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## **Tracing the city – parkour training, play and the practice of collaborative learning**

**Alice O’Grady**

The article examines how parkour training is constructed and transmitted amongst localised peer groups known as ‘traceurs’. It concentrates on training practices that develop as a result of peer interaction in open, public spaces rather than formal training sessions that take place within a gym or as part of a regulated coaching programme. Drawing on extended interview material from a range of parkour practitioners with varying levels of experience and expertise, the article investigates the traceur’s perspective on group training and how this relates to cognition and processes of learning. Using traceurs’ own reflections the research will identify how physical obstacles, mental challenges, fear and risk are handled through repeated actions that then result in deeply embedded somatic responses to the built environment. The repertoire of moves that is shared between traceurs offers a patterned way of learning that, in turn, provides a route to embodied knowing. The research demonstrates how group training sessions in parkour can be conceived as collaborative learning and how that relates to theories of social learning (Bandura 1977, Lave 2009, Wenger 1998). The article argues that the efficacy of play as an approach to training provides a vehicle for active learning that chimes with the utilitarian aspect of parkour practice where to know and overcome obstacles represents the knowing and attainment of freedom.

**Keywords:** underground culture, play, social engagement, interaction, applied performance

## **Introduction: parkour as a subject of enquiry**

The history and development of the practice of parkour is well documented within the popular media and, more recently, has come to the attention of academics across a range of disciplines. Parkour, or l'art du déplacement (the art of movement), is widely recognised as an urban-based activity that at its simplest is the art of moving through and around obstacles, the aim being to get from A to B with speed and efficiency. Whilst constituted by a number of individual techniques and moves, the ultimate goal is to weave these components together to achieve a 'flow path' through the built environment. Using acute spatial awareness and physical strength, master practitioners create an aesthetic, yet entirely functional, performance that alludes to narratives of liberation, personal freedom and heroism.

Whilst the contemporary manifestation of parkour is known to have emanated from the economically deprived Parisian suburb of Lisses in the 1980s, the philosophical roots of the practice date back much further. Atkinson (2009) provides the most comprehensive account of its development, tracing the line from Georges Hébert's Natural Method that developed in the French Navy prior to the First World War. Hébert was an advocate of intense physical training as a means of developing personal virtue. From his experiences in the military he believed athletic strength and skill must be combined with courage and altruism in order to be useful to society at large (Atkinson 2009: 170–171). By practising in uncontrolled, outdoor settings he believed practitioners of his method would be able to conquer any terrain or obstacle they might face and would learn to transfer that energy, courage and self-belief to social situations they encountered elsewhere. With a commitment to social pedagogy

and utilitarianism, he developed training methods that tackled physical obstacles in tandem with psycho-emotional barriers such as fear, doubt, aggression and exhaustion and was the earliest proponent of *parcours* (obstacle course) training from which the name *le parkour* is derived. Hébert's Natural Method was adopted by the French army during the 1960s and used by soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War as a means of overcoming the uncompromising jungle terrain and the psychological challenges of warfare.

Parkour, as it is known today, came to popular recognition through the work of David Belle (whose father returned from Vietnam and passed on his knowledge of Hébertism to his son) and his friend Sébastien Foucan who both rose to fame through the television documentaries *Jump London* (2003) and *Jump Britain* (2005). These documentaries introduced the world to the skill, athleticism, daring and sheer beauty of parkour as *traceurs* (the name given to people who practice parkour) leapt from the roofs and structures of iconic landmarks such as the Royal Albert Hall, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, HMS Belfast, Edinburgh Castle, the Tyne Bridge and the Giant's Causeway. The films also provided a platform for its founding members to disseminate its philosophy. Parkour advocates physical and spiritual immersion in one's environment to gain a fresh understanding of it and reinterprets obstacles as opportunities for physical and creative expression.

The playful manipulation of space lies at the heart of parkour. As Foucan says in *Jump London* (2003), 'the whole town [Lisses] was there for us: there for free running. You just have to look and you just have to think like children. This is the vision of parkour'. Since that time Belle and Foucan have parted company, citing

philosophical differences behind their split. A rift has emerged between the utilitarianism of parkour and the more stylised version, 'free running', that incorporates superfluous but spectacular tricks, flips and spins into the repertoire thereby deviating from the central tenet of parkour: efficiency. Despite these divisions over the past 10 years parkour in all its forms has grown rapidly in popularity and is now highly visible culturally although it remains surprisingly invisible at street level where youngsters are often discouraged from practising or moved on by authorities. It is used extensively in adverts, films and in other media that foreground the super-hero qualities of its master practitioners and make use of the breathtaking aspect of the practice for dramatic effect. The media desire to exploit the spectacular is hardly surprising but it effectively ignores any exploration of the intensive training that lies behind the finished product. This article and other scholarship around parkour seeks to redress that imbalance by examining the processes of a growing (sub)cultural phenomenon that effectively conflates the categories of sport, art, performance and pedagogy.

