Reflection sample from successful EdTA L2 submission

Reflection 4

Introducing technologies during field trip teaching

Over the last 5 years I have taught on an undergraduate field course in Amsterdam. Getting students out of the lecture theatre and into the 'real world' is always illuminating. It's certainly my favourite teaching experience of the year. As we're walking through the streets of Amsterdam the city becomes our laboratory and the ideas, theories and processes that we discuss in lectures come alive in the streets of the city. The informality and unpredictability of our ad hoc teaching spaces on various street corners, and in public squares and parks, and the hours walking together through the city also means it's easier to talk to students and it's possible to get to know them.

In the teaching I do in Amsterdam my aim is to get the students to pay closer attention to the urban landscapes they are moving through and understand how studying these landscapes can expose the social relations, the values and the ideologies that built them. My aim in short is about cultivating 'the art of noticing' and developing skills in 'social description' to borrow a couple of phrases from the sociologist Howard Becker. When I first started to do this I'd give the students short quotes as examples of the kind of attention and description that I had in mind. We'd also stop frequently to discuss particular buildings, streets, sites and public spaces to explore their significance...and as I talked I was performing the kind of noticing, description and analysis that I wanted the students to learn about and experience. And yet between stops, as we meandered through picturesque streets and along peaceful canals the students were often more consumed by their conversations than immersing and attuning themselves to the urban landscape. And so for the last couple of years I introduced various bits of simple technology and given the students exercises where they go off on their own to document the urban landscape. With a camera, a video camera, a pen and paper, or a sound recorder, the students spend 45 minutes focusing exclusively on one element of the urban landscape - the rhythms of the street, the mundane objects that surround us in the city, the soundscapes of the city; the many different kinds of interactions that unfold in the city. At first these tasks - and the playfulness with which I introduce the technological 'toys' into the day - seems to create amusement and bemusement in equal measure. But after doing these tasks the students do begin to get it. They start noticing things that they were missing and develop new relations to their environment. In groups discussions after these activities we begin to reflect on the activities and what they achieved methodologically and conceptually...The things that the students started to notice, record and document form the beginnings of a different kind of engagement with the city. As part of our discussions during the day's teaching we start to reflect on how these activities had encouraged the students to engage differently to the city around them and how they might use this experience when they design their own research and research methods. It is always really rewarding to see many of the students use these experiences and techniques in the group research projects that they design and conduct during our time in Amsterdam, as well as in their dissertations.

Part of the inspiration for this experiment came from reading a series of articles on teaching on field trips in the Journal of Geography in Higher Education. In particular, I drew on some pedagogical experiments developed by geographers Alan Latham and Derek McCormack during their field trip in Berlin (and have since written about in the Journal of Geography in Higher Education and the Geography journal Area (Latham and McCormack, 2007; 2009). Latham and McCormack's experiments had two primary aims. First, they introduced digital cameras during the field trip to facilitate a particular engagement with the city, and to encourage the students to notice and think about the elements of everyday life in Berlin that gave the city its distinct atmosphere and feel. In particular they used the cameras to help the students focus on the practices and materials that make the city. Second, their experiments were also a response to recent calls among researchers and educators to make more of images. Their intention was to cultivating different ways of thinking about images - they wanted to help the students see images are more than representational snapshots. They wanted to encourage the students to think about how images do things. They move us, they shape our thoughts and practices even when we don't understand what they represent. And so, the digital photographs produced by the students on this Berlin field trip formed part of a new set of skills and materials for documenting and narrating the city, but they also became part of a wider reflection of what images do. They gave the students an appreciation for thinking about the more-than-representational qualities of images, and for thinking critically about how
images are produced, circulated and consumed. These aims resonated strongly with my own aspirations for getting the students to engage more fully with the city during the Amsterdam field trip. I developed Latham and McCormack’s experiment, adding different technologies to encourage the students to appreciate how all our senses shape how we make sense of and understand the city. And the process of playing and experimenting with new ways of attuning themselves to the urban environment and documenting what they encountered helped introduce new research methods and modes of presenting their research materials.

References:

