's Brewery, Pickering's Gin
 - Field sketching



Skill acquisition

- Field-sketching - what can be gained in the doing and in the course of learning to do
- Learn with enthusiasm and a sense of discovery
- Embrace the challenge to be more creative
- Experiment, be open to surprises, become more aware of one's ignorance, embrace 'risk' and possible failure



Challenges

- Class size
- Time consuming and expensive (reliant on generosity)
- Infrastructure.
- Acceptance of risk (on my part)
- Flexibility



Assessment

- Experiential learning is not always educative
- 'Minds-on' elements must be as rigorously planned as the 'hands-on'
- Blog writing as assessment is attracting increasing interest
 - Reflection (critical reading, positionality)
 - Empowering, motivating and engaging
 - Writing (and other transferable) skills
 - Creativity

Experiential immediacy

- Creativity, curiosity, intense experience, discovery
- More subjective, sensual engagement with the subject
- Multimedia resources (found or created)
- Flex and spread their wings

Emotions

- Emotional engagement as a critical force in learning
- Challenge the 'professionalization' and 'compartmentalisation' of academic activities
- Preoccupation with "big" topics, neglect of 'little stories'
- Greater knowledge 'footprint' into students' learning experience

Blog writing

Really enjoyed writing blogs instead of the usual boring assessments. Gives more creative students the chance to shine! Do not believe in essays all the time as ways to assess students. Think this was a refreshing way to think about a course and shows that the geography department need to branch out from standard assessments. Liked that we could have some creativity in the course (Course Evaluation 2015-16).

I also appreciate the assessments, which allowed for freedom in engaging with the course content, beyond what I feel an exam would have offered. The blogs functioned as a good warm up to the eventual writing of the assessed essay (Course Evaluation 2014-15).

Scaffolding

- Supporting the students
- Some students find it difficult to make the relevant connections and not all students are comfortable in expressing what they feel
- Some are reluctant to take anything other than a conservative – more traditionally ‘academic’ – approach to writing and what ‘content’
- Practice post in Week 1
- Detailed individual feedback
- Sub-sample of previous blogs

Essays

- 3 types to choose from, theme of their choice
- Transformative
- 'Performances of understanding'

- Social learning - 'thinking hats' approach
- Knowledge is not created in a vacuum.
- Reciprocal learning

Personal content

- Personal engagement raises ethical considerations
- Lack of anonymity
- Duty of care

Making new connections

It was so nice to learn outside away from the normality of university life. It was a joy to remember that education can come in different forms (Course Evaluation 2015-16).

The course taught me a new way to look at the world which I will take with me for the rest of my life (Course Evaluation 2015-16).