Reconsidering the “Ped” in Pedagogy: A Walking Education

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INTRODUCTION

There is a scene often depicted in movies and documentaries in which a single city street is filmed with its cars, taxis, bicycles, pets, delivery trucks, and buses carrying on with their typical day. Set against a backdrop of energetic music (think Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee,” for example), the scene is sped up so that people and vehicles begin to blur together in a rapid flurry, almost as if in a race to manage the daily grind. Witnessing a scene like this, a model of the hubbub of contemporary living, we may find it more comfortable to transport our thoughts to a slower world, to envision a more enjoyable pace of life. Despite – or perhaps because of – the development of such a vividly transportation-centered world, we see a nearly as robust counterculture of “decelerating methods” emerging. For example, consider the increased popularity of yoga, meditation, mindfulness, or distance hiking in the past forty years. Notice the demand for safe sidewalks in cities where commuters have discovered that a walk to work often beats a crowded bus or subway. Individuals planning a cross-country move can even view and evaluate a neighborhood’s “walkability” score.

The modern pace of life marks a sharp divide between propulsion by the human body or industrial force. Consider the contrast between the mountain summit experiences of a tourist who drives their car up to the top versus a hiker who crawls up the side, feels every step, and has time to connect to the activity and place. Imagine the person who wakes up early to walk to the office every day through a park and all that she encounters on her way. Think of all the philosophers, poets, and artists over time who have found their most inspirational moments while on foot (e.g., Henry David Thoreau, Gandhi, and Søren Kierkegaard). Nietzsche goes so far as to famously declare, “Only thoughts that come by walking have any value.” There is something deeply fruitful and reflective about the state that a walker can inhabit. I argue here that it is the physical exertion, reflection, encounter with the environment, and communication with the environment that constitutes this particular type of learning experience – a walking education.

In popular culture, books such as J.C. Robinson’s The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image, Rebecca Solnit’s Wanderlust, Joseph A. Amato’s On Foot, Roger Gilbert’s Walks in the World, or Geoff Nicholson’s The Lost Art of Walking artfully weave together a cultural history of walking. In conjunction, these books form, first, an argument for the primal nature of this particular type of movement – its usefulness from times before carts and cars – and second, an argument that there is modern interest in the resurgence of pedestrianism. Given the wave of outdoor education programs starting today, paired with increasing public demand, studies such as the aforementioned ought to persuade us to carry on this timely discussion.
And indeed, references to walking abound in philosophy. Jan Masschelein tells us that when walking, students are able to become “consciously aware” or “attentive” of the inescapable reality of living. He cleverly titles his teaching method a “poor pedagogy,” because it requires less not more planning. A poor pedagogy leaves the curriculum open-ended, like the meandering pathways we walk, free at any time for a learning transformation. The road walked gives the student’s mind structure without preventing it from drifting to wherever, whenever, whomever, beckons. This paper supports Masschelein’s work with further theory.

Another example, David T. Hansen’s 2009 article “Walking with Diogenes,” takes its reader on a journey through ancient Athens with Diogenes, whom Hansen rightly identifies as an early flaneur or “stroller of streets.” Hansen’s characterization of Diogenes as a walker is focused on the roots (or, rather “routes”) of cosmopolitanism rather than on walking as an educational act in itself. French philosopher Frédéric Gros says in The Philosophy of Walking, arguably one of the most comprehensive theoretical works on this subject, that walking has been a means of escape for Rimbaud, the only comfortable workspace for Nietzsche, or the stripping away of society to find raw humanity for Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In this paper, I propose, as Gros does, that the act of walking can impact our lives and work in meaningful ways. I add to his philosophy an emphasis on walking as a distinctly educational mode.

