Geography and Art: Encountering place across disciplines

Abstract

This paper summarises a project undertaken at the Newton Park campus of Bath Spa University over one week in October 2015. The project provided a space for interdisciplinary collaborations between geography and art students to explore the commonalities and differences in how they saw, interpreted, and creatively re-presented the campus, using a variety of methods. This paper outlines the project and reflects on the processes, outcomes, and challenges of collaboration. It highlights how this approach can enhance student learning experiences, by facilitating more interdisciplinary collaboration across the sciences, arts and humanities, and social sciences. In doing so, it explores the potential and pitfalls of collaborative cultural geography in practice across disciplines.

Keywords

art, collaboration, creativity, mapping, place, social media, walking

Encountering place across disciplines

Our conceptual beginning, and common interest, was in how the disciplines of art and geography understand, measure, and re-present place. In particular, we were interested in how different subjects influence students' perspectives on place, and their point of focus on themes including environmental processes, materials, change over time and space, or access and management. This paper summarises a project designed to explore these interests at the Newton Park campus of Bath Spa University over one week in October 2015. Newton Park is

an historic parkland estate, landscaped by Lancelot “Capability” Brown, and now leased by the University from the Duchy of Cornwall. It comprises historic buildings, a large lake with woodland and follies, and modern academic and residential buildings. The project provided a space for interdisciplinary collaborations between geography and art students to explore the commonalities and differences in how they saw, interpreted, and creatively re-presented the campus, using a variety of methods. It sought to bring undergraduate and postgraduate students together in a series of small emergent teams and tasked them with devising ways of interpreting, portraying, and recording their experiences of the campus as a place. A short video[1], produced by Film students at Bath Spa, documented the week’s activities.

In this endeavour, we wanted neither to use geography as a backdrop for art nor to employ art as an illustration of geography. Instead, we wanted to explore and foster something more elusive - intensifications of encounters with place across disciplines, drawing on the different lenses of the students and experts involved. Combining these different perspectives and methods, we felt, would “enable us to see things that we would otherwise have missed”[2] and to use interactions of geographic and art practice to rethink, redraw, and re-work the campus in a range of registers.

We, of course, are not the first to blend art and geography. In the 1960s and 70s, for example, interaction with mapping and place was practiced by land artists such as Richard Long and Robert Smithson and developed into mapping as sociopolitical statement in the Swedish multimedia artist Oyvind Fahlstrom’s work. In the 1990s, artists’ engagement with mapping as a

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYuUHt2_csU&feature=youtu.be
[2] Alain De Botton, *Alain de Botton: How Proust Can Change Your Life*, Big Think *Big Think*. (2012) <http://bigthink.com/videos/alain-de-botton-how-proust-can-change-your-life> accessed: 11 January 2015.

means to juxtapose concepts of identity, ecology, social change, the poetic and the political, escalated in direct response to the rise of the internet and access to technological systems and global information. This was evidenced in work such as Most Blue Skies by L. Autogena and J. Portway, which they describe as combining 'the latest in atmospheric research, environmental monitoring and sensing technologies with the romantic history of the blue sky and its fragile optimism'[3]. More recently, art-geography ventures have grown in number and prominence. These collaborations are, we feel, bringing the embodied practices and affective material sensibilities of art practice into the mix of methods employed by cultural geographers in ways that go beyond the representational and toward more creative 'world-making' modes. In return, heightened spatial sophistication within arts practice garnered from scholarly approaches allow for deep engagements with the challenges of mobility and difference within and between places.

The project itself took place over 5 consecutive days in October 2015 and brought together 20 students from the art school and the geography subject area. Students were selected through an open application process to foster participant commitment in what was an experimental project to develop a series of creative outputs across our campus. They were tasked with trying different methods of understanding and portraying the campus as a place, using guidance and inspiration from a range of academic disciplines. To prompt their creative endeavours, the students were first introduced to various areas of current landscape-nature research and practice, including cultural geographies of the more-than-human[4], land art, nature writing, deep mapping, and performative geographies during workshops with practitioners. Throughout the week, contributions from Art, Geography, Creative Writing, Environmental Humanities, Film, and

[3] Ruth Watson, "Mapping and Contemporary Art", The Cartographic Journal 46, No. 4 (2009): 293–307.
[4] Hayden Lorimer, "Cultural Geography: The Busyness of Being 'more-than-Representational,'" Progress in Human Geography 29, no. 1 (2005): 83–94.

Creative Media studies helped raise questions and shape ideas for the outputs students later produced. Armed with these methods and approaches, they organised themselves into groups and devised ways of interpreting, portraying, and recording their experiences of the campus as a place.

