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Psychogeography for Student Researchers: a case for the *dérive*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the value of using the *dérive* and psychogeography as a means of teaching research methods to business students. It draws on the experience and reflections of undergraduate students who carried out a *dérive* in a research methods course. It makes a novel contribution to qualitative research practices in business by applying a methodology established in literary circles and sociology to business. Using the *dérive* illuminates the importance of several issues such as the dominance of the visual and the importance of location. The paper also considers whether certain people are more open to *dérives*, whether first-year undergraduates are mature enough for such an activity, and whether undergraduates are able to deal with such an informal practice. It considers how early in their education and to what effect students should be exposed to fundamental issues of epistemology and the challenges to orthodoxy. The findings suggest that the setting of the project is consequential and that reflection is an important element in students' learning from the experience. We may conclude that the deployment of *dérive* related to psychogeography in teaching research methods in business is viable and productive.

Keywords: *dérive*, field-work, psychogeography, qualitative methods, research methods training, undergraduate students

1. Introduction

This paper uses the experience gained in a small empirical study to consider the suitability of the *dérive* and psychogeography as a research method for undergraduate students. The research was carried out with ten business school undergraduates on a first semester Research Methods course at a small private university in Germany. The students had no business experience beyond short internships or work placements. They mostly conducted their *dérive* on the university campus or in nearby towns. The variety of approaches and data collected provides rich material to explore the sensory aspects of research and knowledge construction.

The motivation for using the unusual methods of *dérive* and psychogeography was the call for innovation both in management education and in research methods (see e.g. French and Grey, 1996; Wankel & DeFillippo 2002). Colby et al. (2011:3) advocate an undergraduate education which offers "the breadth of outlook and conceptual agility for living in a global century," so that Business and Management students "understand the relation of business to the larger world" (2011:2). Shulman (2011:ix-x) writes more specifically of students being able to adopt relating analytic and multiple perspectives to a sense of self and the formation of identity. We contend that psychogeographical methods, including the practice of the *dérive* in data collection, are potentially excellent ways to help students develop the above competencies and sensibilities.

With respect to research at undergraduate level, Cassell et al. (2009:514) assert that learning research skills is a "vital element" of management education. It has also been acknowledged that business education is in need of new root metaphors; that this research field is theoretically rather arid; and that new methods should be explored (Albert and Couture, 2014; Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Audebrand, 2010). Even twenty years ago, Tucker et al (1995:384) found that, "A decade ago Cochran and Dolan (1984) had challenged business researchers to find new approaches", emphasizing a requirement for more diverse research studies utilizing a wide variety of data.

Business research manuals are hard-pressed to reach an agreed definition of high-quality qualitative research (Cassell et al, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2008:5) seem to emphasise an artistic aspect by referring to the many creative styles of qualitative research as "bricolage" or "quilt making". Cassell et al (2009) relate to the flexible form of the *dérive* with its bricolage of data collection methods. In more general terms, students need to learn to appreciate diverse ways of knowing, "personal, narrative, embodied, artistic, aesthetic - that stand outside sanctioned intellectual frameworks" (Cole and Knowles, 2008:55). The *dérive* is an excellent way to do just that.

Psychogeography is a literary tradition concerned with appreciating the terrain. The *dérive* is a concept coined by the French situationists and is described by Debord (1958) as “a rapid passage through various ambiances [involving] playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychological effects”. The point is to drop usual motivations for movement and actions and let oneself be “drawn in by the attractions of the terrain”, or simply “drift”, which is how Nicholson (2011:26) translates the term (see also Smith, 2014). It is the combination of these concepts that inspired our project to explore innovative ways of teaching research.

In the next section we will offer further discussion on teaching research to business students, develop the concepts of *dérive* and psychogeography and explain this study in which undergraduate students were encouraged to adopt psychogeographical research techniques. This is followed by the analysis and discussion of the students’ reports on their *dérives*. We then offer our reflections on the value and potential of *dérive* and psychogeography as a method for teaching research.