Just as Aristotle once conducted walking seminars in order to teach his philosophy, colleges in Sweden are beginning to rediscover walking as a curricular choice. In 2014, a Swedish professor piloted walking seminars in his small media technology class, then polled his class at the end of the course. Based on the positive learning outcomes he felt were evidenced, he and other professors at the Royal Institute of Technology are adopting the walking seminars more broadly. Although research studies on walking are still small-scale, they are quickly gaining attention in the education field. In British Columbia, Claudia W. Ruitenberg followed a youth program called “Walking Home Carroll Street” during a series of walks in a non-formal setting, to determine whether the walking could be characterized as educational. She concluded that, indeed, some aspects of the program helped the students to bridge urban gaps between public and private space and to take advantage of teachable moments. Ryugo Murohoshi writes about the Walk Movement in Japan that has been practiced in schools since the Meiji Era, before the outbreak of war. This movement, which has permeated Japanese education, includes ensoku, a school-wide, organized hiking outing, and the encouragement of kyo-ho, a long distance walk or hike (that might be compared to shorter versions of the American “thru-hike”). As much as current theories (and, on rare occasions, practice) embrace ideas of embodiment and environmental exposure, none has fully addressed in combination the philosophical and pedagogical nature of walking.

I suggest that the combination of ideas from John Dewey and Nina Bonderup Dohn present a picture of the embodiment of reflective experience, which constitutes growth. But in the second section, I highlight a crucial deviation from Dewey in order to conceive of the environment of walking outdoors as offering expanded, non-human social communication. Finally, the embodied, reflective experience of
walking is tempered by another of walking’s characteristics, physical exertion. The pedagogical effects of walking are primed for by the degree to which one involves the body. Thus, this paper characterizes this basic but purposeful movement as an educational experience, in each section describing an aspect of just what makes walking educational.

**Embodying Reflective Experience: Walking With Dewey**

A note on the strategy or method of this paper is useful before launching my introductory analysis. There are at least four routes one might take to innovatively discuss the pedagogy of walking. First, similar to Gros’s project, one could construct a *phenomenology* of walking. That is, to take notice of the structure of common experiences of walking without reducing or prescribing the activity itself. Second, one could argue for the *activity* of walking itself, promoting walking as inherently educational and describing why it is educational to walk. Third, one could argue that walking is a primary educational mode, scientifically showing that *peripateticism* should be an essential part of any lesson, and suggesting, for example, that teachers transform lessons into walking seminars. Fourth, one could characterize or outline criteria for a strong type of education or learning experience that can be observed at least somewhat reliably while walking. One might argue that we ought to consider embodied, reflective, physically active movements as pedagogical, and that walking is simply one distinctive vehicle by which these conditions might be fulfilled. While there are merits to each of the first three research routes (and I am, at times, inclined to incorporate them into my charge), this paper engages only the fourth. Here I am talking about the transformative but underappreciated *type of education that walking offers*. It is not that one aims at walking as educational, but rather, that it happens organically. It is (as Masschelein most accurately labeled it) a “poor pedagogy.”

Walking is not the only reflective educational experience, nor is learning its only by-product. Walking is frequently used as a metaphorical device in sensualizing pathways, wandering, or exploring; for example, when we talk about “choosing another career path” or the “journey of life.” Similarly, it is used to symbolize communicating more slowly with an acquaintance, like a pleasant “walk and talk.”15 Besides social or metaphorical notions, walking can be seen as exercise or for health (e.g., to benefit osteoarthritis or fibromyalgia), as a political statement (e.g., *We Make the Road By Walking* by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire16), as spiritual practice (e.g., pilgrimage), as action by demand (as in refugee relocation), or as an aesthetic art form (e.g., Richard Long’s art17). Again, while these are important benefits, we are missing an understanding of the educational dimension of walking.

Since I am making clarifications, I shall address a looming question: How can something so primal – so instinctual as moving our feet forward – be educational? What can we possibly learn from an act that we have already “mastered?” It seems that to say we learn from walking is like suggesting that merely functioning, say sleeping or eating, is enough to change us for the better. There are people who could walk to work daily without being positively affected morally, spiritually, or intellectually by that experience. But many functional movements are negatively exercised, just as we can consume food that harms or helps the body. Moreover, learning is never
guaranteed – even in a formal educational context – especially if the learner lacks certain contextual circumstances or attitudes.

There are some core assumptions that will guide my analysis of walking as an educational activity. Drawing on Dewey, I understand education to be, fundamentally, about positive growth. It makes a difference to us whether walking assists or impedes learning. Also within this assumption is a distinction between “mimetic” and “transformative” learning. The former is objective, requiring instruction and significant support from others, while the latter is subjective, necessitating inward-facing change. If we expect education to be instructive, then “teaching students to walk” seems like a lesson best reserved for toddlers. While some chiropractors, yogis, or health practitioners might say learning to walk properly (a mimetic tradition) is necessary, I am assuming that the pedagogy of walking best fits the tradition of transformative learning. If that is the case, we can turn to Dewey’s account of reflective thinking in experience (what I will herein refer to as just reflective experience) to see how walking does indeed supply the conditions for deep, positive growth.