Much academic research into parkour has been concerned with considering the activity as a form of spatial resistance, a physical means of navigating the harsh realities of urban life and combating the hierarchies of organised public space and its control (Geyh 2006, Bavinton 2007, Daskalaki et al. 2008, Saville 2008, Atkinson 2009, Archer 2010). Positioning parkour as a new form of leisure practice affords it interpretation as a form of resistance (Bavinton 2007). Leisure is a domain of social life in which power is negotiated, lost and won (Rojek 1995). Leisure activities are usually tightly framed and restricted to particular settings such as football pitches, bowling alleys or skate parks. Parkour disrupts this convention and actively refutes

restriction. When permitted to do so, its practitioners play with and within the city space in highly visible and often challenging ways, reconfiguring the built environment as a playground rather than as a site of economic production. Traceurs train physically and psychologically to improve their ability to overcome obstacles. These obstacles present themselves both as physical hurdles but also as the metaphorical barriers experienced by youth living in today's urban setting. Within the narrative of the parkour phenomenon paradigms of freedom and liberation proliferate. Traceurs reinterpret and utilise the constraints of the built environment and reconfigure them as opportunities (Bavinton 2007, p. 391). Free will triumphs over design as traceurs create their own desire lines through the city rather than conforming to the orthodoxy of space.<sup>i</sup> The novel relationship traceurs forge with the physical dimensions of their city has prompted interest from architects, urban planners and designers. A recent article by Rawlinson and Guaralda (2011) examines how emergent under- ground forms of play such as parkour may re-interpret the very fabric of the city space and considers how that might impact upon procurement, design and management practice.<sup>ii</sup>

Some research on parkour sits within the medical field and concerns itself with the dangers and harmful outcomes of participating in it (McLean et al. 2006, Miller and Demoiny 2008). Common injuries include bone fractures, torn ligaments and tendons, joint pain and deterioration of cartilage and soft tissue. Statistics relating to the number of deaths caused by parkour are inconsistent but with the increase of YouTube and other Internet sites where footage can be uploaded and shared amongst users, thoughtlessness, reckless behaviour and even suicide is sometimes attributed to parkour in error. Undeniably parkour can be dangerous but practitioners are keen to

underplay this aspect, emphasising the importance of systematic training in order to minimise injury. In comparison with other physical activity risk can be managed fairly effectively with each traceur operating at his or her own level of competence. Unlike contact sports, there are no other people involved in the actual physical movement and speeds involved are minimal in relation to those experienced in other activities such as skateboarding or BMX biking. The dizzying jumps at height and drops from height as seen on films and television are the product of top end production and professional practice. Most parkour training takes place at ground level where slips and falls might be common but are not life threatening.

Having established that the dangers associated with parkour are often overblown, risk is nevertheless central to the parkour experience. Encountering risk and overcoming fear is a key motivation for participating in parkour and this can have positive outcomes that can be put to social or educational use. An instrumentalist view of parkour is revealed by new research carried out in the South of England that examines our understanding of the boundaries of 'sport' and how that might inform public policy debates and initiatives around youth, physical activity and risk (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011). Gilchrist and Wheaton consider how parkour has been used to engage particular groups, especially those disenfranchised or excluded from mainstream sport or physical education provision.<sup>iii</sup> In line with the findings of this report my own argument is that despite (or perhaps because of) its edgy, risky and potentially resistant status as a counter-cultural activity, parkour offers a system of collaborative learning that appeals to individuals who have previously been excluded from or have walked away from traditional patterns of education. It is also particularly appealing to a generation that has been brought up in a culture that is increasingly protective of its children, suspicious of its youth and where urban spaces

have become increasingly sites of anxiety, tension and fear. Identifying the characteristics of parkour training that make it 'successful' in this regard not only sheds light on parkour practice but offers a transferable model for collaborative learning that combines physical play and imagination, localised spatial practices and joint endeavour to achieve personal transformation.