2. Research

Tucker et al (1995) see an important advantage of qualitative research in its possibilities of re-adjustment according to the phenomena discovered during the course of a study. They cite Yin (1984) in recommending qualitative research methods to aid understanding of complex social phenomena and Wolcott (1992) in distilling qualitative data collection techniques into “experiencing, enquiring, and examining”. Although text books deal with all forms of data collection and provide instructions as well, teaching research methods can be problematic as not only does actually doing it make it properly understood but “research is most often designed while it is being done” (Cassell et al, 2009).

Cassell et al’s (2009:517) focus on the importance of being “context-wise” clearly applies to psychogeographical data collection. Their alternative term of “phronesis” – being “street smart”, in that ‘this knowledge consists of acting from what one knows, to “make things happen” is an attractive image in respect to psychogeography as we are requiring students to literally go out and act smartly on the street to make their study “happen” (Zackariasson, Styhre and Wilson, 2006: 421).

Business is a social practice and is best taught as such, and in the constructivist paradigm. Rich and Brown (2012) in their discussion of formal and non-formal learning among first-year Business undergraduates refer to Eraut’s (2000) typology of student intentions which includes “reactive learning” defined as learning based around “incidental noting of facts” and preparedness for “emergent learning opportunities.” It will be seen that psychogeographical data collection as in a *dérive* is an example of reactive learning. The emphasis in this exercise was on discovery and on the students’ own construction of knowledge. This was deliberately set up as an exercise where students were not aware of the sort of issues and ideas that they might uncover in their *dérive*.

3. Psychogeography

Psychogeography is a literary tradition adopted as a research method by sociologists, geographers and “explorers”, studying human activity in a particular geographical environment, which might research “artefacts” such as buildings, crime, leisure, or transport (Coverley, 2010). It has received little attention as implementable in business and management research (but see Knowles, 2008; 2009) or as an educational tool (but see Rich and Brown, 2012). Knowles (2008:8) comments that other techniques employed by psychogeographers such as reading relevant literature, observing environments and engaging key actors within those settings in dialogue are well recognized within mainstream qualitative business research. Some psychogeographical writing gives the impression of psychogeography as an aimless wandering. However, as Smith (2014:50) points out “The Situationists’ walks, drifts, *dérives* were not ends in themselves. They were acts of research; experiences on the street were experimental materials for the creation of ‘situations’: combinations of site, performance and demonstration out of which might eventually spring new ways of living to transform cities.” (See also Knowles, 2008 for comment on the unplanned/planned nature of the *dérive*). One may also learn about “how people build relationships to places; how space is surveilled, controlled and regulated...” (Garrett, 2014).

4. Dérives

A dérive involves the psychogeographer moving through a, usually urban, landscape and collecting experiences, (otherwise known as data). These experiences can be noted in multiple ways: photos, recordings, souvenirs **found** along the way, oral impressions etc. The task is to move on foot in a seemingly unplanned manner through a setting (Coverley, 2010). The intention is that the experiences collected will broaden, challenge, change and/or complement any initial ideas.

Holtham and Owens (2011) and Rich and Brown (2012) have experimented with dérive in education in different contexts producing data to suggest that more research on the pedagogic application of this technique would be valuable. This study collects detailed data from a small sample of students' studies focusing on the dérive experience, the data collected, and students' perceptions of its usefulness.

5. Into the Field

As part of their "Principles of Research and Academic Writing" course, the students had to complete a research project as the course assignment. The dérive was set up as an exploratory activity to be carried out in the initial stages of this project. The students were given a brief background on psychogeography and dérive to provide them with a workable framework. Initial reactions made it clear that students were not confident going into the dérive. They were told that the aim of the exercise was that we, the researchers, would collect the students' experiences during the dérive and later reflections on the activity with the ultimate aim of analysing the data and researching the applicability of 'alternative' research methods in university studies and in developing management skills. Participation was voluntary and students were given written and oral instructions about 'moving/walking' through an environment.

Time was not a restriction, but a minimum of one hour was suggested. Dérives take place alone or in groups, but large groups often divide, so four people was given as maximum. Students collected their experiences individually focusing on the topic of their upcoming research project. Students chose the setting – urban environments, the university and surroundings, or a selected rural environment were suggested.

