

## Walk, See, Create: Google-Mapping Collaboration

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### Abstract

Walking is integral to creative thought and practice, as highlighted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Rebecca Solnit. Both Graphic Design and Illustration as subjects encourage students and practitioners to observe the world around us in order to make informed comment. This belief that locative practice is beneficial to students has led to the development of digital mapmaking workshops by the University of Worcester Graphics and Illustration departments.

These experimental 'Psychogeographic' mapping workshops aim to encourage exploration of the city of Worcester and the surrounding area. In doing so, students record their thoughts and observations through drawing, photography, film and writing. Mapping is the main objective of these walks; the entire groups' recordings being linked to online maps creating a unique collaborative response to the environment, documenting individual discoveries and routes that have been taken whilst exploring the city.

This presentation will reflect on these early project outcomes and discuss the application of this activity in further teaching and learning activities, residencies and potential partnerships with organisations such as the Worcestershire Canal Ring and local schools, creating maps that aim to promote creative events and encourage participation within the wider community.

**Keywords:** Maps, Collaboration, Partnerships, Illustration, Graphic Design, Locative Research, Locative Media

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### Rationale

Walking has long been associated with creative thought. Writers, Poets and Artists have referred to the process of walking as being a catalyst for their work. William Wordsworth was a prolific walker and Jean-Jacques Rousseau remarked, "I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs." (Solnit, 2002: p.14)

Artist Richard Long uses walking as both tool and format for his art and the writer Rebecca Solnit has dedicated much of her output to the relationship between art, walking, movement and maps. Derek Beres suggests that "...the ability to walk turned us into efficient communicators. As a social animal, the extra distance offered by bipedalism let us signal across large expanses. Creative means of communication developed. Walking and creativity developed together." (Beres, 2017)

'Walking' as a subject and a worthwhile act, rather than wasted time or a transition between one point to another, is celebrating something of a renaissance, with

numerous book titles on this subject, appearing over the recent years. The positive effects of encountering green (and grey) space have been discussed in both artistic and medical fields.

Maps are a common ground between our two disciplines; Illustration and Graphic Design. As Simon Garfield states, “Maps fascinate us because they tell stories.” (Garfield, 2013: p.13) The drawn characters and buildings, composition, shapes and signs can be decoded by the viewer into a tangible environment. It is a way of visually communicating a huge range of facts and implied meaning. How one reads a map is a personal action, much like how one reads an image. Different people may start to ‘read’ a map at different points and therefore take a different journey around that location. Resulting in a personal experience. Mapping is an exciting subject and this is why we wanted to collaborate on a project that allowed students to use walking and mapping within an exercise to promote investigation and creative thought.

‘Psychogeography’ is the study and documenting of (primarily) urban areas and has been practiced and developed as an act over many years by both writers, artists and thinkers in various arenas. It stems in part from the Parisian ‘Derive’ or ‘drift’ where Victorian-era thinkers would walk the streets of Paris and just ‘drift’ to see where their whims took them. These walks could be influenced by chance conversations in the street, geographical constraints such as street patterns and also the ‘feel’ of certain areas to the walker.

Later evolutions of this practice involved ‘The Situationist’ movement in late 1950’s and early 1960’s Paris. Among other things they wanted to chart areas of Paris – albeit not from a geographic perspective, instead they wanted to record (on maps and in writing) ‘zones’ of emotions or feelings encountered through walking.

In past projects this idea of the drift was utilised in applied projects for both Worcester City Council and Malvern Hills District Council.<sup>1</sup> The projects used a range of participants from different backgrounds to help record a range of ‘feelings’ in urban spaces. The resultant multimedia/mapped outputs and findings were then passed back to town planners and landscape architects. In Worcester, these helped planners justify improvements to aspects of the River Severn’s waterfront and public spaces – as part of the winning lottery bid that also funded the Diglis footbridge. In Malvern, the findings helped to support the ‘Route to the Hills’ project – a town walk from the railway station up through the historic town and on to the top of Malvern Hill. The video outputs and personal testimonies were documented on this interactive online site.

## **Process**

Google’s monumental project of mapping the entire globe has resulted in a valuable teaching and learning resource. Google Maps allow the viewing of a location in both a satellite and ‘street view’ format. The ability of the user to plot a route is what we utilised during our workshops. Coloured lines can be drawn on a map of the selected area to signify the intended route. So far, we have used different areas around the city of Worcester.

A start and finish can be indicated and the total length of the route can be calculated to create a realistic walking distance. Routes have been selected to provide students with as much visual stimulation as possible. Utilising the environment's history and idiosyncrasies is key. Worcester is fortunate to have a rich architectural history and the city's interaction with the River Severn offers images of boats, rowers, bridges and various natural elements.

The students walk the route, either following a paper map or using the Google Maps App on their phone. As they walk, they observe and record. How they do this depends on their discipline. Up until this point, we have worked with Illustration and Graphic Design students who (as would be expected) record visually, using sketchbooks, and cameras. But this activity could (and hopefully will) be extended to those who work with sound or write. Recording the sounds of the city and composing comments and poems could also form part of the group's output and highlight the main objective of this activity; to show how different people perceive the same environment in a personal and unique manner.

