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Longitudinal place-based research: exploring spatialised student experiences through walking interviews

Gemma Jackson ^a, Nazanin Shiraj ^a, Peter Branney ^a, and Russell Delderfield ^b

^aUniversity of Bradford, Department of Psychology, Bradford, UK; ^bCabinet Office, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Research into university campuses and students' use of space has rarely used place-based or longitudinal methods. To address this, student experiences were gathered via a novel combination of walking interviews, participant photography and mapping, from 2019 to 2022. The study adopted an online methodology during 2020/21 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach resulted in new spatial findings on how individuals and social groups use campus, the influence of the institutional structure and changes over time. This article reflects on the practice of participatory walking interview methods. Practicalities on how to carry out walking interviews, handle the participant-researcher dynamic and insider status, and respond to changes throughout a longitudinal study are shared. This article contributes to a spatial turn within educational and psychological research and shows the potential of place-based methods to explore people, social structures and place, in a moment and over time.


KEYWORDS

Place-based methods; qualitative longitudinal research; researcher-participant dynamic; student experience; university campus; walking interviews

Introduction

The university campus is essential for the delivery of the student experience as it is the space for teaching, assessment and learning. Yet that is not all a campus has to offer and there is a need to better understand campus usage and the student experience. Previous studies suggest research is needed on all the activities that students engage with, and these should be mapped onto social relationships and the institutional space (Boys 2009). In addition, how students use, and experience, multiple university spaces requires a holistic student-centred approach (Ellis and Goodyear 2016). The student experience and how students engage with the institution, and its effect on social practices also requires investigation (Cox, Herrick, and Keating 2012). To understand the experiences of students, methodologies need to be developed that capture

CONTACT Gemma Jackson  g.k.jackson@bradford.ac.uk  Department of Psychology, University of Bradford, Bradford BD7 1DP, UK

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student voice and consider changes to campus space and student identity over time (Beckers, Van Der Voordt, and Dewulf 2016).

These methodologies need to be longitudinal in design and qualitative, as quantitative data leads to an assumption of student behaviours (Berman 2020). A bottom-up approach that gives students more power would lead to a better understanding of the university experience (Cornelius-Bell, Bell, and Dollinger 2023). Place-based methods have potential because they are useful in bringing out the experiences of participants in relation to the physical environment they are in (Evans and Jones 2011) and provide new data that builds upon existing research and brings forth different perspectives (D'errico and Hunt 2022). Understanding campus from the students' point of view could inform university space development projects, and longitudinal qualitative research can reveal how campus is used by students throughout their degree.

Campuses are complex with public, private, indoor and outdoor spaces (Temple 2018). University estate management have various priorities including sustainability, digital infrastructure, accessibility and teaching delivery (Gov.UK 2022). Universities are increasingly treating students as customers causing the degree study to be transactional (Berman 2020). Operating like businesses with a focus on production and efficiency, they are more open to the public and industry. These are 'Neoliberal Universities' with new campus spaces designed to be accommodating and flexible for multiple users yet are hard for students to navigate (Troiani and Dutson 2021). Learning is not separate from students' wider university experience (Temple 2018) and many struggle with the shift to active collaborative learning (JISC 2006). However, valued support from peers (McCabe 2016) and frequent use of campus impacts positively upon their social and academic engagement (Oliveira, Tahsiri, and Everett 2022). Campuses are learning landscapes (Cox et al. 2020) but are also political spaces with a history of student protests and occupations.

This shows the various views and needs of different stakeholders including students and estates management. Adding to the complex picture, currently the Higher Education (HE) sector is facing a financial crisis, and institutions must balance cost against income (Habib and Michael 2025). In 2020/21, the annual expenditure of UK universities to maintain campuses was approximately £5 billion (Uuk 2023). This adds further tension over priorities and raises questions on the value of maintaining a physical campus over online provision. However, the knowledge which informs estates decisions is partial due to a focus on learning and methodological issues.

Student usage of single campus spaces

Prior research has been conducted within libraries and informal learning spaces where students were observed individually learning in silent areas, away from social environments (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011).

Table 1. Research on university spaces with student participants and methods used.

Reference	Place researched	Data collection methods
Ramsden (2011)	University of Huddersfield library, UK	Researcher observations, survey, situated structured interviews
Ellison (2016)	University of Chichester Learning Centre, UK	Structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, researcher observations
Cox (2018)	University of Sheffield library, UK	Interviews, focus groups, walking interviews
Matthews, Andrews, and Adams (2011)	Social learning space, Australian University	Researcher observations, situated semi-structured interviews
Hunter and Cox (2014)	Informal learning spaces, University of Sheffield, UK	Quantitative survey, research observations, mapping, semi-structured interviews
Cox (2018)	Multiple learning spaces, University of Sheffield, UK	Researcher taken photos, photo elicitation interviews

Independent learning also involves convening in a group with occasional conversation (Wu, Oldfield, and Heath 2020) while groups have been observed working together on the same task or on their individual learning, and socialising is often seen alongside (Andrews, Wright, and Raskin 2016). Bryant, Matthews, and Walton (2009) ‘unexpectedly’ found individuals studying solo on large group study tables, likely because of privacy and security (Ellison 2016; Ramsden 2011). Understanding differences between individual and group study and choice of space appears underdeveloped.

