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Watershed Walking: Experiential Tools for Connecting People, Place and Water

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Title: Walking to Observe, Explore, Experience

Keywords: walking, multisensory fieldwork, environmental listening, mindful walking

Overview:

“Walking...is how the body measures itself against the earth.” –Rebecca Solnit, 2000, 31.

This learning module presents a several short learning activities that consider the role of walking as environmental humanities methodology to be used in courses with existing fieldwork components. Any short walking component of a class is also an opportunity to hone the human body and engage the imagination in exploring the role of walking as integral to the human experience of place. Several activities are provided to explore how different ways of walking generate different effects for bodies, minds, and environments.

Walking is integral to the human experience; it is a way of knowing the world and a form of dwelling. It is the primary way humans we experience and move through environments (daily, historically) and the most enduring way of making place (habitats, home, villages, cities). Many notions of what it means to be human are traced to bipedal upright walking; human evolution, journey, migration, and civilization all begin on foot. Importantly, walking is also a trans-disciplinary methodology for *doing* observation, ethnography, biography, biology, environmentalism, public history, art, activism, storytelling, and much more. Naturalists, environmentalists, and philosophers have always walked to think, observe, document, and discover.

The footprint is also a powerful metaphor and narrative device expressing the lived spatial scale and lived pace of the human body, including the incremental accumulation of personal stories and public histories (“one step at a time,” “one foot in front of the other”). Footprints also form the basis for human conceptions of empathy (“being in someone else’s shoes”), heritage (“following in someone’s footsteps”), place-based environmental impacts (“ecological footprint”) and sustainable urbanism (“the ped shed”), all of which are integral to public discourse a pluralistic society in the twenty-first century.

Goals:

Upon completion of this module students will be able to:

- Appreciate the role of walking as integral to the human experience of place
- Appraise and articulate the different effects (for mind, body, place) of different ways of walking
- Employ walking as a method for observing (art of noticing), exploring (intellectual curiosity), and experiencing (sensory attentiveness) environments

User Guide:

Integrate one of the ‘ways of walking’ activities into a single existing field-based class period or combine multiple themes for an entire course section or week of activities.

For example, in a course that meets twice a week, initiate the short mental map activity the first class meeting (Mon or Tues), assign a reading and written reflection, and then in

the second weekly class meeting (Thurs or Fri), conduct a mindful walk and post-walk reading discussion.

Materials:

- PowerPoint presentation
- Paper and pens/pencils for making a mental map
- (optional) Headphones and smartphone for guided listening activity
- Readings
 - PDF ([online version here](#)) of Solnit, Rebecca. 2000. "Chapter 1. Tracing a Headland: An Introduction" in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, pgs. 3-13. London: Penguin Books.
 - PDF of Francis, John. 2008. "Introduction and Ch.1 Oil and Water: When Worlds Collide" in *Planet Walker: 22 Years of Walking, 17 Years of Silence*, pgs. 7-27. National Geographic.

Ways of Walking Mental Map Activity

5-10 minute mental map	Ask students at the start of class to map the route they walked to get to class. Include as much detail about what they observed en route as they can recall. Remind them that this is a mental (memory) map; no Google map allowed!
20-30 minute mental map	Task students with a class-related activity (specimen collection or other scientific fieldwork) at the beginning of class that requires them to walk somewhere, carry out their assigned task, and return (or conduct a group walk to a site of relevance for the class). Upon their return to class (or when they arrive at the designated fieldwork site), ask students to hand draw a mental map of their route and include everything they observed while walking. Remind them that this is a mental (memory) map; no Google map allowed!

Mental map discussion strategies –

- Ask students to verbally describe their mental map route and/or the observations they made en route with the class.
- Create a list on the board of all the observational details students recorded on their mental maps.
- Or, in a larger group, prior to the class discussion, ask students to first share their maps and observations with a fellow student before asking for volunteers to share in the large class discussion.

Consider the following questions to get the class discussion going:

- What type of observational information was recorded on the mental maps: Visual details? Audible information? Olfactory (smell or taste) data? Tactile features (feelings of touch, texture, air movement)?
- What sort of observations were noticed by some, unnoticed by others?
- Why do you think some people observed more environmental information than others?

- Did the length of the walk play a role?
- What about the degree or type of distraction?
- Did students with multi-modal transportation generate different observations than those who only walked?
- Did distraction influence observational detail and spatial recall? Take a poll: how many students were listening to music, talking on their phones, texting, or otherwise mentally distracted while walking?

Reading Activities

Task students with a reading one of the following three book chapters and crafting a short written reflection using the questions provided as possible prompts.

