

I went up a mountain and came down a hill. Datawalking as a counter to disembodied research during a pandemic

ICACE Abstract

This presentation will share research findings derived from autoethnographic data derived from my PhD study which looks at the interaction between teaching, research and public engagement in STEM education. I will look at the use of embodied movement as part of an autoethnographic research method was expedited by the COVID19 pandemic as a daily walk during lockdown was permitted within government guidelines for the purpose of exercise. This started out as a lonely walk up a steep drover's road in one of the most remote parts of North-West Scotland.

However, as this process became more embedded into my daily life, I realised that not only did it feed my wellbeing, but it also provided a fertile space to reflect on my research work. *Datawalking* (van Es and de Lange, 2020) is a pragmatic approach to gather sensory-immersive data, which Amoroso (2021) posits as a counter to *epistemic injustice*.

I will share how this method enhanced my wellbeing as a solo researcher who was disembodied from the academic community as a distance PhD student during the COVID19 pandemic and counters feelings of self-doubt and isolation typically experienced by PhD students (Boncori and Smith, 2019).

Introduction

- 1) Thanks for the opportunity to present today. My name is Lucy Beattie, I am a PhD researcher based at the School of Education and Social Sciences at UWS.
- 2) My PhD looks at the interaction between teaching, research, and public engagement in STEM from the perspective of Scottish lecturers. In this session I am going to look at Datawalking. And I'm also going to talk about how this fed into my reflections and helped me to develop my autoethnographic writing.
- 3) I chose to look at STEM subjects, in particular those referred to as panel B subjects which includes physics, chemistry, engineering and mathematics. A report on the 2014 REF found that STEM panel B disciplines had the lowest levels of reported case studies that mentioned public engagement. Crucially found that **impact can be hard to capture**; furthermore, dissemination, rather than dialogue, missed **deeper impact** and I wanted to find out how Scottish lecturers experience this, and how it affects their research and teaching.
- 4) During the last 25 years higher education has increased its focus on the linkages between teaching and research (Brew, 2010) More recently the impact of research and its reach in society, beyond the walls of academia (Papatsiba and Cohen, 2019) has brought focus on the triple nexus of teaching/research/public engagement (Stevenson and McArthur, 2015).
- 5) Within an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology my study utilises two methods of qualitative data collection: phenomenological interviews and autoethnography. I wanted examine the essence of the *lifeworld* which explores the subjective interpretation of lived experience (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Zahavi, 2019; Larsson and Holmström, 2009).
- 6) The embodied, somatic movement to gather data is described by van Es and de Lange (2020) as *datawalking*; imply put, datawalking refers to the collection of observed data, interview data, or reflexive data whilst walking. I used this

method to record formative thoughts on my mobile phone whilst walking to reflect and feed into autoethnographic writing. These pictures show some of my walks, all seasons, from the North-West Highlands of Scotland where I live. For me it was a place and space to clear the head, and to seek a different scene from the confined space of homeworking in a busy family home during a pandemic.

- 7) On a practical level datawalking is shown to be an effective method to gather place-based data in the fields of anthropology, ethnography, geography, environmental science and architecture. Datawalking for me was initially expedient during lockdowns, as the only form of activity permitted within government guidelines for the purpose of exercise was a daily walk. But as this process became more embedded into my daily life, I realised that not only did it feed my wellbeing, but it also provided a fertile space to reflect on my research work. And I found others were doing it too.
- 8) Walking is shown to support cognition, metacognition, and self-confidence. And it can equalise power relationships between researchers and research participants. It became apparent in my own practice that embodied movement positively supported my reflective practice, analysis, and critical thinking. Therefore, I formally adopted the method even after the lockdowns eased and I continued to walk (Alvarez-Bueno et al. 2017; Erickson, Hillman, and Kramer 2015).
- 9) Virtual research, particularly during a global health crisis, is a form of disembodiment, and arguably autoethnography addresses this disembodiment through embodied reflexivity (Eatough and Smith, 2008; Leigh and Bailey, 2013). I spoke to ten participants. Sometimes I came away from a call wanting to reach out and check in with a colleague, but remote research meant that wasn't always possible.
- 10) So I started to write. The start of a PhD can feel like you are looking at a mountain, more so when you are in isolation and all those around you are in

isolation too. I knew that I wanted to use autoethnography as a means to reflect on my own positionality, and also to reflect on findings with my participants. The results were positive, and this inspired me to keep going.

- 11) As I walked each day up a small hill at the back of my house the task of writing and reflecting on data seemed less mountainous. It brought to mind a popular film from the 90s, *The Englishman who went up a hill and came down a mountain*. In this film the star, Hugh Grant, played the role of an affable cartographer who was taken along with the pride and passion of a Welsh Village to change the status of a local hill to a mountain by adding to its height. In my case I felt like I was scaling a mountain, but bit by bit, walk by walk, I found I was going up a mountain and coming down a hill as the study findings took shape and the task ahead seemed less onerous. For my PhD study I have found that autoethnography has been invaluable given my circumstances as a remote researcher and I can see that this will have applications beyond the pandemic. It promotes a deeper exchange between researchers and participants in remote interviewing.
- 12) My former teacher from UHI Outer Hebrides, Professor Frank Rennie, used to remind me of a blunt sentence when it came to research. "So what...?", well Hugh Grant got his girl, and he got his mountain mapped. Where am I going with this? Today we are talking about the conceptualisation of a "Right to Roam". My findings illustrate that roaming outdoors has helped to develop a framework to record and synthesize reflective writing. But what I also want to consider is where this can go?
- 13) Datawalking may exclude those who cannot walk due to lack of access, or disability? There may be other forms of somatic, embodied movement that are alternatives to walking. For example, my interview findings indicate that people may exercise their **right to roam** when dancing, swimming, cycling, knitting, running, and even people watching. Overall, it appears that these types of activity enable a space for people to engage with ideas and creative thought.
- 14) I'd like to finish with a poem I wrote after interviewing two women participants. I resonated with the challenges they faced as a woman, caregiver, worker. It is a reminder that one should exercise the right to roam and also maintain boundaries. The poem is called "Finding my no".

Finding my “no” – a poem

Finding
out. Re-searching,
searching the half-lit ivory tower.
Intersections contrast like chiaroscuro,
depending on your lens.

Finding my
real me. Beyond the walls,
of the convivial community.
Mutinous mycelium,
that spreads like a dangerous idea.

Finding my no
way out. Set on a track
measured by metrics.
Reaching in from outside,
authentically anchored.

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