Over the last 15 years, some research into campus spaces has been carried out but the focus has been on single learning spaces. Table 1 lists studies with details of the place researched and methods used. The findings are contextualised by the choice of study site, and data was collected from students who used these chosen locations for a specific reason or due to a previous positive experience. It thus skews the findings in a positive and isolated way because the experiences of students who do not use these chosen spaces, or how it connects with the rest of campus, are not explored.

Use of walking interviews in university research

Five studies have employed walking interviews across the whole university campus. Go-along semi-structured interviews were used to explore students’ access to sexual health resources (Garcia et al. 2012). In the US, sedentary and walking interviews explored experiences of Black students in a majority white college and revealed that being in place recalled memories and narratives (Harris 2016). Students’ sense of belonging was explored through focus groups and walking interviews (Flint 2019). (Girang et al. 2022) used student-led walking interviews to explore where students went to de-stress and discovered students experience stress in certain campus spaces and relax in others. Another study asked students to identify three campus spaces they used for learning, often libraries and department buildings, which were visited during semi-structured interviews (Cox et al. 2020). Despite the success of these studies in capturing student narratives and experiences on these topics, there appears to be no longitudinal studies of university spaces in

the UK, or a study that combined walking interviews with geographical mapping to spatialise the student experience.

Staff voice versus student voice

All the locations of studies in [Table 1](#) were chosen by staff researchers. Four of these studies had staff participants as well as students, and different data collection methods were used for each population (Ellison 2016). The staff perspective was gathered in ways that allowed for more of their voice, through semi-structured interviews and open question surveys. In comparison, students were restricted, with Likert scale questionnaires, structured interviews, and focus groups. This had led to a bias in our understanding of campus usage, as the staff perspective has been given more detail and richness over the students' experiences.

Staff members who conduct campus research rarely acknowledge their position, insider status or power dynamics. I identified two studies where authors recognised these issues. Cox (2011) reflected that his lecturing role may have pressured students to take part. A graduate student was chosen to conduct observations and interviews with students instead staff due to power differences (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011). Understanding a researcher's insider position and power is essential to acknowledge impact on participant engagement and development of findings (Yip 2024). I interpret that staff, without intention, have overshadowed students' voices with their own.

Student voice, according to Advance HE (2017), is the opinions, perspectives and values of students within a HE community which are heard through channels of student-staff committees or student-led organisations. However, student voice is a debated concept with different views on what and where the voice is (Hillman 2021). Cornelius-Bell, Bell, and Dollinger (2023) argues it should be deterritoria- lised from its traditional place of Student Unions and governance committees. Student voice is also gathered via the National Student Survey, yet this has attracted criticism due to its impact on league tables, lack of useful data, and perception of students as customers (Williams 2015). The use of surveys acts as a constraint on student voice and does not garner in-depth data on student experiences. From co-creation projects where students were equal participants, I have seen the creation of new campus spaces and programme curriculum. Therefore, student voice is useful and relevant when students can openly share their perspectives. This leads to the rationale for a different methodological approach.

Methodological inspirations and approach

Rationale for the research

Research is needed on students' experiences, how they engage with the institu- tion, and their social practices and activities (Boys 2009). A bottom-up

approach is required to give students more power (Ellis and Goodyear 2016) and methodologies must be qualitative (Berman 2020). Changes to campus space and student identity over longer periods of time also need to be captured (Beckers, Van Der Voordt, and Dewulf 2016). Longitudinal qualitative methods can reveal continuities and ruptures to people's experiences and enable participants to find their voice (Neale 2017). In summary, the research design must be innovative, student-centred, longitudinal and qualitative.

Inspirations from place-based methods

Place-based methods are linked to situationists, *dérive* and psychogeography. Situationists conducted walks in urban locations to challenge capitalist structuring of space and to reimagine the environments and their structure (Bridger 2014). This inspired me to look at the potential of place-based methods for this research.

Place-based methods bring out different perspectives and participant experiences in relation to the physical environment (Evans and Jones 2011). Outside of the university sector, place-based methods have been found to provide in-depth narratives in relation to place. The combination of go-along and walking interviews with either participant photography and geographical mapping has been successful, as suggested by Carpiano (2009), and a variety of approaches have been used. The route of the walking interview can be pre-planned by the participant (Teixeria and Gardner 2017), developed during the interview (Evans and Jones 2011), or set in advance by the research team (Jones et al. 2008). GPS allows participants' experiences and transcript excerpts to be mapped to locations, and exploration of peoples' connection with their environment captures rich place-based memories (Evans and Jones 2011). Participant photography has been successful in enabling researchers to view places of importance through their eyes and understand their perspectives (Teixeria and Gardner 2017). Geolocation of visual data is a powerful tool for the reader, spatialises participants' experiences and develops knowledge on how physical and social structures influence behaviour (Chang 2017).

Yet there is no study that has used both participant photography and geospatial methods with a walking interview, or any that contended with walking in and out of buildings as would be expected on a university campus. There appears to be no previous longitudinal studies that used walking interviews within the fields of human geography, psychology or education. This article aims to contribute by sharing the novel place-based methodology developed, with reflections and guidance to inform researchers who wish to use this approach.