Ways of Walking – Embodied Experience and Environment

Reading 1 Solnit, Rebecca. 2000. "Chapter 1. Tracing a Headland: An Introduction" in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, pgs. 3-13. London: Penguin Books.
<https://oss.adm.ntu.edu.sg/17s1-dp2010-tut-g01/wp-content/uploads/sites/1694/2017/08/Rebecca-Solnit-WANDERING-Chapter-12.pdf>

Written Assignment & Discussion Prompts

Please read *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Ch. 1) and write a 500-word response to one or more of the following prompts. Solnit says, "to make walking into an investigation, a ritual, a meditation, is a special subset of walking, physiologically like and philosophically unlike the way the mail carrier brings the mail and the office workers reaches the train" (pg. 3 2000).

- How is walking as a mode of investigation, ritual, or meditation *different* than walking to work or class (or walking as work, e.g. a postal worker)?
- What do the body and mind (physiologically and psychologically) do differently when walking to observe, explore, or reflect than habitual, necessary, or distracted walking?
- How might the speed, rhythm, gait, and posture of walking correspond with different patterns of thought?
- What are the effects of different ways of walking for human well being, health, safety, and enjoyment? For built and natural environments?
- Have you walked differently after reading and reflecting on ways of walking? How has this shaped what you feel, think, and observe? Explain.
- Why do you think walking has been a methodology employed by so many legendary environmentalists (such as Henry David Thoreau)?

Walk the Walk – Environmental Listening, Communication, and Practice

Reading 2	Francis, John. 2008. "Introduction and Ch.1 Oil and Water: When Worlds Collide" in <i>Planet Walker: 22 Years of Walking, 17 Years of Silence</i> , pgs. 7-27. National Geographic.
TED Talk Video	Francis, John. 2008. Walk the earth...my 17-year vow of silence https://www.ted.com/talks/john_francis_walks_the_earth?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare
Newspaper Article	Francis, John. 2016. Experience: I didn't speak for 17 years. <i>The Guardian</i> . https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/nov/25/i-didnt-speak-for-17-years-experience-planetwalker
Website	Planetwalk - http://planetwalk.org

Written Assignment & Discussion Prompts

Please read Planet Walker (Intro and Ch. 1) and write a 500-word written response reflecting on how the themes Dr. Francis raises that resonate with you: environmental pilgrimage / walking, environmental activism, silence/listening, empathy, and more.

Dr. John Francis, Planetwalker, says that "environmentalism is about how we treat each other when we meet each other." Please read Planet Walker (Intro and Ch. 1) and write a 500-word written response to the following questions:

- Why do you think we define empathy as "the ability to imagine yourself in someone else's shoes"? How does the idea of footprints relate to other social and environmental concepts? To past and future generations of earth's inhabitants?
- Why did John Francis start (only) walking? How did his experience walking as an environmental practice transform how he viewed himself, others, and the world?
- How did moving at 3 miles an hour shape John Francis' experience of place, landscape, and Earth? How does walking help us experience and tell "slow stories?" See also, Out of Eden Walk by Nat Geo: <https://vimeo.com/175964614>
- Why did John Francis stop talking? Why is listening to environments and others such an important practice for pursuing ecological and social sustainability? How are listening and empathy related?
- Why did John Francis start talking? How might his reasons for these decisions (silence, speaking out) inform how we think about environmental communication strategies?

Mindful Walking Activity

Task students with listening to one of the following guided mindfulness activities prior to embarking on fieldwork or a class activity that involves walking. This listening activity can be done in the classroom with the lights off, eyes closed, prior to a walk. Or, if students are asked to bring headphones to class, the listening activity can be done in the field. A guided 'body scan' narration helps students focus on their own bodily sensations and keep their attention focused on these sensations in the present, rather than becoming preoccupied with thoughts of the past or future. Practice honing attention to bodily sensations other than vision (sounds, air movements, smells, vibrations) reveals a vast array of environmental information that otherwise goes unnoticed.

Ask students to conduct a mindful walk to the field site or embark on a mindful (silent) group walk. Upon return to class, students can repeat the mental map activity to compare and contrast with their first mental map. Or, a class discussion could take place on these same ideas (without actually drawing a second a mental map) on the differences students observed while walking to observe their sensing body, rather than distracted or 'necessary' walking.

3 or 12 minute
body scan

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center's free guided meditations (3 minute body scan, 3 minute body and sound, or 12 minute breath, sound body)
<http://marc.ucla.edu/mindful-meditations>

2 minute
mindful walk

Guided 2-minute mindful walk for use with headphones
<https://www.mindful.org/the-mindful-practice-podcast-walking-meditation/>

12 minute
mindful walk

Guided 12-minute mindful walk for use with headphones
Headspace meditation podcast in The Guardian
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/audio/2011/jan/25/headspace-walking>

10-15 minute
mindful walk

Use this [guide](#) from Mindful.org to prepare students for a 10-minute (or any length) mindful walk
<https://www.mindful.org/walk-this-way/>