The intention in this project was to develop creative output through embodied practice and time 'in the field,' while at the same time bringing in film, photography, and an overarching digital creativity and capturing element. The social media and walking artist, Richard White, introduced participants to interactive, live mapping walking practices with mobile media technology[5]. This involved walking routes around the campus while uploading GPS points and tweets, often with images and sound files, to a map displayed in the university. A combination of Twitter, Flickr, Audioboom, and View Ranger were used to record these images, messages, sounds, and positions to create an interactive and participatory GIS in the Social Hiking website[6]. The map content grew as the project evolved, and progress could be monitored either via the visible map or through twitter feeds. The map was also publically displayed as it evolved throughout the project on a large media wall in the central university atrium (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

In addition to this digital mapping element, textile and environmental artist, Sue Lawty, focussed attention on the materiality of place, reflecting how "cultural and personal narrative is concerned with the substance of things, the mapping of place and space, the structure of the landscape,

[5] Richard White, *About*, <http://www.walknowtracks.co.uk/about.html> accessed 20 May 2016.
[6] http://www.shareyouradventure.com/map/60655/walknowlive/Lines-of-Desire

the sense of time."[7] Students were encouraged to explore materials found in the campus, natural and man-made, and to use these to visualise their personal response to the place. Consequently, students used different methods and techniques to produce creative, visual outputs informed by their discipline, group, and the material and practitioners with which they were working.

A key element of the entire process was to introduce students to the creative performative practices of Bristol-based, internationally acclaimed, land artist Richard Long. This was achieved through students visiting a retrospective of his work at The Arnolfini art gallery and an off-site commission on The Downs in Bristol (see figure 2), followed by Long's talk to participants on campus. Richard Long was a pioneer of land art, although working within different frameworks from those who are now regarded as environmental artists. His work speaks to the wider 'creative turn' in geography, where there is a desire to embrace artistic practice and artists' work to open up more non-representational accounts of how place is and can be lived in affective, emotional, relational individual and collective ways. His performative interventions rest on a suite of practices which include walking, sleeping in place, marking the land with bodily practice, and manipulating place by moving material into patterns.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Alongside these performative interventions are a series of graphic works which record such practices, often in very short typographically elegant statements. Much of Long's work is articulated by two of the most basic and profound ways of being in place: that of line, or journey,

[7] L. Millar, *Sue Lawty*, <http://www.browngrotta.com/Pages/lawty.php> accessed 20 May 2016.

and that of being centred. With a particular emphasis on ephemerality, Long prefers working unseen in remote locations and leaving little or no trace of his activities. Greater understanding of his approach prompted students to consider how digital tools and social media applications could enable a more ephemeral, less intrusive visualisation of the place. The tools allowed students to record images, audio recordings, physical movements, and ephemeral art works, while uploading via Twitter, View Ranger, and Social Hiking enabled these creative outputs to be communicated and accessed over a potentially unlimited period of time.

Reflections

This project produced a number of outcomes and highlighted both the potential and pitfalls of cross-disciplinary activities. Students' creations included ephemeral and permanent pieces, text works, sound pieces and video, all recorded using the interactive map. Their engagement started with observing, recording, and photographing details, including lines of cars, discarded wrappers balancing on blades of grass, and the trace of previous structures in the ground. It developed into collecting and reorganising materials by, for example, gathering fallen leaves (the few untidy elements in the carefully managed campus) to create a thick ordered line that followed the contours of the land. Following reflections on these material responses, students began making connections between the place and their own particular interests, from linking natural and man-made patterns on the campus to using natural elements as metaphors for broader social issues. These initial activities and reflections encouraged the formation of smaller student groups, which then used different methods to identify and portray particular themes, such as physical accessibility and impact, the gendered nature of the place, management of the site, restriction and freedom of nature, and materials and their permanence and impermanence.

For example, one group noted the restriction of nature through management of the site, with felled trees stored in once-locked culverts beneath a walkway. Marking the ground in the process of dragging the wood, they “rescued” the logs and repositioned them on top of the stump of a felled tree. This natural sculpture remains standing at the site, memorialising the intervention in the natural environment.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Another group, including a wheelchair user, used large sheets of paper to record the tracks of the wheelchair, reflecting issues of access and control of space. Paths around the campus clearly define where to walk and where not to venture, but for wheelchair users in particular, such paths restrict accessibility and limit mobility within the campus.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

In both of these examples, the art students proved much more willing to physically engage with the materiality of the place while the geography students were more at ease and familiar with the academic debates around nature/environment, accessibility, and mobility. However, the experience raised a number of challenges and issues, in terms of both logistical and practical arrangements, in part as a result of students’ different conceptual and pedagogical backgrounds.