### **Parkour training, learning and development**

Parkour slips between definitions and, as a result, academic analysis of it can emanate from a range of disciplines. Parkour has been described as a sport, an art form, a discipline, a leisure activity, a counterculture, a philosophy, and positioned as an 'emerging urban "anarcho-environmental" movement' (Atkinson 2009, p. 169). From my own discipline of applied performance, this article looks at the characteristics of parkour training and identifies how this relates to particular processes of learning. Using data gathered from semi-structured interviews with traceurs and supported by additional information gleaned from the many online forums and Internet resources dedicated to parkour, it considers how group training in parkour might be conceived as an example of highly contextualised, collaborative learning. It offers an analysis of parkour training as a process of learning that relates intimately to the place in which it occurs. This is a process that is socially framed and, like all learning, might be potentially liberating. With the ongoing sportisation of parkour, training regimes can operate very differently depending on whether they function as informal peer interactions in public spaces or whether they form part of a regulated physical education programme. My interest lies in the former configuration. Parkour training in this instance is not necessarily systematic but constructed around



formulations of play that operate, according to Huizinga's definition, as free activity that stands outside 'ordinary' life. This activity may be perceived as being 'not serious' but nonetheless absorbs the player intensely and utterly (Huizinga 1949). Whilst the play of parkour might involve playing with architecture (Rawlinson and Guaralda 2011), playing with the experience of space (Daskalaki et al. 2008), playing with fear (Saville 2008) or playing between systems of control and resistance (Bavinton 2007), what is critical is that this particular form of playing has real world consequences (if I misjudge a jump, I will fall) and applications that extend beyond the immediate game (if I learn to overcome this obstacle I can learn to overcome others).

Whilst acknowledging the subjective nature of personal testimony this article will examine the traceurs' belief in the transformative dimension of parkour training and how that relates to their own sense of personal development. The interviewees for this research ranged between 16 and 32 years old and semi-structured interviews were carried out over a six month period between March and August 2011. All of the interviewees were male and all selected to be part of the project via online advertising through Facebook and by word of mouth.<sup>iv</sup> The interviewees had between two and eight years' experience of parkour. Two of the interviewees described themselves more as practitioners of free running<sup>v</sup> but were fully conversant with parkour philosophy and its traditions. Two of the interviewees had considerable experience of coaching parkour within a professional context of youth development and education.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Parkour training and processes of learning in context**

Unsurprisingly, previous research has placed much emphasis on the physical nature of parkour but this article examines the cognitive processes associated with it and argues for its consideration as a form of ‘situated learning’, a model proposed by educational theorists Lave and Wenger (1991). Situated learning is learning that takes place in the same context to which it is applied (for example, we learn mental arithmetic while calculating the cost of groceries in a shop and working out how much change we should receive at the end of the transaction). According to this model learning is situated in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment. Traditionally research has considered learning to be a highly individualised process contained within the mind of the learner and thereby ignoring the lived-in world. This attitude serves only to strengthen a perceived division between mind and body. In contrast, Lave’s (2009, p. 202) model highlights the importance of considering person, activity and situation as a single unit. ‘Traditional cognitive theory is “distanced from the world” and divides the learning mind from the world’. Much parkour training and the group learning that arises from it is not set at a distance. It is brutally immediate. It occurs on the street in the presence of others. If a traceur is to overcome an obstacle safely then mind, body and context have to work together. They are inseparable components of an activity that requires critical thinking as well as physical agility. Whilst many traceurs supplement their outdoor training with sessions in the gym or on a specially designed parkour park (of which there are an increasing number), playing physically within one’s lived context is a key aspect of parkour philosophy and is a particularly resonant aspect for groups of youngsters who feel themselves excluded from or marginalised by the disciplining systems of control that the modern urban cityscape can represent. Playing in, around and with the city, tracing undiscovered desire lines through it, reconnects the parkour

body with the environment and trains it to be able to meet physical or social challenges should the need arise. Being strong to be useful is the central tenet of Hébertism. It is an applied activity that has to have relevance and be connected to the space that the practitioner inhabits as part of daily life. In this sense traceurs are not only learning parkour but also learning about themselves, the world in which they live and how they might function usefully within it.

