



FEATURE

Itinerant encounters beyond the metropolis: expanding sedentary perspectives on teaching through pop-up community classrooms

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Itinerant encounters beyond the metropolis: expanding sedentary perspectives on teaching through pop-up community classrooms

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Abstract

In this article, I highlight the often underestimated role of mobilities in teaching and teacher education through the example of the Welcome Hut, an itinerant classroom in a 'tiny house'. Applying a fluid lens in the debate around remoteness, the focus here is on emancipatory processes through which mobilities can influence educational provision and policies. In an itinerant as well as locally connected curriculum, remoteness is perceived as a strength rather than as a label to be overcome. Beyond centrist prescriptions, those schools declared remote can deliberately play with their own centralities at the fringe to provide an enabling learning environment for singular belongings and inventive ways to educate beyond the metropolis.

Keywords: itinerant education; mobilities turn; tiny house; strength-based remoteness; assimilation

“no route has ever led any caravan to reach its mirage; but only the mirages have set the caravan in motion” (Desroche, 1997, p.144)



Figure 1. A classroom on its journey between communities.

Introduction

In this article, I propose a discussion on the role of mobilities in teaching and teacher education through the example of the Welcome Hut, an itinerant classroom in a ‘tiny house’ (see Figure 1). Applying a fluid lens in the debate around remoteness, the focus here is on emancipatory processes through which mobilities can influence educational provision and policies. The long geographical distances of peripheral schooling infrastructures are often categorised as burdens and barriers, when debates from a centrist positionality rarely value individual and collective negotiations of distance: “the space outside the metropolis is diverse. Yet diversity is not a term often used to describe rural” (Corbett and Gereluk, 2020, p.301) experiences.

This invitation to nurture itinerant perspectives on learning and teaching is based on years of my own professional experience building up a transnational infrastructure for ‘vagabond education’ which connects to schools and community networks from a transient non-expert deontology of relational movement. The historical perception of the physical classroom as static and bounded to geographical location is challenged by practices in mobile learning spheres which shift spatial definitions of what constitutes a classroom onto routes and into the outdoors. In an attempt to build curricula that are both itinerant as well as locally connected, remoteness is perceived as a strength rather than as a label to be overcome. Beyond centrist prescriptions, those schools declared remote can deliberately play with the fringe positionality as an enabling gateway for singular belongings and inventive ways to be educating beyond the metropolis. This article therefore looks at ways how relegated angles informed by mobility can help to reframe sedentary educational frameworks in constructively messy and imaginative ways.

Who needs to catch up? Policies and the privileges of movement in research

As a PhD student funded through the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) Attainment Challenge Project, my research is embedded in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curricular reform with a specific focus on outdoor education, pluriliteracies and health and wellbeing. In my investigations on

educational policy, I have continuously experienced a gap between my own privilege of scientific mobility as a researcher and the imbalanced distribution of the right to roam in policy discourses which hierarchise and restrict access to mobility. While I have been given creative freedoms to use mobility horizontally in research processes, global policies around attainment and the ranking of measurable educational outcomes carry the risk to reinforce immobility when they function as vertical systems of power and control. The emancipatory potential of movement is then contained as global or national systems manage definitions of falling behind through testing scores (Lingard et al., 2016). Policies can work as watchdogs over upward mobilities of the peripheries through

“...the organization of power around systems of governing mobility and immobility at various scales. Such systems are culturally shaped and politically governed by mobility regimes that govern who and what can move (or stay put), when, where, how and under what conditions. Mobilities research focuses not simply on movement per se, but on “the power of discourses, practices and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects of both movement and stasis” (Sheller, 2018, p.19).

The issue with immobilising paternalism: “The “problem” being located with “the other”, with elites left questioning what is it about “the other” that needs to be the focus of pedagogic (and bureaucratic) intervention to move them from being “less marginalized” to “more mainstream” “(Gale, Mills and Cross, 2017, p.346). The narrative around raising attainment or escaping the margins is then problematic from a social justice angle. Remoteness is rarely connotated with empowerment. An underlying assumption of the historically dominant deficit-focus in peripheral schooling is that deprivation is the default state. Progression according to a predefined standard is a challenge to divergent livelihoods as “discourses of threat, un-productivity and (in)authenticity are mobilised in intersecting ways as part of a broader justification for a sedentarist politics of mobility that seeks to discipline mobile cultures into more palatable settled, productive citizens.” (Prout Quicke & Green, 2018, p.649). Schools experiencing non-recognition of their own strengths have to question the standpoints from which their lacks are being judged: “assimilation always implies coming into the game after it has already begun, after the rules and standards have already been set” (Young, 1990, p.164). It is unlikely that an assimilationist categorisation framed by lack and othering emancipates so-called rural or urban ‘low attainment’ schools. Sheller has asked the question of mobility justice: “Who is able to exercise rights to mobility and who is not capable of mobility within particular situations? Who is mobile or immobile and why? [...] How can we support building greater mobility justice? How can people reclaim the mobile commons?” (Sheller, 2018, p.22). The narrative emerging from static gatekeepers of educational standards feeds an unsustainable desire in which ‘reach’ is instrumentalised as one-way, normalising traffic:

“There is, in the ‘hard to reach’ label, an inherently reassuring vision of a future in which the injustice of education deprivation has been overcome – as well as a subliminal affirmation of the means by which reach has been attempted thus far. Yet, at the same time, it is a label that homogenises diversity, and collapses accumulated, intersecting forms of social disadvantage, linked to embedded effects of identity and social

categorisation (Mosse 2010), into the discursive form of a shared characteristic (Kabeer 2006).” (Dyer, 2014, p.5)

In order to rescript remoteness into a strengths-based approach, I propose the shift from rigid standpoints towards less sedentarising *movepoints* and “moorings” (Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006) embedded in an itinerant perspective of more-than-digital remote learning and teaching. Mobility, used as a challenge to assimilationist standardisation and not as an imperative to catch up with a centrist norm, provides breathing spaces: “The margins, in the nomadic, become an interesting space in which alternative ontologies can inform ways to think about the potentials available to imagine alternative realities” (Burke and DeLeon, 2015, p.11). Mobility allows to explore the realities beyond dichotomic macro-categories and opens up institutions to acknowledge their own possibility to spark wanderlust: “there is a periphery inside and outside the core zones as there is a core inside and outside the peripheral regions” (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Binary dividing lines such as centre and periphery are dominant categorisations. It needs to be asked how an enabling look for place-based, site-specific local realities (Corbett and Gereluk, 2020; Smith, 2008) can unsettle dichotomies through itinerance. Based on the argument that mobilities are not *per se* negative or positive (Gustafson, 2013), there remains a task in “transforming the marginalisation of mobility into its acceptance and celebration as a valid, viable and valuable mode of existence” (Kenny & Danaher, 2009, p.2) alongside more sedentary perspectives. This is about a move towards “recognizing and legitimating other ways of knowing: particularly, those that open up rather than close down opportunities for students to engage with knowledge claims central to schooling, and which invite contribution to these learning interactions from their own knowledge base” (Gale et al., 2017, p.346). My arguments seek to push policy and classroom practices out of the comfort zones of ‘sedentary metaphysics’ (Malkki, 1992) which place those who are ‘on the move’ into the dilemma of the exclusively deficit-driven choice between ‘catching up’ or ‘staying remote’.

When “academics appropriate and romanticize the experience of the nomad, they are ignoring the lived experiences and practices of those who actually live that way of life” (Kabachnik in Prout Quicke & Green, 2018, p.648). The shift to valorising mobile knowledges cannot stay a thought experiment. It is a constant existential challenge that I have explored as a vagabond educator for the decade preceding my PhD research. Not dividing but connecting the apparently divergent perspectives of institutional academia and unsettled teaching is the challenge of remoteness at the core of my constantly improvised itinerant educational practice. Such an attempt is not innovative but rather historically and culturally situated:

“The tension between mobility and stasis, in terms of freedom and security, and the fantasies of an independent, free-floating existence, have perhaps always been part of European settled populations’ understanding of themselves (Peters 2006) and the ‘other’. The figure of the nomad as the embodiment of freedom and irresponsibility and a challenge to the order of things is thus deeply embedded in European understandings of mobility and

stasis. The threatening image of mobile peoples as destroyers of order and progress is as old as the romantic fantasies” (Engebriksen, 2017, p.44)

The question is then how the mobilities angle, in the diversity of reactions it provokes (Gustafson, 2013), can practically contribute to transformational interventions in learning and teaching.

Practice: itinerant classrooms as vehicles for local curricula

One can still find travelling grocery stores in rural France despite the growing financial dominance of multinational hypermarkets over local shops. Those running the *épiceries ambulantes* prefer the relational experience over the functional consumer culture. Some have even invented a delivery model of cultural nutrition, allowing artists to travel rural itineraries with a grocery van that offers theatre, music and other forms of participatory art (Bojko, 2010). Such small-scale practices became my most important inspiration in the process of building up a storytelling venue in a roadworthy shepherd’s hut after a Master degree with a Scottish specialism in Adult and Community Education. As an intergenerational pop-up classroom (see Figure 2), visibility in the public sphere is guaranteed. The vagabond stance in a massified educational landscape of assessment metrics is however much more than an ephemeral provocation. The tiny house builds encounter and connectivity by a constant interplay between arriving and departing. My role is to make departures and pauses resonate with each other. This interplay between mobility and stillness (Conradson, 2013) does not polarise but instead transcends binaries. While my Welcome Hut visits for a day or a weekend and returning to a location only many weeks later, it provokes novel social rearrangements which can last well beyond the immediacy of the stop-over.