Data could be submitted in whichever form students wished; and text, recordings and photos were mentioned as examples. All sent text and photos and two students also included voice memos. They were then asked to fill in a 'dérive report form' focusing on research topic, location, previous knowledge of location, background research, time, group size, roles, attitudes to research topic post dérive, information from the dérive different from other data collection methods carried out (questionnaires and surveys), and usefulness of the activity. The reflections below are based on this student feedback.

5.1 Variety of data, the problem of assessment, notions of success and locale

Significant differences were found in the amount and type of data students collected. Students proved interested in the activity as any previous primary data collection experience tended to consist of questionnaires at school, never where the method provided so much flexibility. Since researchers collect impressions in the form that suits them, that they can best process, or in the form best suited to the subject, this presents challenges in terms of assessment. This is even more salient when it is a student assignment where grades are desired and become a criterion of whether the work is worth doing or not. This makes it difficult to make a dérive an assignment, since a 'pass' could be given for completion; yet, grading it would require sophisticated rubrics. However, there the dérive might be deployable as a good way for students to learn business skills and leave behind the school system of exams and grades every few weeks. The variety of approaches that the students adopted also offers challenges to our concept of the characteristics of data.

Students mostly concentrated on visual impressions. This can in some cases be related to their chosen research topics (sustainability, brand awareness, dress codes, social/electronic media use, advertising) but one student listened to music whilst walking therefore not allowing the surroundings to offer aural impressions. One group, whose topic was advertising, proved open to further data stating, "We experienced the verbal advertisement on the market, drawing customers from miles away, with words like 'fresh' and 'cheap'. Food stores, for example, are also able to advertise through the smell of baked goods or spices, which led people to be curious about their products".

One student conducted a participant observation, in a lecture, on a train and also at a train station. Another carried out her research by stopping passers-by to answer a survey and whilst waiting, dérivé.

This raises an interesting question; *dérive* means to float, but do we have to float, or can the environment around us float and we stay physically still? Ingold (2013) points out that participant observation is not a data collection method but “knowing from the inside”. Does this make an ideal combination with the *dérive* “knowing from the outside”? Only two students (working together) actually talked to other pedestrians. Interestingly this had not been mentioned as a possibility, but simply that students could collect whatever data they found appropriate and interesting. “We took the chance to ask a couple of pedestrians about their opinions and found that they had very different ideas than we did.”

Students who wrote text tended to give a briefer overview. Photos were complementary and provided opportunities to comment on further, later noticed information that had not been evident when they were taken. For example, students with the topic of advertising noticed many additional small adverts and attention grabbers in their photos. Again we have a challenge to any easy acceptance of data, or findings: is it worth making a distinction between what was noticed on site and what was later noticed about the site via a photograph? By contrast, voice memos provided the most detail on the research topics being spoken during the activity and the impressions were instant.

The variety of data and the problem of assessing the students' efforts relates to assessing the value of the *dérive* as a teaching technique. Is it an example of personalised learning where students do it as suits them, or is it a method in itself which may suit some and not others? One of the students said it was a “waste of time”, but did he just not (yet) know how to process it? When he completed the *dérive* report form four weeks later, he no longer said this. Initially he submitted data on his topic of “sustainability” including “most sustainability is invisible” – actually a really interesting comment. The overall impression was that his and other students' attitudes to their research topics changed during the *dérive*, but this did not strike them all until they came to complete the *dérive* report form later. The issue may be one of time to reflect. Cassell et al (2009:528) advise that “training should be carried out with enough time between sessions to allow students to have ample opportunity to reflect upon their learning and experience.” Perhaps the learning here is that students are not able to immediately assess the usefulness of a *dérive*.