In part, Dewey explains that the value of an experience lies in its degree of reflectiveness:

> Since reflection is the instrumentality of securing freer and more enduring goods, reflection is a unique intrinsic good. Its instrumental efficacy determines it to be a candidate for a distinctive position as an immediate good, since beyond other goods it has power of replenishment and fructification. In it, apparent good and real good enormously coincide.

Thus stated, reflectivity is a valued aim and good in and of itself. “Reflection” for Dewey is the epitome of good thinking, and good thinking is not a stream of consciousness but a continuous chain of “serious and consecutive consideration” aimed at an end. I take it that our goal in education is to produce growth by way of good thinking, so reflection must naturally be an educational goal as well.

The phases of reflective thinking, according to Dewey, are, first, a state of doubt and second, a pursuit of inquiry to abate that pesky doubt. It is notable that here Dewey appeals to two examples literally applicable to this paper. He describes a walker responding to a sudden coolness in the air by looking up at the clouds in the sky, and he describes a walker encountering a fork in the road, choosing between two possible paths. Dewey identifies both of these scenarios outright as reflective. In the way he describes reflective thinking, it cannot be synonymous to armchair philosophizing. Experience must spur the reflection, and active experiencing often happens simultaneously with reflective thinking.

Nina Bonderup Dohn importantly argues that the paradigm cases of reflective activity that we use in teaching today, such as journaling or group dialogue, are embedded with the problematic epistemological presuppositions that writing or oral speaking induces reflective, educational thought. That is, by focusing on skills in order to improve practice, it is presumed that reflection automatically transpires. Since the paradigm reflective activities are withdrawn from actual practice, a linguistic representation of the practice must be created by means of verbalization or transposition. How, then, can we know what is truly reflection on the practice versus mere reflection on its formalized, representative activity? Consider all the
socially mediating factors at play in a classroom discussion: which students speak, how thoughts are expressed, what comments are questioned and what ideas are left alone, and the way in which the facilitator controls the subject matter at hand (i.e., “groupthink”). So much further data is constructed or constrained by this secondary process of representation, which is just the means by which we try to forcefully distill lessons learned by the body into exclusively cognitive or linguistic matter. By pedagogically imposing “reflective activities,” educators’ implicit epistemological choices show their Cartesian colors, divorcing the learner’s mind from her body. 

Influenced by philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, Dohn posits instead that successful reflective activity is situated and context-dependent. Choosing to take a path while walking, answering world problems while feeling them upon us, or simply thinking while moving, are all wholly possible reflective activities. There is no need to insert the step of “transferring” insights to and from original experience, if it is even possible to transfer insight to action at all. Dohn, like philosopher Donald Schön, recommends that the learner focus on engagement in a conversation with the present situation. A conversation such as Dohn proposes does not look like a typical discussion circle, however. It is an embodied, phenomenological address to the world, which I explain further in the next section by calling upon the ideas of David Abram and Martin Heidegger.

A Conversation with “Others”: A Departure from Dewey

A necessary component of walking is engaging in a conversation with others. One’s immediate thought might be that I must mean walking with other people. In fact, I wish to argue that walking, with or without other human walkers, is educational. This is because walking, especially outdoors, is inseparable from the innately transformative powers of social experience. Dewey makes a similar declaration in Democracy and Education: “Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educational. To be a recipient of communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience.” By this, Dewey means that communication is a part of social life, and social life changes those who participate in it. Unfortunately, Dewey takes this a step further and claims that non-humans cannot be “partners in a shared activity” with humans. I believe this to be a misconception that hinders our appreciation of common educational actions such as walking. After all, the natural world is as communicative and social as any concrete jungle. Elephants grieve over the bodies of their dead, darkness conveys to us a concern for what we cannot see, and leaves change in autumn, warning us of colder weather. Although the environment does not use words, it does “speak to us.” It would be a scientific and historical mistake to envisage the social world as contained within a single living species.