In a similar way, Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning places learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world. He proposes that learning is fundamentally a social phenomenon:

a process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. . . . Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do. (Wenger 1998, p. 4)

The four main components of social learning theory are meaning (the way we talk about our experience of the world and the significance we ascribe to it); practice (the way we talk about shared resources, frameworks and perspectives that then sustain mutual engagement in action); community (the way we talk about our social configurations and our participation); and identity (a way of talking about how learning changes who we are in relation to our communities). In turn these components correspond to learning as experience, learning as doing, learning as belonging and learning as becoming.<sup>vii</sup> Each facet is interconnected and mutually defining and each is evident in the narratives and experience of parkour practitioners

who embody this learning through their practice as well as through the narratives they construct around what they do.

Parkour is a social activity. Training usually takes place in the presence of others in a mutually supportive environment. Strong bonds are formed through affiliation to the group and peer-to-peer training relationships develop. Traceurs often work closely in pairs with someone who matches their skill level or with whom they have ‘an instinctive spark’ (interview). These pairs combine to form part of a larger group or team who train together over a period of time.<sup>viii</sup> As well as working on improving physical technique, forming relationships, networks and bonds, both real and virtual, is a critical part of the parkour experience. Joining a group and actively engaging with its members, finding a place within the community and developing an identity in relation to it, and then deriving meaning from the experience of belonging are regarded as key components of the parkour way of life. Clearly, notions of community in this context can be highly contested and are subject to all the usual instances of exclusion, clique and hierarchy evident in any number of youth cultures or neo-tribal formations. However, the ethos of community and inclusion is one that runs through the very core of parkour philosophy and is mirrored in the language of traceurs when they talk of the ‘non-competitive’ nature of parkour and the importance of the ‘friendly social environment’ (interview).

A parkour group functions according to Wenger’s (1998) notion of a ‘community of practice’. A community of practice is a group of individuals who share a common interest and who have a desire to learn from and contribute to the community which they are part of or which they seek to join. In this instance learning is seen as a social

process where knowledge is co-constructed. A community of practice consists of three interrelated dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, p. 73). These dimensions are evident in parkour groups whereby training is conducted in a shared environment that all interviewees described as mutually supportive, self-regulated and goal orientated. However, during a typical parkour training session there exists an interesting duality between the highly regimented rehearsal of moves and considerable amounts of friendly banter and playful behaviour between group members. Despite the promise of inclusivity that frames the web presence of most informal parkour groups, witnessing this in situ as an outside observer might suggest groups operate as exclusive clubs where membership is limited to those 'in the know'. However, most parkour groups would refute this and usually encourage new members just to turn up at a regular meeting point within the public space of the city. The combination of drilling moves with peers in an open access environment that includes everyday social interactions alongside the development of physical strength and agility establishes a collaborative learning dynamic. This pattern of learning is socially driven and can foster feelings of identity, identification and group affiliation that aid the learning process.

As Wenger (1998, p. 6) points out:

Communities of practice sprout everywhere – in the classroom as well as on the playground, officially or in the cracks. And in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice.

Although parkour still resides very much within the ‘cracks’ of conventional education, it is undergoing a process of regulation, standardisation and sportisation. Parkour UK (PKUK) is the National Governing Body for parkour and claims to be ‘responsible for all the administration, development and promotion of the discipline of parkour or freerunning’ (Parkour UK 2011). Whilst acknowledging the significant, positive impact this organisation has had on the development of parkour in the UK, being ‘taught’ parkour by a qualified instructor or coach is very different to ‘learning’ parkour with peers on the street. Examining how groups organise themselves, construct their own patterns of learning and provide mutual support for each other helps position the self-regulated parkour training group as a community of practice and provides insight into an activity that is both disciplining and potentially resistant at the same time. Most public space is closed off to forms of play and city spaces are constructed to discourage the use of ramps, pathways, stairs and railings in any other way than to regulate the flow of consumers through the economic centre of our towns (Bavinton 2007, p. 396). However, traceurs utilise the discipline of parkour to find new ways of engaging with their surroundings in what might be perceived as an ‘undisciplined’ or ‘unruly’ way that can unsettle authorities and onlookers in its unconventional approach to space. This is a process that disregards conformity and standardisation and yet, at the same time, disciplines the body and mind of the traceur and produces a set of moves and techniques that can be rehearsed, repeated and shared between groups.