The map up until this point in the workshop is used as an instructional tool, a guide, but it then acts as the creative framework for displaying all the outputs. Digital photos, sound clips or text are uploaded and placed onto 'tags' at the corresponding locations. Drawings are easily digitized, either by scanning or photography. The map grows as more and more elements are added to it. Patterns are created. They show areas of interest and activity. Students made lots of work in some areas whilst other places on the map remain sparsely populated with outcomes. This in itself has provoked interesting debate amongst the students when we reviewed the maps. Students were able to view each other's work, observing similarities and differences in what was drawn or photographed and the different viewpoints that were taken.

The Google-Mapping workshop was embedded into both a level 4 Illustration module and a level 5 Graphic Design module. Students studying the Digital Illustration module were initially surprised to be told that for one of their assignments, they were to turn off the computer and walk around the city! Pen and pencil drawings were then used as a basis for a digital painting session and the student response afterwards was very positive. Drawing and Illustration as a discipline can be a rather solitary activity, so to walk and record in small groups and to then 'exhibit' the work as a collaborative artwork, helped students explore their Illustration practice. Level 5 Graphic Design students engaged in a similar project on their Graphic Information Design module, where they walked a route around the University campus investigating typography and signage and developing their understanding of how both these elements combine to help people best navigate in certain spaces.

### **Limitations, Alternatives and Extension**

From carrying out these small-scale tests of the workshop we are now in the position to evaluate the basic format. One technical limitation of a Google Map, is that the scale of the uploaded image is rather small, not ideal when trying to showcase visual outcomes. The functionality of the map allows the viewer to click and close each tag as they investigate the map for themselves, and each creative 'output' is clear. However, due to the scale of the images, some of the detail within the artwork is lost

and so this rather conflicts with the aim of the project. There are however other applications where the display of the work is more suited to our desired output.

'ZeeMaps' has been used in another Illustration staff research project, titled 'Migrations'. Artists from around the world have been asked to send us an image of a bird on a postcard in response to the word 'Migration'. All these postcards will be included in a forthcoming Illustration exhibition during the Biennial of Illustrations Bratislava, Slovakia-a major picture book illustration awards event. On receipt of these various images of birds, Taz Lovejoy (our Lead Technician in the Creative Arts) investigated this application and began to create a world map, plotting the different origins of the postcards. The map is an evolving entity, a work in progress, and will continue to change and to tell the story of this project. Perhaps ZeeMaps will be utilised in our next Mapping workshop?

Outputs and content can be taken forward from these workshops into Google Earth. This enables a set of additional capabilities that bring the 2D work created into a 3D space. Functions such as the fly-through allow viewers to see the work animated in a linear manner as they follow the course of each walk. Videos of this journey can then be created with the different drawings, photos or comments, popping up as the viewer is taken around the route. The combination of 3D space and movement, provides something arguably more tangible than the flat map and could aid communication with a wider audience.

### **Further Application**

Student trips are a regular feature of the Illustration and Graphic Design degree programmes. Berlin and most recently Barcelona have been visited by the students. They take the opportunity to visit galleries and talk to Illustrators and Designers during these trips, but the exploration of these cities could be enhanced further by a Google Mapping workshop. By defining an optimum route for students to explore, the best balance of guidance and freedom may be achieved and hopefully the student experience will be improved.

Another potential application of this idea would be a residency, perhaps during a Worcester Week, which could also enable a collaboration between subject areas. Creative Arts, English, Geography, History and Archaeology could all potentially contribute content to a group map. The location is obviously key, but local areas such as the Wye Valley and Brecon Beacons may also provide the content that is applicable to this wide range of subjects.

This process could also be applied to engagement projects with organisations outside of the University. We are currently in discussions about one project as part of 'The Ring Arts Trail' in which we aim to engage community groups and possibly schools along the route of the Worcestershire Canal Ring. One idea is to create a single master map of the area in which we can add and accrue outputs from these groups such as; photos, drawings, comments, poetry and videos which match themes along the canal's route.

In addition, we've already worked with UW Sustainability when they hosted visiting American students whose focus was sustainable business practices in the city. The

'How to use Google Maps' guide we created, was then used by them to chart examples of high street sustainable business practices in Worcester on a Google Map that they could also use when back home.

## Conclusion

The potential of Google Maps and digital maps in general as a catalyst for collaboration and the contextualisation of creative outputs, is exciting. From participating in these workshops, Illustration students can consider this format and tool to record their location drawings and to create digital sketchbooks where they illustrate the attributes of different cities. Graphic Designers gain a range of transferable skills during these workshops, such as research and wayfinding. They also develop the ability to utilize Google Apps within their web design modules and to understand maps as a tool for visual communication.

Collaboration has been achieved here both on a staff and student level. Learning how to integrate this technology into the teaching sessions and how to then translate the potential to the students has been challenging at times, but has yielded some fascinating results. We propose to continue to use and develop this workshop format in our modules and Worcester Week activities with the aim of encouraging walking and the use of maps within our students' creative practices.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> These projects were designed and delivered by Andrew Stevenson and took place before the two authors began collaborating.