Giving examples such as Australian aboriginals’ walkabouts and songlines, Abram in the Spell of the Sensuous argues that in ancient and indigenous cultures the social world and language indelibly integrate Nature. He poetically demonstrates this in anecdotes from his personal travels:

It is by a complementary shift of attention that one may suddenly come to hear the familiar song of a blackbird or a thrush in a surprisingly new manner – not just as a pleasant melody
repeated mechanically, as on a tape player in the background, but as active, meaningful speech. Suddenly, subtle variations in tone and rhythm of that whistling phrase seem laden with expressive intention, and the two birds singing to each other across the field appear for the first time as attentive, conscious beings, earnestly engaged in the same world that we ourselves engage, yet from an astonishingly different angle and perspective...Thus, at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that speaks.31

If we are attentive, the gestural and perceptual “languages” of other beings can become known to us. Like learning any language, though, we need a willingness to change the lilt and accent of our own vocal tools to match, to expand our vocabulary, to hear and recognize new sounds, and to practice conscientiously. We cannot expect to perceive anything but nonsensical sounds and movements until we take the time to educate ourselves on the ecological-social mores. Dewey would agree that engaging in and theorizing communication is vital:

> Events that are familiar and customary are those we are least likely to reflect upon; we take them for granted. They are also, because of their closeness to us, through gesture and pantomime, the most difficult to observe...We tend, accordingly, to regard it as just one phenomenon among others of what we must in any case accept without question. We pass over the fact that it is the foundation and source of all activities and relations that are distinctive of internal union of human beings with one another.32

While Dewey is referring in this passage to communication as oral or written speech, it is not a great stretch to hear him instead describing our lack of reflection when walking. Walking, too, is “taken for granted” because of its “closeness to us” and, as such, becomes “difficult to observe.” Moreover, if we were to contemplate, as Abram does, the natural world as equally communicative with human beings, we would also note that speaking with our environment is as “distinctive of internal union of human beings” with the world writ large. Without a means with which we can come in contact with our environment, without a willingness to see it as social and capable of speaking to us and us with it, we might too easily dismiss the educational value of non-linguistic conversation.

In a sense, I am describing the educational activity of walking in terms of Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit*, roughly translated by Mike Zundel as world “attunement.”33 Although Zundel writes from a management learning perspective, his philosophical work is widely applicable to pedagogy. According to Zundel, Heidegger offers a threefold topology of care of the world that includes understanding, attunement, and discourse, and from this mood of caring blossoms active, reflective experience.34 In these three steps we see also the three modes necessary for conversing with the world while walking: first, understanding that we must use a different “language” for this activity; secondly, attuning to the language itself; and finally, discoursing with “others” in that space. Envisioning such a discourse or conversation with “others” in action may seem taxing, but it can be done. An experienced walker might see warblers every spring and so notice if one year these tiny birds are absent. Heidegger believes that learning to care is an outcome of communication.35 In recognizing that “others” exist and can be understood, the walker becomes a participant in their ecological being.
Outside (not indoors) is a special conversational place for urbanites and countrymen alike, because the cacophonies of voices in the enlarged environment are coded in languages we must strain to recover and comprehend. Also, the newness of an ever-changing, living environment drives learning. For example, a runner can spend hours on a treadmill without being forced to adjust form or pace, but the instant she is outside on a trail, good running becomes a more demanding affair. The environment can stimulate one’s receptivity to adaptation, forcing the brain to keep up. Walking outside also guarantees at least one confrontation, perplexity, or discomfort to inquire into, because we must literally face the elements. The weather is one of the most uncontrollable and puzzling forces on earth. Each encounter, if we take the time to notice and not take its presence for granted, is material for reflection.

**Physical Exertion as the Primer**

Perhaps it is easier to accept that a conversation with an “other” constitutes a reflective experience than it is to accept that walking itself is the catalyst. After all, couldn’t we commune with the social world while sitting? Besides the fact that this question assumes stillness is possible at all, it implicitly claims that immobilizing the body allows for equal-quality reflective thought. This, I have argued with Dohn, is simply not the case. There is a crucial component that stationary activities are missing: physical exertion. How are we to understand the impact of physical exertion on reflective experience? First, we must realize that there is a scale, relative to each person, of staticity to total exhaustion. On each end of the scale is the blocking out of thoughts entirely: sleep caused by being too lax or passing out from overwork. It would be tough to argue that either extreme is educational. Therefore, what we are investigating is the lowest amount of movement needed to prime learning.