Challenges of interdisciplinarity

During this project, it became very clear that the art and geography students were embedded in very different pedagogies and approaches, reflecting Foster and Lorimer's point that "in establishing a collaborative relationship, shared interest in conduct can matter as much as a shared vision for content"[8]. Although all students were unfamiliar with the different methods being used, the experimental and open assignment, without stated expectations regarding method or outcome was confusing for some. The geography students in particular would have benefitted from a more formal structure at the beginning of the week. In contrast, the art students were more comfortable with an open-ended approach and exploration. This raises interesting questions about students' ability to deal with uncertainty and the importance of giving them the opportunity to step outside disciplinary boundaries and take risks as part of their higher education experience. The increasing emphasis within UK Higher Education Institutions on developing resilience and creativity as key graduate attributes desired by employers, suggests that this kind of open-ended project offers opportunities to develop those skills.

If the geography students struggled with the open-ended nature of this project, they were much more accepting of group work and group output ethos than were the art students, for whom work tends to be individual and much more personal in nature and outcome. Although collaborative and cross-disciplinary methodologies form the basis of many artists' practices, art students have the conflicting need to establish their unique artistic voice at an early stage in their career, hence the tension between individual and group identities and activities. Many of the art students, for example, felt the need to create tangible/concrete outcomes as evidence of their involvement, in addition to the collaborative mapping and documentation of more ephemeral responses.

[8] Foster & Lorimer, 'Art-Geography', p. 427.

In terms of logistical and practical arrangements, it quickly became evident that our preconceptions of a technologically savvy and social-media-engaged student population were misguided. Engagement with the various applications - notably Twitter, Flickr, and View Ranger - proved to have a steep learning curve for many students, especially in a short space of time. Altering practice to use the smart devices and social media tools was not straightforward and required considerable encouragement before students were taking and uploading pictures, sending tweets, and recording their GPS location as a matter of course. Some students seemed to find this quite disruptive and were not used to such frequent use of smart devices while engaging in creative practice. Once students were more familiar with the tools, using them on the campus was also problematic due to the campus topography and the resulting limits to the phone and wifi signal and upload capacity. The rather ambivalent attitude of many students towards using the technology left us puzzled, questioning our assumptions about students' intrinsic enthusiasm for technology-enhanced learning. There may be a sense of technology fatigue among the student body or a generational distance between what devices, technologies, and applications are perceived as useful and appealing. This is a key point for future projects to ensure student engagement in the process and outcome.

Shared ways forward

Beyond these challenges and issues, there were many positive outcomes from the project, not least the identification of future collaborative ventures. The value of evolving and displaying the project in a prominent public atrium space on campus meant that it encouraged engagement from colleagues across the university, who identified links to their own work. For example, the project has highlighted opportunities to develop this approach further through incorporating

music in audio mapping and sound installations or exploring other forms of participatory mapping. It also prompted discussions about devising an interdisciplinary project module option available to all students. The appearance of art works around campus stimulated much interest from staff and students, and the more permanent pieces have undergone their own evolution in the months after the project, suggesting that other campus users have engaged with and experienced the place in new ways. In the feedback gathered, students reported that the experience had altered their own practice and perspectives - becoming more “adventurous”, “seeing things in other ways”, and “looking at the concept of drawing in a different way”. Comments were also made that the project had “pushed my boundaries in understanding and practice of art” and “further opened my eyes to the connections between geography and art and how we can relate to the landscape”.

The project has also given us a greater sense of disciplinary differences and similarities, highlighting the importance of including different pedagogical approaches to achieve a truly interdisciplinary collaboration. Combining the methods and perspectives from cultural geography and art proved valuable in encouraging students to look beyond their “comfort zone” and produce different, less-expected outcomes. The methodological diversity and more holistic and nuanced interpretation of place gained when working from *both* disciplines is key to the success of this approach, even if encouraging students to look beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries remains a challenge.

Conclusion

Our aim had been to provide the opportunity for cross-disciplinary explorations and responses to place without prescribed outcomes. Overall, the project proved an interesting example of

collaborative co-creation across disciplines, methods, and tools. It provided an opportunity, rarely encountered in the daily activities of university modules for students and staff, to learn from each other's practice and perspectives. It has also had an impact on wider collaboration on our campus, as it constituted a starting point for identifying connections and posing further questions about encounters between art, geography, and other disciplines.

The project's positive outcomes, combined with the challenges experienced as a result of disciplinary boundaries, support our belief in the value of interdisciplinary or even post-disciplinary working. This approach is increasingly evident in the blurring of the institutional and methodological traditions of academic cultural geography and arts scholarship and practice. The more this is done at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the better, for the future of both subject areas and for more holistic creative knowledges of place.

Figure 1: Mapping the project on the media wall (Source: Johnston 2015)

Figure 2: Boyhood Line by Richard Long (Source: White 2015)

Figure 3: Memorial to the tree (Source: Waterworth 2015)

Figure 4: Exploring access and mobility (Source: Johnston 2015)