A different approach

The aim of the longitudinal study was to develop a student-centred understanding of social learning, with the research questions of how students socialise and learn on campus and what changes over time. Student voice, seen as an aspect of social justice work within HE which brings minoritised voices forward and bridges the gap between staff and students (Holquist et al. 2023), could have potential in answering these questions. However, Charteris and Smardon (2018) noted that student voice has also been framed theoretically in sociocultural, social constructionist and post-structural terms. Students are part of universities as institutions of power and organisations of social networks (Jenkins 1996) and a physical place with connected social groups and identities (Carvalho and Garduño Freeman 2023). Students experience universities as both a social and physical structure. A realist social constructivist approach theorises that facts are socially constructed within culturally specific narratives and patterns of power, and subject to social arrangements (Parker 1998). Critical realist approaches have been used to explore childhood education (Zanatta, Sainz, and Gillett-Swan 2019) to understand learner agency and curriculum (Kernaghan 2022) and to conceptualise graduate outcomes (Fryer 2022). It has also been found to work with a co-production method within a community (Durrance-Bagale et al. 2025).

Therefore, a realist, social constructivist approach with co-production methods could better understand the dynamics between members of the whole university community and to build a collective understanding of their experiences. Place-based methods can reveal how this complex phenomenon is spatialised. Therefore, a realist, spatial and social constructionism approach was chosen, underpinned by my insider status and reflexive practice.

Method

Situating the researcher

In previous campus research, there is a lack of acknowledgement of insider (staff) status of researchers. However, awareness and embedding of the insider-researcher in the data is necessary, which is complex and requires reflexivity. I, the first author, am able bodied and since 2010 I have been a student at the University of Bradford and at the time of writing am completing a doctorate (PhD). My values come from my personal experience as a student representative and staff roles in the Students Union, the recognised body for student voice (Bradford 2016), and currently supporting all researchers under a commitment to the Researcher Development Concordat (Bradford 2023). The dual student-staff position I occupy influenced the methodological approach. My aim was to allow students to territorialise their campus, to see it from their perspective by using a methodology which sets participants up as

co-constructors of data. I asked students to show me any campus space important to them, whether it was for socialising, learning, both or anything else.

Population and place

The University of Bradford was selected as the research site because my insider status provided access to campus and potential participants. The University of Bradford was established in 1966 (Bradford 2024a) and in the academic year 2020/21, had 11 885 students, of which 5895 were local from West Yorkshire and 3355 are international (Hesa 2024). The university operates from a 27-acre city centre campus, a 10-minute walk from the train and bus station (Bradford 2024b). It is the only university in the city of Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK. The campus has a visible boundary that is closed to traffic, but open spaces are accessible to pedestrians. The university encourages the public onto campus through hosting community events and a public gym. A spatial campus map showing the campus boundary, open spaces and buildings can be found in the supplementary material.

Longitudinal study

The longitudinal study was refined following a pilot study which refined the data collection technique. The study took place over three academic years and was structured into three phases, from 2019 to 2022. A total of 33 undergraduate students were recruited to the study through research project advertisements online and snowball recruitment. There were three periods of data collection, one each academic year. The combined walking interview protocol, outlined in Figure 1, was used in Phase 1 and 3. Due to COVID-19 and national lockdowns from March 2020 in the UK, the methodology was adjusted in Phase 2. See Table 2 for a summary of the recruitment and retention of participants and methods in each Phase. Ethical approval for this study was granted by University of Bradford. The following section presents spatial findings. These were developed from participant produced data (Jackson 2024) using a combined analysis approach that considered all data. Each participant's data was anchored together through a number given to each photo that was added to interview transcripts and maps to show when and where it was taken. The transcripts, photos and maps were kept whole and not fragmented. I familiarised myself with each participant dataset, making notes in margins and adding thoughts to a reflexive journal. First, synchronic analysis was carried across all participant datasets of each academic year of the study. Second, diachronic analysis was carried out to uncover changes over time. Though inspired by Braun and Clark's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2008), codes were not produced, themes were developed and

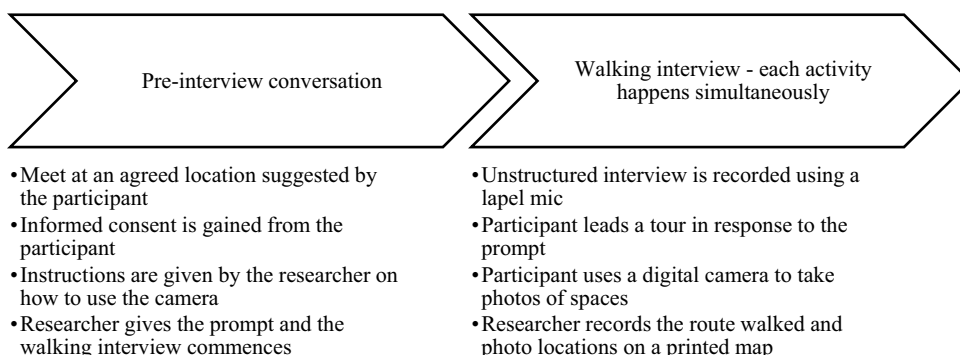


Figure 1. Protocol for a combined walking interview with participant photography and spatial mapping.

Table 2. The phases of the longitudinal study with details of the academic year, university delivery, number of participants, data collection and analysis processes.

Phase of study	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Academic year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
University delivery	On campus	Online	Hybrid
Participants	11 total	14 total: 8 recruited 6 retained	12 total: 5 recruited 7 retained
Data collection	11 combined walking interviews	10 online interviews 4 online photo elicited interviews	10 combined walking interviews 1 situated campus interview 1 online photo elicited interview
Data analysis	Inductive, reflexive thematic synchronic analysis	Inductive, reflexive thematic synchronic analysis	Inductive, reflexive thematic synchronic and diachronic analysis

refined through iterative mind maps and matrixes, and my reflective research journal was kept throughout the project.