Detailed descriptions of the arts-based workshops in mobile shepherd’s huts across Europe are informed by different fields, from education to social work and the arts (Hanser, 2020). Suited to propose fluid local curricula in ‘remote’ communities, “public pedagogy interprets educational institutions as fluid, open systems that are themselves nested within multiple, overlapping, and contested sites of learning.” (O’Malley et al., 2010, p. 697). A mobile classroom then becomes a multisensory venue to learn differently and opens up spaces of opportunity that are not visible from the indoors routines. Bringing the classroom on the road follows a natural flow that is already applied in many curricula through field excursions and approaches to outdoor education. Through the storytelling encounters around the wood fire stove of the mobile tiny houses, learners-as-visitors can advance at their own pace. The hut itineraries follow their own temporal logics and make space for emerging knowledges, situated in improvisation and local human ecologies: “success in educational institutions has less to do with how well students learn in them and more to do with the extent to which those educational institutions recognize their a priori knowledge and skills” (Gale et al., 2017, p.348). The mobile encounter space makes something visible which is often forgotten in the accelerated narratives on global impact: “Instead of searching for grand alternative models or strategies, what is needed is the investigation of alternative representations and practices in concrete local settings” (Dyer, 2014, p.3). Pop-up disruptions demonstrate in their modest capacity of small-scale change that it is possible to do things differently within one’s own sphere.

My own practice can be connected to a wider body of literature on travelling learning spaces, often situated in the global South :

“mobile schools – flexible, dedicated provision that can come to learners, rather than vice versa, and does not enforce extended separation between learners and the mobile household. There is from Mauritania, Algeria, Iran and Nigeria over 50 years of experience of mobile school provision for pastoralists (Krätli 2001), offered by both state and non-state providers, often via a range of partnerships between state, third-sector organisations and (in Africa in particular) donor agencies. Such provision is unconstrained by form – the ‘school’ may be a tent, a bus, a boat (e.g. Maksud and Rasul’s (2006) discussion for Bangladesh), or a couple of boxes on the back of a camel or donkey. It can be as simple as the UNICEF ‘school in a box’, or comprise a more complex multi-grade model, such as that Oxfam trialled in Sudan (Aikman and El Haj 2006).” (Dyer, 2014, p.167)

Another example is a Higher Education initiative of an itinerant and cooperative university through which the teaching staff mobilised by the French university professor Henri Desroche travelled to their students in their own life worlds in the global South, rather than asking the students to make their way to the metropolis to study in Paris (Lago, 2018). The informal and outdoor model of university teaching led to decades of running a postgraduate diploma awarded by French universities. It was explicitly inspired by Desroche’s rejection to *retrain* the ‘hard-to-reach’ and ‘upgrade’ their levels, and instead to learn from reciprocal encounter. This itinerant education cannot be described as responding to rural deprivation, but as relational self-sufficiency that does not rely on the dominant centres for validation.

From my experience of operationalising the travelling encounter pedagogies, a major challenge lies in the interweaving of this fragile approach into more stable systems and networks. Funding challenges can be tackled in a relational approach of rural schooling as a community-driven rather than school-only approach on “the specific, simultaneously place-based and globally relational problems beyond the metropolis” (Corbett and Gereluk, 2020, p.303). A few departure points will be sketched out to imagine wider networks of itinerant education in the North.



Figure 2: home delivery of groceries and home delivery of encounter

Policy suggestions : the role of mobility in community-driven teacher education

Schools and schooling in their presential, non-digital versions are almost exclusively conceptualised as anchored in one location, rarely perceived as 'in movement' and not imagined as nomadic. Learners and teachers move, but institutions stay. This view can be challenged, as digital education has already made its own mobilities turn. Data-driven activity is increasingly accepted as fluidly institutionalised education, while physical schools are kept in a more static paradigm. As Covid-19 has recently accelerated a necessary but timidly pursued expansion of digital infrastructure, there is also a concern among educators about loss of meaningful physically grounded learning. When Dalsgaard and Ryberg suggest to rethink distance as an opportunity for enabling shared presence in the context of digitalisation (2020), I want to add that this twisting of views on 'distance' can also be enacted on wheels.