### **Patterns of learning: repertoire, repetition and the pursuit of ecstasis**

In order to achieve the ultimate goal of fluid and unrestricted movement or ‘flow

path' through the city, traceurs must first learn a repertoire of moves that have common names, such as cat leap, monkey vault, cat balance, tic tac, kong vaults and palm spins.<sup>ix</sup> These moves are all variations on vaulting, diving, sliding, climbing and jumping and function both as a language to describe physical action as well as serving as a movement vocabulary that traceurs can apply to their analysis of the obstacles in front of them. These individual moves are repeated until they become part of the body's somatic response to physical structures. The individual moves are then connected together to achieve Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of 'flow' or what has been described by parkour practitioners as 'total fluid movement over every type of obstacle. Almost like water flowing down stream and coming to a boulder. Instead of smashing into it, the water simply moves around it and continues its journey' (Urban Freeflow, cited by Bavinton 2007, p. 403). A dialectic exists between the pursuit of freedom and the aforementioned flow and the mechanical repetition that is required to achieve it. As with much performer training there is an underlying tension between restriction and freedom. According to Barba's (1991, p. 8) philosophy of physical training, 'performers who work within a network of codified rules have greater freedom than those who . . . are prisoners of arbitrariness and an absence of rules'. Whilst there are no prescribed 'rules' in parkour there are moves that are learnt mechanically in order to reach towards physical freedom and thereby achieve a sense of flow.

The practitioner of parkour is encouraged towards 'freedom', to have vast possibilities for movement before them, from which they may playfully select and string together new improvisations in a flowing dance across the urban landscape. Yet the paradox of parkour is that to have a sense for these spatial

possibilities, as anything but terrifying dreams, one must drill particular moves repeatedly. (Saville 2008, p. 899)

Through constant repetition the body begins to know what might be possible. The traceur begins to know his body and its capabilities and begins to trust it to produce a somatic response when the need arises. Having first learnt soft and fluid gymnastic movements such as rolls, jumps and leaps, training then progresses and traceurs begin to experiment with more challenging physical acrobatics. This next stage of training requires intense focus and a unity of mind and body. The ultimate goal is for traceurs to learn how to let go physically and psychologically. Drawing on the work of Heidegger, Atkinson argues that this moment might be understood as a form of poiesis, a threshold moment where transformation occurs. Parkour can ‘provide moments of catharsis and liberation for people, or moments of ecstasis, wherein the conscious and calculating mind is “let go” and the body and mind move as one’ (Atkinson 2009, p. 178). This is experienced as a heightened state of consciousness, a moment of transcendence or deep personal knowing, that then becomes embedded within the narrative of the parkour quest for freedom. This point is the Holy Grail for traceurs and is achieved as a result of intense and rigorous training and is by no means experienced by all. Emotions such as dejection, disappointment, frustration and fear are perhaps more common but are accepted by most as a necessary part of the journey and fundamental to the psycho-emotional aspect to training.

### **Parkour as process and psychological function**

Parkour is a discipline that requires great physical agility and strength but even the



most basic level of training focuses on developing physical and psychological functionality in tandem and, as such, provides a useful tool for examining ‘learning by doing’ and ‘learning in context’. The weaving together of physical and psychological imperatives within parkour training gives an insight into why traceurs describe parkour as ‘a way of life’ and why they consider it not only a means of expressing who you are but also as ‘a way of showing how you are’ (interview; emphasis added). Bavinton’s research into the subjective experience of traceurs suggests that parkour is as much to do with internal space as it is to do with physical strength:

Various practical elements (running, jumping, rolling) are considered of great importance, but an emphasis on the underlying philosophy opens up the internal space, the subjective experience, to be recognized as the real location of Parkour. The physical elements become merely the outwardly visible expression of this philosophy. (Bavinton 2007, p. 402)

All traceurs I interviewed talked about their own psychological development as well as improvements to their physical skill base. One expressed his belief that parkour was ‘90% psychological’. Improving mental efficiency and strength was seen as a transferable skill that was linked to confidence building, growing self-awareness and an ability to overcome personal obstacles, particularly in times of crisis. There was a repeated narrative across interviews that parkour training helps establish the ‘motto for life that there is nothing that cannot be overcome’ (interview).

Unsurprisingly all interviewees talked about the importance of body conditioning and strength training when practising how to overcome physical obstacles. Many had

complementary sporting activities in their background that supported this, such as gymnastics, trampolining or martial arts. When training to overcome psychological obstacles each interviewee described strategies that engaged the imagination and prompted a rehearsal of reality through a process of visualisation.

You've got to see yourself do it. See yourself making the jump. How am I going to approach it? What footing am I going to use? I rehearse it in my mind.