Spatial findings on student usage of university space

Uncovering the different uses of space by individuals and groups

Spaces are appropriated by students for activities that are likely not the intended purpose when the space was designed. In [Figure 2](#) and the relevant quotes, Tyler discusses how he uses the group study space in the library for his own individual study because the presence of others is important for his motivation to learn. The presence of others is an important factor in where students choose to go to learn (Cox et al. 2020) yet they also want freedom in how they use a space and will ignore the intended usage. Spencer talks about how a formal teaching space, a computer lab, is used for multiple socialising and learning activities, and is where he spends most of his time on campus. This appropriation of a space is also seen with Nicky's group who use a bench outside the campus bar, which they turn into a learning space first before socialising

there. It is important for university estate management to understand the full range of activities a location supports to identify gaps in campus space provision. I note a potential issue as estate management design space for sustainability, teaching, commercial and security priorities which do not align with students' social use of campus that supports their learning.

Nicky's photo of the bench between Student Central and Phoenix NE Tyler's photo of the group study space in the Library



Jamil's photo of tables on a gallery above the shop in Richmond atrium

Spencer's photo of a computer lab in Horton where his course is based.



Figure 2. Participant quotes and photos of campus spaces showing themes of individual and group usage of campus and ownership of spots.

Nicky: We studied here last year for exams [. . .] So we were close to the bar but not in the bar. We didn't get drinks while studying obviously coz we're smart like that. We waited until after exams, and then we came back, and drank our sorrows – no [laughs] We sat down here as well. So like, when we'd finish studying, we'd sit here and then it's like a break away from studying, relax sort of time.

Tyler: Like I know it's meant to be for group study but I come here on my own to study. I come here in a group sometimes if we got something to do together. I just prefer it, coz when I'm on my own I can get distracted and it's good to be around other people [. . .] I tend to sit over there, like the corners, or in one of the side computer rooms down there. So I'm down here quite a lot.

Jamil: These benches up here at the only spot big enough for us all to sit together. And when we can get a table then we like claim it, you know. Sit here for hours. And then some of us get our laptops out or whatever, do some studying. There's a few right now doing a group project and they work on that together to the side. And then they practice stuff out, like we'd give some feedback. Like even though I'm not doing their course, we can still help each other out you know. And take breaks, chat. It's just a nice spot.

Spencer: This is the place where I literally have all my labs and lectures, and where I go to do my coursework and stuff because of the computers. And it's where the computing society meets too, it's sort of socialising as well [. . .] It gets really busy when it's around final year project time and people spend like all day in there. It's a 24 hour space that we just all camp out. Only certain students have access to the labs though, and there's other computer labs in the building but we can't get into those rooms.

Usage of space by social networks were uncovered and as shown in [Figure 2](#) and the relevant quotes, examples of Nicky's course group, Jamil's cross-course network and Spencer's course community. All these networks formed on campus through shared use of space and social routines. Therefore, student groups can blend their learning and socialising activities in one location they regularly return to. The choice of location could be due to a lack of spaces that support larger groups, as experienced by Jamil. This is a new implication that friendships at university are spatial in nature and connected to campus.

All participants in this study took me to multiple locations on campus depending on who they are with and what they intended to do. The map in the supplementary material demonstrates the migratory behaviour students exhibit when they are on campus. Students have different preferred locations on campus for different activities (Cox et al. 2020) and therefore need a variety of different spaces (Beckers, Van Der Voordt, and Dewulf 2016) but I have found students often have a routine of which spots they travel to at certain points of the day, anchored around their timetabled lectures. This is a new finding in how students use physical environments. Campus needs to be understood in how each space is linked to others, like a neighbourhood is understood as a whole area where every building and space is related to each other (Clark and Emmel 2009).

Changes to campus usage over time

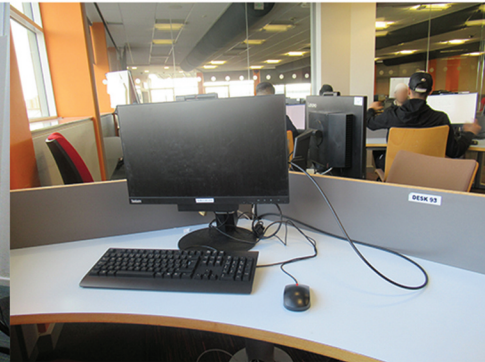
I discovered a direct connection between changes in social groups and changes to campus usage. When groups change by loss or gain of members, they chose a different spot to meet and blend socialising and learning.

