

**Teaching Mobilities *from where?* The disciplines, institutions, positionalities, and spaces
of mobility pedagogies**

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Abstract:

In this paper, we take seriously *where* we teach mobilities from and why that matters. ‘Where from?’ asks vital questions about how teaching and learning in mobilities are located in various traditions, spaces and bodies that shape knowledges co-produced in the classroom, application beyond it, and the future of the field more widely. Asking ‘where from?’ helps identify how our mobilities pedagogies are situated and the perspectives they emphasise and those they overlook. In this paper, we reflect on the creation and evolution of a mobilities course and confront its ‘where-ing’ in four ways, exploring the disciplinary, institutional, positionality and spatial influences on our pedagogies. We explore why these matter, strategies for negotiating them, and why asking ‘where from?’ is key for anyone teaching mobilities.

Keywords: mobility, geography, teaching, pedagogy, spaces, disciplines, institutions, positionality

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Introduction:

From where do we teach mobilities? Where do we come from? Where do we go? These are perhaps quite obvious questions that concern geographers who are interested in researching, writing and teaching mobilities. Mobilities has always had a crucial relationship to geographical thinking and emerged in relation to a ‘spatial turn’, wherein mobilities had come to mean movement over, through, in and of space itselfⁱ, to traverse complex material environments and social, cultural and political contexts and meanings. Tim Cresswellⁱⁱ has even suggested that mobility is equivalent to the way geographers think about the differences of space and place. Mobility may itself constitute a transformation of space. To move, suggested Doreen Masseyⁱⁱⁱ, is to fulfil all kinds of potential possible through relational ties and power geometries which unevenly position people in relation to their capacities to move. Moreover, mobility – whether larger scale or finer-grained - is sensuously embodied and ‘enfleshed’^{iv}: both felt and experiential.

In these different senses then, mobility bears a complex relationship to how geographers and others make sense of it - questioning from ‘where’ we understand mobility, from what context and from whose bodies? These ‘wheres’ shape our teaching and learning too, influencing the understandings of mobility we engage with and embody. To locate mobility within a field, like Geography, within specific institutions, within physical and digital university spaces, and within the bodies of particular teachers and students – what we could think of as ‘moorings’^v or as ‘whereings’ - makes a difference to mobility pedagogies.

In this article, we reflect on why it matters *where* mobilities is taught from, take seriously *where* we teach it from and consider the difference it makes to a final year Mobilities class we co-constructed almost ten years ago. First, we explore how the course was shaped by its disciplinary and institutional location on the Geography degree programme at Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL). Second, we examine which bodies, positionalities and knowledges we teach mobilities from, a ‘where’ that encourages a concern for the agendas around decolonising the academy and efforts to work more carefully with more differentiated understandings of bodies and mobilities. Lastly, we consider the locational setting of mobilities teaching and the affordances of learning spaces for engaging with mobility, even within the context of COVID-19. Together, these ‘wheres’ make up the geographies of our pedagogies and this paper demonstrates why they matter and deserve attention in teaching mobilities. In doing so, we draw on examples, illustrations and vignettes of how we negotiated these in our practice, that may prove useful for others.

From where? Disciplinary and institutional moorings

Mobilities is a lopsided scholarly field, with its research and teaching arms somewhat imbalanced. As a research field, mobilities functions as a well-established transdisciplinary field with associated organisations, journals, conferences and identities. As a taught field, however, mobilities is less well-established. It is rarely the parent topic of any degree programme, more commonly operating as a subdiscipline, a specialist option or key concept on a variety of other degree courses such as Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, Urban Planning, and Transport Studies.^{vi} This locates the teaching of mobilities in specific disciplines, filtered through their perspectives and positions to fit into particular curricula, aims, canons, and narratives. This may be thought of as a *disciplining* of mobilities and poses a pedagogical challenge. How do you *discipline* mobilities while still doing justice to the

depth, liveliness and transdisciplinary nature of the subject and the diverse forms of movements, bodies, knowledges and politics it is attentive to?