(Interview)

The notion of rehearsal was teased out further by one interviewee who went through the process in more detail. He explained how preparation for a big jump helps the traceur work out where their personal boundaries lie. He described how the dimensions of the jump are marked out on the floor in chalk first to ensure that the distance is physically achievable. Other elements of the jump are then considered, such as body positioning, the type of landing required, the texture and spatial dimensions of the wall or building to be jumped. All this is practised repeatedly before the jump is attempted at height. The learning happens at the point where the mind prevents the body from doing what it knows it can accomplish.

I know I can physically do these jumps on the flat floor and yet when it comes to doing the actual jump, that's when you start learning it. That's when you figure I know I can physically do these jumps but psychologically I can't do it.

Why can't I do it? (Interview)

This is the point where 'letting go' remains elusive and further training is needed to

achieve the point where the threshold might be crossed.

Taking into account the emotional aspects of parkour alongside the recurring notion of physical rehearsal to combat psychological obstacles allows for a reprioritising of 'parkour as process' rather than the more highly publicised 'parkour as product'. As Saville points out the public's awareness of parkour is usually mediated through the screen. We witness it on film as 'a fearless and mature product' (Saville 2008, p. 892). We see a finished product that is slick, polished and edited together for spectacular effect. Saville tries to dispel this common (mis)understanding of parkour and considers instead the emotional specificities of the practice by proposing the concept of the 'parkour body': an unfinished, ever-learning, emotional body' that handles fear as 'a lived and mobile process' (2008: 893). One of the traceurs I interviewed talked of 'fear training' and suggested this was linked directly to his sense of self-esteem, ego and self-fulfilment. The learning that occurs in this phase of parkour training then finds its application in the day-to-day experience of the traceur:

The confidence and all the lessons I learnt about myself from doing parkour carry on through to the rest of my life [. . .] When I'm stood on the edge of a jump and I know I can physically do it but I'm just scared for some reason, I can push myself to trust in myself. I know I can do it, so just get on and do it. And you prove yourself right. That belief in yourself totally carries through to everyday life. (Interview)

### **Group affiliation and collaborative learning**

One of the key motives cited for participation in sport and exercise is affiliation (Ashford et al. 1993). Membership of groups is essential for psychological health and satisfies basic human needs in terms of forming bonds with others (Hagger and Chatzisarantis 2005). Parkour training is one example of a physical activity that takes place in a social setting, where group processes abound and where people often form close interpersonal bonds. Self-esteem and a sense of worth are, in part, derived from the social group to which an individual belongs (Tajfel and Turner 1986). One of the key constructs in research into group dynamics is the concept of the group norm (Hagger and Chatzisarantis 2005), namely the behaviours that are deemed acceptable or unacceptable by the group. As with some other 'lifestyle sports' where affiliation and personal reward are intrinsic motivators for participation (Wheaton 2004), the group norm in parkour is characterised as inclusive, non-competitive, supportive and non-hierarchical. This is not to suggest that competition is non-existent or that groups are not subject to their own systems of hierarchy, power and control. Indeed the master-guru figure in parkour is a key symbol of respect and is perpetuated in many media representations. What is significant is that, regardless of local fluctuations, the perceived group norm for training is one of collaboration and mutuality.

In a parkour group, members seek to learn from each other. They provide instant feedback for team mates and acknowledge everyone has something to contribute in order to help others achieve regardless of age, gender or experience.

Every new person that you go out training with sees something that you didn't. You learn from each other. Everyone you come into contact with via training has something to teach you. (Interview)

I don't know a traceur or free runner that has ever stood out and said I cannot learn any more. There are so many ways to take yourself to the next level. With others we share ideas and techniques, you push yourself in a new way, learning from others' suggestions, trying techniques and routes that you hadn't thought of yourself. (Interview)

This is a process of shared learning that crosses institutional hierarchies where traditional teacher–pupil relationships are usually arranged vertically. The contributions to the group session and the insight provided by those new to parkour can be just as enlightening as those made by traceurs with a wealth of experience. In this sense learning functions along a horizontal, networked plane.

We're all still learning. Even people I have taught, I'll ask them for advice and feedback. [. . .] We are always learning and teaching each other because you need an outside view. (Interview)

The networked learning of a typical parkour training session that is further supported by online learning via YouTube, social networking sites and chat rooms helps individuals set goals. This might include achieving a new leap that can be accomplished at ground level but not yet at height or learning a new move that has been modelled by someone else. According to Foucan one of the guiding principles of parkour is the drive to move forwards regardless of what lies before you. As he says, 'there is always a path . . . you never go backwards' (Foucan in Jump London 2003). This ethos becomes embedded in the personal drive to 'reach the next level' (interview) and becomes part of the developmental journey for each individual

traceur.