One example is Aisha whose photos are shown in [Figure 3](#) alongside maps of the walked routes of each interview. In Phase 1, she used the library foyer table with her course mates and her sisters' course friends. When her sister's course graduated, Aisha and her group relocated to the computer room in a different building. In the Phase 3 map, the loss of importance of the library is

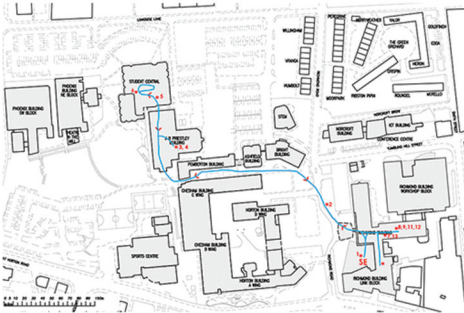
Aisha's photo of her preferred spot in Phase 1, a table in the library foyer



Aisha's photo of her preferred spot in Phase 3, a computer lab in Richmond



Aisha's walked route in Phase 1 interview



Aisha's walked route in Phase 3 interview

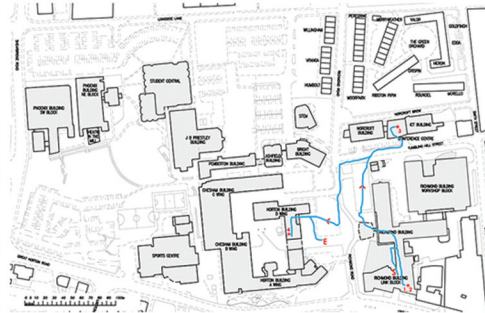


Figure 3. Participant photos and maps that reveal a change of campus usage over time.

shown by her choice not to go there. Comparing the two maps shows additional spaces were visited in Phase 3, which were discovered through a new friend Aisha made at her job.

Changes to campus usage can be caused by changes to the design and purpose of a space. There was a café which Travis and Nicky used often. When it was removed, both stopped using the space. Nicky's friends felt the comfortable and social vibe had disappeared, but they still needed a space to sit together at lunch and went to find one elsewhere on campus. Here, the redevelopment of a single location impacted on the routines and ownership these participants felt over their spot. The behaviours and activities do not disappear, they move elsewhere. When campus areas are redeveloped, a holistic approach must be used to understand the true value of that location. Due to this being the first longitudinal place-based study into university space, the effect of social group changes and space development on campus usage needs further exploration.

Loss of campus space

Longitudinal research is ideal for capturing changes to place and how people respond to these changes. However, the closure of campus due to COVID-19 was not expected and teaching moved online, which displaced the university experience into the home. University of Bradford campus was not fully closed, the outdoor spaces remained open to students and the public. However, teaching, learning and socialising took place in students' homes, in virtual environments. To reflect this, I pivoted to online methodologies and interviews were conducted in a virtual place (Zoom) and physical place (home) where both participants and I were experiencing university. Due to this disruption, participants could compare normal and restricted access to campus. During the 2020/21 academic year, some buildings were opened such as the library, where it was rearranged to comply with social distancing measures. Participants reported that measures including desk booking, time limitations and lack of choice over where to sit, were barriers that stopped them using campus. These barriers show that providing access to a space is not enough, students need agency over where, how and with who they use campus. In addition to loss of agency, participants spoke about loss of motivation to study, loss of connections with fellow students and lecturers. Their reflections could imply that campus provided this before and gives a fresh insight into the value of campus beyond its role as a learning space.

Ownership of space

Students gain a sense of ownership of their university campus in several ways. Shown in Aisha's photo in [Figure 3](#), students used belongings to physically take up space, reserving it for friends. Students have been observed in other studies to use belongings as visible boundaries to moderate their interaction with other students (Bryant, Matthews, and Walton 2009). This temporary claiming of space provides students with boundaries and comfort. Students feel attached to specific places and if these are in use by others, then a process of waiting to reclaim it happens.

Grant: I'll give some glances over you know, and if they move on then I head over and claim it again. Like I give myself an hour, if I don't get my seat within an hour then I'll give it up. If they look like they'll leave within an hour then I'll wait it out and steal it back. Like I got very territorial which is very weird. But then I've seen other people in the library do the same, like move to another seat when someone's only just left.

The 'reclaiming' of places has not been established before. The brooding, watching, and waiting for the desk to become free again, means that students are not able to fully focus on learning or feel comfortable until they are back in their preferred spot.

The language participants used, such as ‘my’ and ‘our’ when referring to spots shows the level of ownership they have over campus. Cox (2018) found that individual students refer to their favoured locations as ‘spots’. I build upon this with the finding that student groups also create a sense of ownership and belonging through claiming of spots like Jamil in Figure 2 and the relevant quotes. Students have referred to social learning spaces as ‘home-like’ and ‘home-based’ (Matthews, Andrews, and Adams 2011) and similar language of ‘headquarters’ and ‘home’ were used by my participants. Lefever (2012) found that sense of belonging comes from safety, comfort, and familiarity with others at university. I agree with this, and in addition suggest that these needs must be met for students to claim spots and have a sense of ownership over their campus. Kahu (2013) finds that sense of belonging is situated within place and people and is influenced by institutional factors.

Discovering the impact of the institutional structure

I found the institutional structure affects how students use campus. The structure of departments provides students with membership to institutional groups which have buildings and spaces assigned to them. Spencer’s description of the computer room in Figure 2 and the relevant quotes reflects this. This computer room is the place on campus where everyone on his course gathers but Spencer and his peers have a limited choice of where to go on campus. Access to other labs is not provided because they belong to other departments. The lack of options has potentially limited the chances Spencer’s cohort has to make connections with students across the university. Spaces that do not have a departmental identity attached are seen as places for all students (Cox et al. 2020), and course identity affects how students use campus space (Cox 2011), yet the influence of access restrictions according to the university structure has not been found before.