One could ask what implications the possibility of mobile classrooms could have on professional identities. A platform for a constant interplay between travelling encounter spaces and 'remote' schools could emerge through geographical itineraries of experiential learning as well as intertwined digital education platforms. It is necessary to question why teachers and learners as individuals are posited as the ones who ought to travel, if school spaces can share this act. There is a risk of stasis in positioning institutions and their settings as stable and static in a fluid world in motion that can no longer be understood through binary categories. Experiential itineraries are capable of functioning relatively 'off the grid' and at the same time in elaborate ways of physical, local connectivity and wider digital relations.

Mobile educational schemes can transcend the rigid status quo that often functions as the replacement anchor for a lost security: "social and educational researchers find themselves as players in a larger historical context where human beings have searched for certainty in an attempt to regain a lost security. The instrumental rationality [...] reflects this tendency, as positivistic researchers have searched for a method (a means) which is never-changing, an anchor in a stormy sea of ambiguity" (Kincheloe, 2012, p.141). Ambiguity invites us to conceptualise teaching trajectories with the inherent possibility to reflect on fragility and build curricula with uncertainty as valid elements of the human experience. Instead of working *against* vulnerability of all sorts through mastery and control, teachers could be given experimental spaces to roam and explore that there is mobile agency in the face of immobilising uncertainties on the global scale: "deterritorialized curriculum theory implies a commitment to fight for a different research platform, one that pushes research to a "level of instability, not stability, generating concepts also, in itself, unstable" (O'Brien & Penna, 1999, p. 106) [...] that breeds from the multiplicity of immanent platforms and, from its centerless and peripheryless position, defies clean knowledge territories" (Paraskeva, 2016, p.196). This is about allowing educators to existentially and pedagogically experience motion and mobile epistemologies as an emancipatory challenge to dominant knowledge hierarchies. One visit of a school-on-wheels can already create a substantial experience to challenge sedentarising components of a curriculum and make forms of marginalisation visible. Such learning is then embedded within, not against, a functional system of ITE that is often considered in need of more motion as spaces of creativity and improvisation (Campbell, 2019). Community educators then accompany teacher educators and (student) teachers to host mobilities, to travel with and facilitate itinerant classrooms, just as every participant also gets the chance to be equally hosted by mobilities.

By being on the move in experimental schemes for community-led practice that enable placements or Continuous Professional Development workshops as touring and journeying, we can give ourselves the chance to unsettle and be unsettled.

There is also a risk of perceiving commuting in rural zones as one-way processes without the potential of reciprocity dormant in mobilities schemes. The focus is usually on teachers who are considered difficult to recruit in remote environments, who have to relocate and have to travel towards school buildings each day. What about school buildings, such as classrooms, moving with educators in different asynchronous temporalities than daily interventions? Professionals then iteratively learn to rescript the indoors classroom enriched by standpoints and *movepoints* of outdoor wanderings, making way for self-directed '*itineraries towards*' instead of '*commuting to*'. Teaching in so-called peripheries does not have to be a commuter's outreach towards the 'hard-to-reach', but can bring about existentially disruptive formats playfully transforming standpoints which create their own evolving centralities beyond stasis. This can allow to reassess sinuous trajectories and to "encourage student teachers to critically interrogate their own trajectories into higher education (and the teaching profession), and audit forms of capital that they possess" (Gale et al., 2017, p.352). Educational training can host a diversity of profiles in motions that expand the logics of *in* or *out* in widening participation: "From the perspective of the motion itself, neither side is ontologically distinguishable as inside or outside. The concepts of inside and outside make sense only from a fixed referent or perspective [...] However, from the perspective of the movement of oscillation itself, every place is an inside/outside" (Nail, 2015, p.131).

From standpoints to *movepoints*: taking the discussion further

Mobile schools have their moorings in underexplored small-scale practices and often invisibilised life worlds informed by existential, pedagogical and curricular movements. Conceptually, they trigger an imagination that could go well beyond the contemporary idea of 'schools on mobile phones'. Pop-up classrooms can spark hybrid formats that stretch further than technical concerns. Itineraries can allow meaningful encounters both digitally and physically. New ways of perceiving remoteness can emerge so "that the margin be no longer margin but part and parcel of a multifaceted whole, a center of decision among other decision-making centers, an autonomous center of knowledge production among others" (Hountondji, 1997, p. 36). To answer the questions of communities and the existential challenges that remoteness poses, we can unlearn to rigidify our educationalist *standpoints* and go with the flow of deterritorialising *movepoints*. Education is then not about the attainment of conquered land to stand on and occupy, but the nurturing of stillness as humble waystations (Figure 3) to take an uncomfortable but emancipatory journey further. The destinations emerge in the horizontal dialogue between local and travelling contributors.



Figure 3: The empowering stillness of shared mobilities

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