I do like to learn new moves. I don't believe I'm better than anyone else or anything like that. I just want to be better each day. I want to up my level. I know what I'm capable of and I want to exceed that. It's about setting standards and reaching goals. (Interview)

Achieving those goals is a process that is then supported by the group. This is done explicitly through encouragement, mentoring and peer-to-peer coaching and also implicitly through observation, comparison and role- modelling.

We're all setting standards for each other. There's a guy who's got a great vault. He's looking for the next gap. If he does that vault and he just makes it, I know that I'm probably not going to make it but I can work towards it and that's given me a goal. Him finding something he can do has given me a goal. By the time I can do that, he's found another one. (Interview)

In this instance training as a group offers a system of benchmarking as well as an incentive for the individual group member to work harder towards their goal.

There's a great social side to it when you're training with friends. You watch each other progress and there's this great sense of achievement when one of you gets to the next level. You're looking for new goals all the time. The next level has to be found but you create your own level. It's very individually oriented. (Interview)

Training in the presence of others and learning through watching and modelling is a key aspect in Bandura's (1977) work on social learning theory and self-efficacy. As with physical theatre training, 'observing others executing the same movement increases awareness of what we look like to an outside eye' (Callery 2001, p. 23). For the interviewees, having other people around to witness the overcoming of a mental or physical obstacle was seen variously as support, pressure and motivation.

Having other people around can really help. It kind of pressurises you to do it but also they're there to congratulate you when you've done it. You need some pressure to achieve. (Interview)

I find I'm more productive jumping around than I would be sat down talking. We're doing stuff. We're pushing each other physically and we're pushing each other's minds as well. (Interview)

From the instances above it is evident that parkour training complies with the basic elements of co-operative learning (Thousand et al. 1994). These elements include positive interdependence (where there is the belief that an activity has to be a joint effort), face-to-face promotive interaction (such as providing each other with efficient and effective help, giving feedback, challenging, influencing, supporting), individual accountability and personal responsibility, interpersonal skills and group processing. With these characteristics and the underlying ethos of inclusivity it is unsurprising that pupil friendly parkour-related activities are being used to fulfil the requirements of the UK's National Curriculum for Physical Education (Binney and Barrett 2010)

and that parkour is being put to use within communities to fulfil the social inclusion agenda (see Gilchrist and Wheaton 2011) despite its sometimes troubled relationship with authorities, communities and institutions, who have viewed it as anti-social behaviour and a dangerous public nuisance. Co-opting youth (sub)cultures for the purposes of instrumentalism and social cohesion runs the risk of sanitising and diffusing the very practice it wishes to harness. Whilst regulated parkour programmes have a part to play in the physical education of young people and can provide systematic and safe coaching for those who wish to access it, how youth cultures function independently as communities of practice and how they determine their own strategies, priorities and cultures of learning must remain a priority for those interested in the relationship between social pedagogy and spatial practice.

### **Conclusion: parkour and playful learning**

As children we always move for enjoyment, unaware of social rules and uncaring of others' opinions of us. We'd use the environment to play. So when people ask me 'how long have you been training parkour?' I like to ask them, 'When did you stop?' (Interview)

Much academic analysis of parkour returns to the concept of play and this is where I would like to conclude. Parkour has been described as a 'form of unscripted creative play' that reinterprets the city as 'a terrain of playful possibility' (Bavinton 2007, p. 393). Parkour is 'about getting in touch with your inner child and taking the interesting way, rather than the easiest route' (Belle 2010). It is 'a declaration of the creative ludic potential and the playing spirit of mankind' (Rawlinson and Guaralda



2011, p. 21). It unlocks opportunity and encourages ‘chance, interaction, possibility, imagination, creativity and change’ (Daskalaki et al. 2008, p. 51). Traceurs frequently use the word ‘playground’ to describe how they perceive the built environment. Although play is usually marked off, framed or relegated to ‘contrived zones of play’ (Atkinson 2009, p. 184), traceurs play in the street, a phenomenon that has become less common over time with the increased regulation of working class life and a growing public mistrust and fear of youth and its display. Parkour, whilst not exclusively a working class activity, is nonetheless free from the constraints of economics. It costs nothing to participate and requires no specialist equipment. Through play, traceurs reclaim their sense of space and place within the city and make creative use of the streets, buildings and obstacles that surround them. Their actions are open to interpretation as deviance as they refuse to comply with the original function and normative use of public space. They ‘corrupt space’ with their particular form of risky play.<sup>x</sup> According to Geyh (2006), parkour effectively remaps urban space, creating a parallel, ‘ludic’ city, a city of movement and free play within and against the city of obstacles and inhibitions.