These institutional course boundaries can be removed by staff. Maddalena has been ‘adopted’ into a different course and trusted by staff who gave her additional access permission to spaces. Through the interviews it became clear that Grant has the same social circle as Maddalena and yet he has not received the same trust from staff. These spaces are inaccessible to him, and it created a divide in their social group. Permission to use space can also be implied through signage. Nahlini walked past one building on campus and reflected that she had never been inside because the sign was for a different faculty and she ‘didn’t think I could get in with my card’. These implied barriers could prevent students from finding spots that would better support their learning and socialising. The spatial arrangements of offices, buildings and campus reinforce the institutional social hierarchy and this affects academic staff (Andrew Cox, Herrick, and Keating 2012). These spatial arrangements also affect students’ social groups and use of campus.

Reflections on and practicalities of longitudinal place-based methods

Participant-researcher dynamic

Walking interviews have been found to reduce the typical power dynamic between the researcher and participant (Carpiano 2009) and the act of walking develops symmetry and equity in the relationship (Brown and Durrheim 2009). I add to the notion of symmetry by sharing data collection with the participant; I had a paper map and participants had a camera. Balancing these duties and providing my personal camera showed I had trust in the participant.

As a fellow student, I had the same shared knowledge, stories and jargon as my participants. So when they referred to abbreviations and buildings, I knew the reference and did not need to stop the flow of conversation to inquire – a benefit of the insider position. But not everyone at university has the same knowledge of all campus spaces. During the interview, I was taken to unfamiliar locations. I openly disclosed when this happened, and participants then took more ownership of the interview process. Carpiano (2009) highlights that participants act like a tour guide, and they gain more agency within the research process (Teixeria and Gardner 2017). The active choice I made in explicitly shifting power to participants is something for other researchers to consider.

In comparison to sedentary interviews, walking interviews require less prompts and questions (Evans and Jones 2011) as people, places and artefacts help participants recall memories and narratives (Harris 2016). I have found the same, that walking removes the need for prepared questions because the location itself serves as the prompt for conversation. Brown and Durrheim (2009) states structured interviews are not possible and I concur. Haphazard and free conversation is unavoidable due to the changing and interactive environment being experienced by both researchers and participants. This results in rich data on memories and experiences, but a new challenge for analysis.

In previous studies where the researcher is a staff member at the institution, it introduced a dynamic that influenced how students participate. It can exacerbate the power imbalance because staff at universities are higher in the institutional hierarchy than students. Being aware of this, I made a conscious choice to present myself in my student role and not my staff role, to equalise the relationship as much as possible. Due to this, some participants asked questions about my student experiences. However, the staff-student power dynamic was present in this study as some participants were aware of my staff role and led me to emphasise they could withdraw without penalty. I do not believe the power balance can be completely equalised because of the institutional hierarchy, but this method provides the participants more agency and control.

Experiences for the researcher

During a few of the walks, participants took me to places which I had not ever been to be before, despite being at the university for 14 years. I felt a sense of bemusement feeling out of place on a campus I assumed I was familiar with. On some walks, both the participant and I got disorientated.

Gemma: I'm a little confused where in Horton we've ended up.

Maddalena: It's below the first room we went to, so about here on your map ... [points out location on the clipboard] This is the D204 wing and we should be ...

Gemma: No, that's Horton Barn.

Maddalena: Oh yeah course it is, so we're here. That map is so confusing!

This quote shows how shared confusion, when a familiar place becomes unfamiliar, can be resolved together. There is a challenge to connect your location within a building to a map that does not detail floors and rooms. In this study, the spatial data was co-constructed and resulted in the correct recording of routes and photo locations. This quote also demonstrates the value of insider researchers. Through our shared knowledge of building names and campus spaces, we were able to co-construct the data and identify specific places of importance.

Reflecting on my dual position, I use campus in different ways as a staff member than as a student. If I had planned the walking interview route, I would not have discovered different uses of campus, spots of importance, or had my assumptions challenged. Researchers have different assumptions of what places are important and this subjectivity is addressed when participants have more control over walking interview (D'errico and Hunt 2022). Stevenson and Holloway (2017) found that when methods centre the perspective of the participant, it reframes how researchers view a place and generates a new perspective for researchers. Most campus research to date has seen the researcher place importance on learning. Seeing campus from the student perspective reveals its social value.

Experience for the participants

In the design stage, I did not anticipate any benefits or disadvantages for participants. The most important aspect was for participants to be aware of the longitudinal nature of the study and have willingness to return for multiple interviews. The participants in this study vocalised curiosity to engage again and see what would change over the next year. They spoke about the 'fun' they had taking part in the interviews. I believe this curiosity and enjoyment helped retain participants.

Walking interviews give participants the opportunity to reflect and interpret what a space means, where their everyday takes place and with who (Clark and Emmel 2009).

Anthony: 'I have found that I'm getting more confident every day with university, I explore more every day.'

During the interview, Anthony went on a detour and discovered new spaces he had not been before. He was a first-year international student adjusting to the UK and the interview gave an opportunity to explore and improve his confidence. Grant's second interview was almost an intervention. In Phase 1 he showed me a desk in the library where he felt motivated to study. In Phase 3, when walking past he said 'Ah the library, good old library. The library that I should use more!'. COVID-19 had disrupted his everyday routines beyond lockdowns easing. Later in the interview, Grant took me back to the library to find his spot and referred to it as a his 'lucky chair', reflected he should use it again. Despite not using this spot for over a year, the attachment was still evident, and it shows how students build connections to campus.