It is possible that students were over-challenged by the activity. One voice memo stated “Well, I hope it comes out kind of okay. But as I have no clue, or few knowledge what I'm actually supposed to do let's see what comes out.” Another student stated, “I had no idea how to start with my *dérive*”. Is there an aim, or is the whole point that the aim is discovered whilst ‘doing’ it? Sinclair (2002) refers to road users as ‘goal-oriented’, ‘going somewhere’. The *dérive* students definitely did not know where they were going. Perhaps this new territory is correlated to learning? Success from an educational point of view does not necessarily correlate with an easy student experience from the student's own point of view.

One student stated, “I did it alone, as to concentrate on the task. I was only listening to music.” This implies that “success” is related to concentration and this is easier alone. This is surprising because when the activity was discussed in the lecture, students turned to one another for support as they lacked confidence in what was expected of them and even how to go about it. The research projects that students work on as part of the course are done in pairs, so a partner was available for the *dérive* with the same topic, or classmates with different topics.

Much depended on what the student perceived the purpose and the actual beneficiaries of the exercise to be; “I thought it makes more sense to do it alone so you would get more different answers.” This implies that success for the lecturer entailed as much student feedback as possible making an individual approach apparently more ‘productive’. This student clearly saw the project as for the lecturer and not for their own benefit. His research project concerned attitudes to clothing brands. “Useful for you probably, haha. Not so much for my own research. I enjoyed doing it anyways.” The interesting question here is what sense does the student have of his own learning, and is it actually accurate? To accept that the student learnt nothing is not feasible.

Other student responses also indicated questionable assumptions about research knowledge. One student, asked if the *dérive* changed her attitude to her research topic, responded, “Not really, as I found the results I expected to find.” Later the student claimed the activity was not really a success as, “It was a nice thing to do, definitely opened my mind for the topic. However, the results I achieved were mainly as I expected them to be.” The student implies that finding expected results makes the activity

less successful. Another student stated, "My attitude to the topic did not change but I actually started to think about the reasons (...) and what the results of our questionnaire will be." This can be deemed a success and according to the student produced a clearer focus on her topic than brainstorming. A further variation was supplied by a student who conducted the *dérive* alone because, "I often notice that people from certain target groups have a certain dressing behavior". This student implies that as she knew what data she would collect in advance it was not really worth getting together with someone else.

Success, it seems, is bound up with relevance; "It has only shown us that our topic is relevant" is a fascinating comment by a student implying that relevance is not really important. In the course itself it is actually quite difficult for students to select 'relevant' research topics. This student repeatedly mentions the connection to the topic. Apparently this is a measure of success.

There was plenty of evidence of student learning. A student researching the use of social media in public places commented that the *dérive* made her want to monitor her own behaviour; "I think it is also a positive experience for me, because I can learn out of these situations and can try to not behave the same way". She also commented that questionnaires show how people perceive themselves but the *dérive* "was useful to get additional valuable and reliable results!" Several students found the *dérive* useful in confirming the significance of their chosen research topics; "It was an interesting experience and I found it really helpful to get a better look on the importance of my topic."

One student dealing with student attitudes to sustainable actions found the *dérive* useful in "I noticed how broad the topic actually is and how narrow our view". Most students analysed what they had seen and said they would then use that to search the literature for their assignment. Overall students clearly define research success in different ways. Most show success as related to working alone and therefore fostering concentration as well as finding 'relevant' data and discovering new insights.

We offer some final comments on the importance of locale. One student chose the local town "as I hoped to find visual proof of sustainability", an interesting expectation about the visibility of sustainability in a town. The same student responded to the question on whether he carried out background research on the location with, "No, I was going with the flow", implying he could not have carried out research beforehand as he was not sure where he would end up – quite an astute comment really.

Students generally commented on the suitability of their chosen location for their topic. However, one student stated, "Another reason why we chose this is because it was very convenient for us to get there" showing the practicalities of research. This student also mentioned the fact that taking photographs can be intrusive and so the location should be one where this does not strike people as much (see Sinclair, 1998, for an experience of being banned from taking photographs in an inappropriate location).

All in all students clearly showed that they considered the location carefully before beginning the *dérive* and certainly considered some locations more appropriate than others. The emphasis was on the urban, but no evidence was given that the rural might not be appropriate.