For us, these concerns became a question of what does it mean to locate mobilities in Geography and grappling with what a geographical class on mobilities would look like and do. And more specifically, what would a RHUL Geography mobilities class look like and how would it build on ideas about mobility students will have encountered elsewhere in their degrees? We saw the course as important to the academic life of a Geography department where mobilities (and movement, and circulation more broadly) compelled much thinking, research and teaching: from the circulation of print texts and biological materials; the practices of pilgrimage and spiritual mobility; the differential movements of the displaced; gendered mobilities of domestic violence; migration mobilities and remittance flows; fashion, creative and intercultural exchanges and practices. The module was also, in part, a reimagining of an earlier incarnation of ‘Geography of Mobilities’ taught by Tim Cresswell. To be sure, mobilities mattered to the academic context within which we were working and to separate off a class on mobilities from these broader concerns – even if that would have been simpler for students – seemed nonsensical. ‘Where’ we taught the class mattered.

And yet, at the same time, our ideas of a disciplinary home are changing. We could have been far more critical of how mobility has featured within Geography as itself a hugely problematic discipline, mobilised by what Natalie Oswin^{vii} has described as the ‘drives’ by ‘white supremacist heteropatriarchs to chart, map, exploit and extract from lands, peoples, flora and fauna previously unknown to them for their own early capitalist gain that set’ the discipline of Geography ‘into motion’, and embedded a ‘a disregard and disdain for difference and social justice into the fabric of geographical thought and practice’. The module now realises how Geography’s disciplinary travels have been rent from the (im)mobility

imperatives of empire, settler-colonialism and extractive, dispossessing and displacing neo-liberal capitalism.

Our module was designed to be team taught, reflecting a collaboration of more senior and junior staff, which also included postdoctoral fellows Anna Nikolaeva and Astrid Wood, and lecturer Emma Spence. Simon was then a PhD student and Peter was a relatively newly promoted professor who had taught a mobilities class before at Keele University. We were coming at Mobilities from different interdisciplinary angles. Astrid's expertise was in policy mobilities and transport infrastructure in South Africa. Anna's research has connections to Urban Studies and focused on airport design and management. Emma was interested in maritime mobilities of the super-rich. Simon's interests centred on running mobilities with orientations to active travel and sport studies fields. Peter's work connected mobilities thinking with that on security and space, particularly as related to matters of air and air-travel, emergencies and transition.

Trying to combine these quite distinctive empirical interests and conceptual backgrounds felt a little like trying to pin down (*discipline*) an object of concern which is implicitly about mobility and always moving. This can equally be a challenge to convey to student communities, who - at least within Geography - tend to be divided up into different sub-disciplinary camps (like urban geography, historical geography, cultural geography, political geography) and may be unused to working or thinking across disciplinary boundaries and with ideas that may feel diffuse and untethered. In other words, disciplinary identities and boundaries matter to students of mobility as well as teachers. It is *from where* they engage with the topic and how they see it fitting as a component part of their journeys to become, in our case, geographers.

The design of the course aimed to cut across and resolve these various messy problems that come with *disciplining* mobilities. We sought to retain the transdisciplinary entwinement of mobilities thinking but structured the module largely around different mobile spaces, as perhaps a distinctly geographical approach within which to host such intellectual eclecticism. This resulted in the module exploring mobilities through different modalities of movement, as a way to nod and play with more traditional transport geography language. This also helped get beyond the problems of conceptual abstraction some mobilities approaches have been accused of and try to move beyond oppositional constructions of mobilities research *and* transportation studies, but also cognate fields such as migration studies, tourism and transport history.^{viii} Mobilities work tries to bridge these different forms of mobility and the module's approach was to use modalities of mobility – railway mobilities; aeromobilities; automobilities, maritime mobilities - as important but different spaces, territories and technologies of mobility that move through specific sociomaterialities – the air, the land, the sea and so on. These mobile spaces situated our engagements with different disciplines and forms of movement that we encouraged in the class, grounding *where* we considered mobility.