Walking interviews also challenge participant's assumptions about the meaning of a space.

Tyler: Doing this interview made me realise how much socialising I do on campus, like it's not just turning up to lectures and studying.

It is possible with a sedentary interview design that Tyler would only have discussed his learning experiences due to his assumption about campus which aligns with the focus in previous research on learning. Without walking on campus and discussing his everyday experience, Tyler may not have come to this realisation or shared how important socialising was for his university experience. This can challenge institutional priorities on learning and teaching design of spaces because all uses and the wider impact of campus must be considered.

Interruptions to interview

Interviews were interrupted through the unexpected appearance and disappearance of objects, lack of access to a space and bumping into people. As the interview is in a space that is familiar to the participant, social interactions with other people should be expected (Flint 2019) and it occurred often during this study. I agree with Clark and Emmel (2010) that participants are comfortable handling these interactions, and I make the case that is important to give advance guidance and let participants choose how to handle these situations.

During an interview with Maddalena, we came across a life-size model of a Dalek, a creature from the science-fiction TV show *Doctor Who*. I interrupted our conversation which prompted Maddalena to take a photo.

Her motivation for taking the photo was to create a memento for me and it shows the rapport we built over three interviews. Despite this interruption, we were able to resume the conversation and continue the tour. Other interruptions include an LGBT flag and a fire alarm going off which disrupted a walk. Unexpected object encounters have been reported from other walking interviews at universities (Flint 2019). It is important for researchers to understand how to handle these situations, as interruptions affect both participants and researchers.

The disappearance of objects also caused disruption, and this has not been discussed before. Cathy and Puja took me to the same location where they often studied and relaxed. However, the seating was removed which caused an emotional reaction. Cathy reflected the space ‘just looks a bit wrong’ and Puja saying it was a ‘sad thing’. In the moment they were not sure what to do but being in place meant they were able to discuss how they used the booths. They took photos of the empty spot to symbolically capture the location. This experience reminds students that they do not own the space or have power over it.

The inaccessibility of places also caused disruption. Reasons include other students using a specific spot, lectures taking place or closed rooms. In these instances, participants took photos of similar spots or symbolic photos of entrances. Despite not being in the exact spot, being nearby inspired them to share their experiences. As a photo was taken and route mapped, their experience could still be spatialised. These symbolic photos are visual artefacts of how space is shared and territorialised by multiple students, controlled by the institution and reveals how student usage of space can be unintentionally disrupted.

Preparation for a combined photography, mapping and walking interview

While there are many aspects researchers need to consider and plan for, the logistics, time and cost are comparable with sedentary interviews (Garcia et al. 2012). Other researchers have discussed the importance of considering the weather, safety of location, time of day and equipment (Carpiano 2009). These were considered for this study, and all interviews occurred during the hours of 10am and 4pm on teaching days at a mutually agreed time. Evans and Jones (2011) found that the weather did not affect walking interviews in their study however I found it can interrupt data collection. When leaving buildings, we were often buffeted by the wind and would comment on it before resuming the conversation. It can affect audio file quality, so wind-muffs for mics are advised. Jones et al. (2008) stressed the need for choosing the best method to capture spatial data as GPS has an accuracy of five to ten metres. GPS would not be suitable as we would be moving in and out of buildings, so I chose a low-tech method of pen and a printed map. The advantages of using a pen

and a paper map included ease of making notes in the moment, recording photo locations, and it was a quicker, cheaper solution to developing an electronic system. It allowed for participants to point out locations on the map and co-create spatial data. Previous studies have used disposable cameras and personal devices, but reflections on the choice of technology were not shared. In this study, I choose to provide my digital camera to ensure images were easy to access and high resolution, though I had to give instructions on how it worked. By providing my camera it demonstrated trust in the participants and gave them agency. It also practically shared data collection and promoted co-creation.

Due to lack of familiarity with walking interviews and participant photography, for researchers and participants, there is often a lack of confidence and initial awkwardness (Brown and Durrheim 2009) and having a prompt is important. There are different styles of prompts: warm up questions (Garcia et al. 2012), requesting a specified number of locations (Cox et al. 2020) or an open prompt that gives participants choice (Clark and Emmel 2009). As I wanted to see campus from the participants' perspective, I chose for them to lead the walk. My prompt was open, for participants to show me as many places on campus they wanted, in any order and via any route. Despite the prompt, I found each participant had different levels of confidence. Some sought reassurance early in the interview that they were taking the 'right' photos and showing me the 'right' places before becoming comfortable with the process.

For researchers who have not done unstructured walking interviews before, giving only a prompt and relying on the space to inspire interactions and conversation can be daunting. To build confidence, I recommend conducting a pilot study to test the method. I found the environment sustained our conversation without having to ask specific questions. Therefore I assure researchers that this method results in rich data on narratives and spatialised experiences. A list of topics to explore during walks is recommended and can help with consistency if blending with online interviews. However, during walking interviews topics are likely to be discussed in different orders. Leaning into the messy nature of a walking interview is important to keep the conversation natural.

Online vs place methods

Longitudinal qualitative research requires flexibility, often adjusting recruitment and data collection methods while maintaining rigour and openness (Koro-Ljungberg and Bussing 2013). When access to space is disrupted for an extended period, as during Phase 2 of this study due to COVID-19, researchers can pivot to online methodologies. I chose to do this to retain Phase 1 participants and address the longitudinal research aim. Online interviews

allowed participants with mobility concerns and caring responsibilities to engage when a walking interview was not possible.