According to Lecoq’s (2000, p. 79) philosophy, ‘the body must be disciplined in the service of play, constrained in order to attain freedom’. In parkour the city is not only a site of free play, it is also a site of learning. For the traceur to achieve the ultimate goal of physical and psychological freedom across the cityscape, rigorous training must take place. Mind and body become the subject of discipline but this brand of discipline is self-regulated and intrinsically motivated. Training is situated within the context of the learner’s day-to-day experience and takes place in collaboration with peers. Training becomes a vehicle for the co- construction of knowledge and shared

transmission of experience that is not dependent on age or gender. Parkour knowledge is not simply about executing technique, mastering certain moves and demonstrating physical efficiency. It is a form of embodied knowledge – one that is learnt in practice, applied in context and operates in collaboration with others. It is situated learning that marries person, context and activity. It involves processes of doing, belonging and becoming simultaneously and, as such, offers a potential route to personal development, transformation and self- actualisation.

The role of psycho-emotional and physical play is central to a variety of performer training regimes and parallels can be drawn between this type of training and parkour. However, what sets parkour aside is its intimate, immediate and, at times, brutal relationship with set and setting. In the open air parkour training operates as a process of resistance as well as of discipline; as a way of training the body as well as sharpening the mind; as a way of reimagining space and its obstacles. Parkour is contextualised learning through doing that occurs via the co-option of play as a system of social pedagogy and collaborative endeavour. In parkour, function and aesthetics are in constant dialogue. Traceurs aim for total immersion in their environment so that the point of ‘letting go’ can occur. This threshold moment is of significance not only in parkour but in theatre and performer training as well as sports training. This is the point at which mind, body and space work in tandem, where embodied knowing takes over and internal voices of doubt, fear and anxiety are silenced and the individual is able to reach new levels of achievement.

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<sup>i</sup> Desire lines are the unpaved paths that are developed over time by human and animal footfall. They represent the easiest or shortest route from one point to another. They emerge where the designated route or pathway has been ignored and thus desire triumphs over design (see [http:// www.vanseodesign.com/ web-design/desire-lines/](http://www.vanseodesign.com/web-design/desire-lines/)).

<sup>ii</sup> Other underground forms of play that are beginning to emerge predominantly via YouTube and social networking sites include practices such as house gymnastics ([http:// www.housegymnastics. com/index.shtml](http://www.housegymnastics.com/index.shtml)), planking (<http://www.planking.me/>) and extreme ironing ([http:// www.extremeironing. com/](http://www.extremeironing.com/)). All share an interest in risk, danger and physical challenge and challenge the normative conventions of urban and domestic spatial practice.

<sup>iii</sup> Most active in this area is the London Borough of Westminster through the Positive Futures initiative (Positive Futures 2007). This initiative is a sport- based policy developed in line with New Labour's social inclusion agenda to tackle issues surrounding health, crime and education for young people at risk.

<sup>iv</sup> Parkour is not a gender- specific activity and there are many female traceurs practising within the UK. However, as all the interviewees for this research were male, traceurs will be referred to as 'he' for the purposes of this article.

<sup>v</sup> Free running is an aesthetically orientated version of parkour. It involves adding flips and spins to produce spectacle rather than concentrating solely on functionality and efficiency. It also emphasises the need for practitioners to find their 'own way' over obstacles and to develop their own style as a route to personal development.

<sup>vi</sup> For the purposes of this article transcribed material from interviews is not linked to named contributors.

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<sup>vii</sup> For a full explanation of this model and a diagrammatic representation see Wenger (1998, p. 5).

<sup>viii</sup> The youngest interviewees for this research described how in the summer months they regularly trained for 12 hours in a single day. Walking from place to place to find suitable places for training made up for some of this time. Socialising was an important aspect of the day and made up for approximately a quarter of the time spent together.

<sup>ix</sup> A full list of parkour moves and training videos can be found at <http://www.worldwidejam.tv/pkbasics.1.jam.parkour.html>

<sup>x</sup> The term ‘corruption of space’ comes from the documentary *Jump London* (2003) where architect Will Alsop discusses how lifestyle sports such as parkour and skateboarding corrupt the original use or function of buildings but in doing so reinvigorate public space with new dynamism and creativity.