Such grounding also lent itself well to engagement with policy and practice and not only to critique the design and consequences of policymaking. The term 'mobility' has gained purchase in policy, consultancy and advocacy worlds where transport or 'travel' may have been the go-to concepts before. This may be a consequence of capitalist logics colonising another word, but it does also mark some shifts in thinking within transportation and mobile communication industries, away from a techno-solutionist understanding of mobility as merely 'derived demand' or the technologies which afford it, that we hoped to engage students with. What's more, the module also explores how community and grassroots organisations, especially in the US, are developing their own notions of 'mobility justice'.

This is to realise and demand more participatory deliberation and decision-making in transport planning, and to recognise the complex consequences of urban and transport developments for differentiated, minoritized and marginalised communities. Such groups have largely been excluded from mobility capabilities by historical and structural inequalities and racism^{ix}. Confronting these aspects of mobility in the course draws on Geography's tradition as both an applied and critical discipline.

From *where*? Positionality, differential and 'just' mobilities

Perhaps the key aim of the module we have been describing – and possibly by implication towards mobility pedagogies - is an inculcation of a politics of mobility as both an empirical fact, a methodological imperative, and an analytical, conceptual approach that students might use and mobilise in their future careers. This has been complemented by more recent engagement within the class around 'mobility justice' but more centrally an understanding that mobilities are always differential. In this section, we outline how difference and positionality became core concerns in *where* we teach mobilities from.

This begins with our starting point as a teaching team and cohorts of students. Our engagements with mobility were largely from privileged social positions, situated from generally white and middle-class perspectives. As a discipline, Geography has a low Black Global Majority student and staff diversity, something recognised as a priority challenge by the department's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee^x. Throughout its various iterations, the course teaching team has always been white. RHUL's origins are as a Higher Education Institute for women of the middle classes, a legacy still apparent in its student diversity, with higher proportions of female students and lower proportions students from deprived communities^{xi}. The teaching team has reflected this too, although is gendered male in terms of total teaching contributions rather than headcount. And everyone in the course had the privilege of university education and the motility facilitated by such academic

standing. Understanding, questioning, and going beyond these perspectives has been a central and ongoing task of the course, inviting analysis and critique of our embodied knowledge and engaging with perspectives on mobility that begin from different starting points.

Mobilities thinking encourages researchers to look across different kinds of movements, moving bodies, and mobile perspectives, something we encouraged in the class, such as a focus on gendered, classed or racialised experiences of mobility. We also took seriously the contention that mobilities research should avoid romanticised portrayals of mobility as some kind of emancipatory, nomadic thought (a point geographers have long made ^{xii}), and always question assumptions of undifferentiated, universal experiences and conditions of mobility^{xiii}. Work within and underpinning mobilities research had almost always been concerned with this point, and the dangers of doing so – that by focusing on mobilities somehow the critical insights on who can and who gets to move, or not move, might be forgotten.

One approach to foregrounding this mode of thinking was Anna's idea of using scenes and hooks to open up the different discussions, themes and modes of mobility that mobilities helps draw together. For example, the opening example discussed in the very first session each year has been a protest that took place in the departures gate area of St Pancras International railway terminal in London ^{xiv}. The event was a protest organised by several migrant activist organisations, led by The London Latinxs where protestors glued themselves to columns, blocking passengers from reaching the immigration and security gates, and spilled blood on the floor while chanting "Borders kill". Students are invited to discuss and debate the events and their representation in imagery. In recurrent years students have, perhaps not knowing much about the event, been imaginative in making connections. Many can see that the protest was meant to evoke and critically consider wider anti-migration regimes. This includes those peoples and refugees seeking asylum and sanctuary in Europe who have taken extremely precarious and deadly journeys across the Aegean or

Mediterranean seas, or across the Alps ^{xv}. Disruption in one place of intense but broadly safe and privileged mobility from London to the continent of Europe was meant to raise awareness and dark juxtapositions of the precarious journeys of people often categorised as ‘migrants’, and international scales of migration mobilities. Different forms of mobility are therefore alluded to, and relationally connected. Just as the violence of mobility and border regimes on the *body* are transposed from one context to another. The simulated flood of blood on the floor of the terminal is meant as an allegory of those suffering in violence elsewhere.