However, engagement is different. During online interviews participants would go on tangents and wander from the research topic. Others ranted about the online university experience and issues they were experiencing. I felt it was important to not interrupt their rant or agree with what they were saying but it was challenging to handle the situation. I used the interview theme list to ask a question that would steer the participant back to the topic, but they often returned to their tangent. In comparison, the campus would distract and inspire further conversation, but participants remained focussed on their experiences and the research topic.

During online interviews, most participants did not produce photos for discussion and half did not turn their cameras on. I expected communication to be easier if we were both on camera and always turned mine on, but I let participants to choose if they did or not to respect their agency. The lack of photos and being on camera may be because they did not want to show their personal space to a stranger. Interestingly, all returning participants to Phase 2 did turn their camera on potentially because we had built rapport in the previous interview. I found that rapport was easier to build in walking interviews. In Phase 3 it felt like I was meeting all the participants for the first time including those who were returning to the study. Though not captured in the transcripts, the pre-meeting often started with comments about how nice it was to be on campus instead of through a screen. It indicates that there is a greater distance between researchers and participants during online interviews which may affect retention and rapport.

For walking interviews, each participant took a different approach. Some came prepared with a mental list of spots to visit and they walked a logical route across campus. The most common was a detour part-way through the interview to other places they had not first considered. Other participants wandered around without clear direction, continuously inspired by campus or conversation for the next destination. This variation in approach correlated to length of the interview, the more detours the more time we spent conversing. All walking interviews ended at participant's discretion and surprisingly they took less time on average than online interviews. This difference may be due to campus naturally inspiring conversations so participants covered everything they wanted to share, while online interviews required more questions.

Concluding thoughts

The novel combination of participant photography and researcher mapping within a walking interview is a productive method which resulted in new spatial findings of students' use of campus. There are implications for universities as students prioritise socialising on campus to support their learning,

which is not aligned to estates strategy priorities. Therefore universities should explore place-based methods in addition to surveys and single space studies to understand all students' needs and campus usage.

Student voice is shown to be spatial and social, as students' experiences of university are. The traditional sites of student voice via student-staff committee meetings are both social and spatial yet are held on campus or online in spaces chosen by staff. This study shows how gathering student voice through co-production approaches and in-place helps us better understand their experiences. Holding meetings while walking, or in places chosen by students, would reduce staff power and empower students to share meaningful feedback, further supporting student voice.

The longitudinal approach revealed new reasons behind changes to student routines. Redevelopment to specific campus spaces affects students' sense of ownership and may remove a place of importance. All universities must build a holistic view of all campus spaces from the student perspective to inform future building work and understand the effects of department signage and card access restrictions.

The spatial findings are limited to one university and undergraduate students. It is the first study to use place-based methods for longitudinal research. Therefore, further studies are needed to apply and refine the method protocol, recruit other student demographics including postgraduates, and build upon the spatial and longitudinal findings presented here. This research was subject to my dual student-staff position and values which influenced the methodological approach. There are benefits for rapport building and understanding data, so I call for researchers to acknowledge their insider status and build reflexivity into their methodology.

There are practicalities for researchers to consider when using place-based methods including interview prompts, technology, weather, timing and pilot studies. There is also the role of participants. Walking together following participant direction and co-creation of data can further balance the participant-researcher power dynamic and uncover new findings. It is an enjoyable way to conduct interviews and challenges assumptions held by both researchers and participants.

The method presented here has potential for use in future studies on geographically located institutions and topics including belonging, social networks and place-based identities. It is also a flexible method. This study had success for longitudinal design and blending with online methods for participant retention, and it would work as part of a mixed-method approach. The protocol also gives freedom for researchers to apply different theoretical approaches.

Since the commencement of this study in 2019, more research on university space has utilised place-based methods, and this indicates a spatial turn in educational research. This article adds to methodological development in this

field and has begun reimagining university campuses as a social, learning and identity forming place for students.

Author contributions

GJ: conceptualisation, research design, data collection, data analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. PB, NS and RD: project administration, supervision, writing – review and editing. All authors approved this manuscript.

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Other than three authors being employees of a Higher Education Institution (GJ, NS and PB), there is nothing to disclose. Permission to re-use and modify the campus map was provided by the University of Bradford.

Notes on contributors

Gemma Jackson is a recent PhD graduate in psychology and a Researcher Developer at the University of Bradford, United Kingdom. Her primary areas of interest are place-based qualitative research and higher education provision in the UK including campus development, student experience, and social learning.

Nazanin Shiraj is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Bradford, United Kingdom. Her research interests are in criminal and social psychology, including topics on cultural differences, interpersonal violence, and honour.

Peter Branney is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Bradford, United Kingdom and an Honorary Life Member of the British Psychological Society. His research interests are improvements to patients' experiences of healthcare through interventions and open science in qualitative methods.

Russell Delderfield is an education specialist and has taught across compulsory, further, and higher education. His PhD experimented with innovative qualitative approaches to psychology research and publications include papers in a range of psychology and education topics and a book about reflective practice.

ORCID

Gemma Jackson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5436-8340>

Nazanin Shiraj  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3308-7498>

Peter Branney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2084-461X>

Russell Delderfield  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5714-2497>

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the UK Data Service repository at DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9269-1>.

Rights retention statement

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