Gros describes the importance of pacing oneself while walking. He distinguishes walking from jogging and other “sports.” However, Gros makes the mistake of seeing walking only for the purpose of one’s present contentment. I would add that there is another possibility: that physical exertion, like walking “practice” over time, may not always pay off in the moment, but could prime one’s body/mind for a more expansive reflective experience over time. Imagine earlier walks as the body/mind’s “warm up.” The prospect of physical exertion in walking as a primer for learning is evidenced in experiences where an amateur hiker at first does not “listen” or “speak to” the woods, but is trapped in tunnel vision, trying hard not to trip on rocks or roots. In time, the hiker becomes a native to the trail, deftly navigating and noticing what is around her. Walking may immediately create reflective experience, or the physical exertion of the activity of walking can begin more slowly by inviting the body into the process of learning. It may even be possible that more intense physical activities prime the body/mind for more radically transformative lesson. For example, extreme athletes and adrenaline junkies feel drawn to their physical sport and its challenge with the same gusto and magnetism as a scholar to her intellectual research. We can follow in these people the same driving educational doubt that leads to the pursuit of insights. If we are to reject Cartesian notions of reflection as merely mental, we open up new possibilities for theorizing exercise as a means of truly holistic, reflective experience.
Another possibility from this line of reason is that the pace may matter little compared to the act of journeying or travelling a distance mechanically. As Dewey ascribes aims to reflective thinking, so too might we see the activity of movement in space as vital for educational goal setting. Although I am not yet convinced that distance moved is necessary, it must be a contributing factor to learning at times. For instance, if we return to the treadmill example, we can note that not going anywhere new limits the conversations at play between the learner and her environment. Perhaps progress on foot mirrors progress in mind.

**Concluding Remarks**

In summary: Is all walking educational? Not always immediately. Like any learning activity, the effectiveness of walking is based on the quality and intelligence of the experience. Hurrying on a walk to work, a body/mind may be entirely unconscious of its surroundings and “others,” preventing it from receiving the full learning benefits. Yet, no walk is ever useless, because through physical exertion every walk has the potential to prime the body/mind for a future transformative learning experience. This is not to say that educators must control or plan out a walk in order to maximize the current or future educational benefits. Remembering Masschelein’s concept of a “poor pedagogy,” educators should keep in mind that an intelligent activity is not necessarily muscled into shape. In many ways, the natural environment and the active movement of the learner already infuse the activity with “quality” and “intelligence.” We know this because thus far walking has educated without an explicit curriculum. Under the conditions that I have enumerated here, when a walker embodies reflective experience, communicates with a broad and enriching non-human social world or “others,” consequently developing a “care of” those others, and when a walker physically exerts herself, she is undergoing a walking education.

A desire to prove that walking should be understood as educational is important for expanding innovations in the classroom environment, affording schools and educators a greater range of choices of learning spaces and activities. But more than anything, theorizing bi“ped”al movement as a rigorous pedagogy prepares students for a possible future where our body/mind, human/nature, and static/movement dualisms are thoroughly reconsidered. Our students could then walk into a world that is even wider and more experientially welcoming than we could imagine.38

Reconsidering the “Ped” in Pedagogy

12. The Japanese Meiji Era extended from 1868-1912.
14. It could be argued that Thoreau’s posthumously published book *Walking* offers an educational account of walking. However, in this article I resist Thoreau’s reliance on walking as an escape or rebellion from society. A more applicable and acceptable theory for education must theorize walking as an inherently social activity.
15. Margaret Gilbert, in “Walking Together,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 15 (1990): 1-14, theorizes the social metaphor of walking, which uses an extended example to point out paradigmatic features of walking in company that play on a shared moral duty, symbols of prudence, and joint goal-setting.
17. http://www.richardlong.org/
22. Ibid., 122-123.
23. Ibid., 240-241.
26. Ibid., 692, 680.
27. Indoors we can hide from other living beings, but outside we have no choice but to accept human, animal, and plant cohabitation and coexistence. (Assuming, as I do, that nature in general constitutes a complete social ecosystem of which humans are members.)
29. Ibid., 17-18.
31. Ibid., 81 (original emphasis).
34. Ibid., 9.
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