Another favourite scene explored in the class is an image of the opening airshow of Liverpool Airport at Speke in the early 1930s. The photograph shows two fairly middle-class looking women – given their attire – almost lounging on the vehicle their heads turned upwards to the sky above perhaps expectantly^{xvi}, which illuminates various dimensions of air-travel and aeromobility. Of course, the image indicates the inter-connectivity of different modes of mobility and transport, representing an early and intimate relationship between flight and automobility. In this moment, the car becomes a kind of spectator technology, a comfortable perching point to the aerial action. Simultaneously, it is a cultural icon of personal autonomy and mobility, that may have been denied to the women that sat on it, but which would be promised in the figure of the aeroplane.

Such an image reminds us of the highly gendered nature of mobilities and provides something of an unusual if enigmatic image for students to explore. Asking students to relate to presumably quite privileged women attending airshows in the 1930s is not automatically all that easy. And yet – in turn – it is that strangeness of the event, and the simplicity with which it connects different kinds of mobility, which perhaps speaks. But as a “where from” gesture it moves beyond simply the differential mobilities we have already explored. We might not only ask ‘whose’ mobilities and histories of mobilities might we speak to, but

equally from where do we teach such a subject, from where might students and others be taught, and from where might they co-produce knowledge and interpretation of mobilities.

These are difficult questions to grapple with, but one starting point is the body. The women sitting on the car at the airshow of course inhabit and display bodies shown in the photograph. These are presumably quite able bodies, the women were able to climb their way onto the car's roof. Their bodies, in the posture of sitting on the car-as-chair, are also bedecked in 1930's outdoor coats and clothing that may belie a middle-class status. In short, when working through from where they are observing the airshow we can consider what bodies can and cannot do, what worlds and infrastructures and built forms, even material prosthesis such as clothing, as well as what social norms, codes of conduct, societal imaginations and ideals might enable and disable that movement too.

In many ways, though, this is a very discursive approach to mobilities and embodiments, and one that lacks sensitivity to our own (mobile) bodies as researcher, teachers and students. Indeed, in the space of the classroom (discussed below) running a quick experiment on getting the students to move, all kinds of gendered, raced and even classed cultural expectations may have been playing out in ways which were impossible to voice let alone feel comfortable debating. Mobilities research can certainly be accused of being a white supremacist discipline.^{xvii} There are very few Black authors writing within the field, and the network, centres and gravity of mobilities research has been, like other academic (inter)disciplinary structures, disproportionately centred towards the Global North/minority world, especially the UK, Northern Europe and North America, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Teaching mobilities research can and should pay closer attention to research and practice from outside of these contexts, and to explore mobilities as they are experienced by the global majority and, in places like Britain, minoritized ethnic communities.

While our own authority to steer a class such as this is massively challenged by commitments to decoloniality and diversifying mobilities teaching, which have been explored as the module evolved, there were ways that our own different authorities were brought into question by students within the neoliberal academy. As teaching at a university is commonly, and problematically, framed as the transfer of knowledge through hierarchies of knowledge, experience and ‘expertise’, some students pushed back at our team-teaching model. Our feedback reviews showed student concern not at the lack of global majority diversity in the teaching staff, but the lack of ‘senior’ or ‘professorial’ presence across all the classes. For example, some found it patronising for the context of climate change to be introduced by a female, early career member of the team in a session on low-carbon transitions, yet were inspired by the delivery of ethnographic work by another early-career female staff member. The departmental fidelity to student surveys meant that we were asked to look at how staff presence was apportioned to the module following this feedback. Highly indebted students with artificially constructed expectations of what and who their teaching should look like, be delivered by, and what authority and expertise is, is of course part of the discussion.