6. Conclusion

In teaching research we tend to focus more on the nature of research rather than the nature of learning. Using psychogeography and a *dérive* as means of teaching research facilitates a focus on learning as, "a fostered process and not a managed process where diverse options and opportunities are required" (Amitabh et al, 2012: 11). Amitabh and colleagues quote Chatti et al; "Learning and knowledge are social, personal, flexible, dynamic, distributed, ubiquitous, complex and chaotic in nature." (Chatti et al, 2007 cited by Sinha, 2012: 11). The *dérive* allowed both students and lecturer to focus on learning and produced interesting insights into data collection. The first-year students proved able to carry out such a project, but clearly benefited from time to reflect post-*dérive*. The informality of the activity was a new concept to the students, and perhaps their varied interpretations of 'success' reflected this. Their focus was on visual data and locale, but we as authors and educators reviewing the process and the student feedback have discerned how the crucial issues of theory and practice play out in the process of collective versus individual inquiry and the importance of context.

The *dérive* was introduced to the students to broaden students' perspectives on their initial ideas for a research project. None of the students had much experience in any form of educational research and definitely began naively. In this context, adopting the *dérive* was not arbitrary, for students can learn the theory, but have to find out in practice what works locally. In some ways this experiment with *dérive*

and undergraduate students vindicates the findings of the anthropologist and educator, Tim Ingold (2013:11) who states the aims of his university course in art, architecture, anthropology and archeology as “to train students in the art of inquiry, to sharpen their powers of observation, and to encourage them to think through observation rather than after it. Like hunters they had to learn to learn, to follow the movements of beings and things and in turn respond to them with judgment and precision.” This is the essence of learning research methods. Ingold (p.13) also stresses that teachers are not there to just pass on their knowledge, but to provide situations in which students can discover what they already know and even more beyond it: “We grow into knowledge rather than having it handed down to us.”

The relationship between theory and practice is entwined with the relationship between teaching and learning. Rich & Brown (2012) commenting on an undergraduate course including a *dérive* states “a minority of students were uncomfortable with the level of reliance on students themselves to organize some activities.” This is reflected in the current research where students clearly had problems with self-reliance, yet their concept of “success” showed a link to doing something on their own. They were told “you can’t do it wrong” but were, at least initially, not really sure how to “do it right” either. This clearly links to the difficulty of assessing such an activity which has, embedded within it, a paradox. In the words of Smith (2014:74) “It’s all about being flexible and ready... There is a paradox here: preparing to be spontaneous.”

Group work is notorious in education, from first-year level to MBA, for provoking personal issues and assessment problems. However, we persist because the ability to work in teams is an essential management skill. Rich & Brown (2012) point out the benefits of informal learning as very strong for team skills and team building. Psychogeography and the *dérive* throw up this challenge. The students in the current project were addressed in teams, but mostly worked alone. The analysis of team work and Sinclair’s (1998; 2002) preference for walking with a companion, stress that psychogeography is a team effort. Could the team, as students suggest, actually influence the perceived success of the activity? The students definitely required help in being an effective team or even in combining the words “effective” and “team” in a business research context.

The purpose of an inquiry is inseparable from the context of that inquiry. In the *dérive*, the locale is the context. Should we tell students where to carry out *dérives* – does it matter? Sinclair (2002) is irritated by organisations such as the Countryside Commission telling him what he should visit, “Why let someone else nominate sites that are worth visiting?” (p. 318). The evidence from this small experiment suggests that finding the “suitable”, “appropriate” place is part of the research process. The “wrong” place does not really exist, although as objectives develop a “more appropriate” place may be chosen.

The *dérive* as a psychogeographic research tool can be seen as implementable in research activities for business. We would conclude that the earlier students are exposed to fundamental issues of epistemology and challenges to orthodoxy the better. The findings suggest that the setting of the project and choice of locale for the *dérive* is consequential, the crucial element in students’ learning from the experience is their reflection upon such choices. We may conclude therefore that the deployment of *dérive* related to psychogeography in teaching research methods in business is viable and productive.

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