From *where*? Learning spaces and education settings

The where of teaching mobilities cannot but be shaped by the micro-geographies of the spaces, places and environment in which teaching happens. However, this *where*-ing is often in danger of being assumed away, perhaps by new-fangled digital methods of collaboration, remote participation – especially during COVID – or because it is seen as so mundane that it is ignored as a passive backdrop to learning and student engagement. Just as settings are not treated as neutral scenery in mobilities, we sought to work with the spaces and places of the module, engaging with them to promote the kinds mobilities thinking we hoped to in the class.

Where we do teaching can make a difference, in part because of the way we have to make moves to get to the classroom. The first few years of the module happened in an unusual setting, in an old Victorian building which used to house the University's swimming pool amid the woods that formed the pleasure grounds of the 19th Century campus. Indeed, the mobilities the campus afforded those students was interesting, differentiated and visual: male labourers were forced to move between parts of the campus in underground tunnels to avoid being seen. In our class, the students and staff could arrive at the building a little late and a little out of breath having walked up a wooded incline, sometimes slippery from rainwater and debris of pine needles and leaf-litter – or down it – to the building. We used this to make a point to our groups, even if the point may have been lost as so banal it wasn't worth talking about – that they had to move to get to class. If they were to understand the way mobility constituted the social or may be necessary to access important services – such as education^{xviii} - this was one very simple way to make sense of mobility as an everyday practice.

The room was often cold, but it was not the 'epitome of immobility'^{xix} either. It was a long and flat room, and sometimes used for theatrical performances in the evening. It encouraged us to think of teaching as an embodied, mobile practice. The room's flatness meant many students were too far away to hear us all that well or see the screen. In many ways it was a highly inappropriate room for more typical lecture-style engagements (and it has now been turned into a gym!). Our approach to this problem was simply to move. Some of us moved in ways to really get in the faces of distant students in a difficult room. We recalled a presentation given by Mimi Sheller at the AAG 2010 in Washington DC when she walked through the middle of the audience to grab their attention – the spectacle of mobile presentation. Although our confidence to do this was shaped quite a lot by our experience, language, and body language competencies. And while this helped some students engage

with the classes, as we discussed within the teaching team, it also meant turning our backs on some students and potentially intimidating and excluding others.

Settings and spaces also provided a useful context with which to experiment with mobile methodologies and approaches which encouraged students to work beyond individual and more passive classroom experiences. We encouraged the students to literally move around the campus and use those mobilities to develop a critical understanding of different kinds of research methods. In groups, students were assigned a mobile method (e.g. go-along interviews, mobile video ethnography, photo-diaries, GPS tracking etc) and an accompanying introductory reading. They were then tasked with devising a mobilities-related research question about campus they thought the method would be well-suited for, before briefly putting the method into practice and reflecting upon its value. The session ended with a presentation from all groups, reflecting on their method, which progressed into meaningful and critical discussion about the insights mobile methods help reveal, as well as their absences, exclusions, over-enthusiasms and supposed necessity^{xx}.

More recently, Saskia Warren's work on British Muslim communities has helped us develop a more critical perspective on these methods and putting them into practice beyond the classroom^{xxi}. Warren suggests critically reworking those 'mobile methods' which embark on approaches such as walking in participants' neighbourhoods and communities. For Warren, engaging with Muslim participants, some of whom may have experienced racist and anti-Muslim abuse and violence in those spaces, to participate in a walk-along interview intersected with those very experiences and expectations of space with fear and concern. A walk-along interview could make a participant feel conspicuous and vulnerable by the very practice of methods designed to be more sensitive to their lived experiences. The same could be said for researchers/practitioners. Today we can discuss how a politics of mobility is not just an analytical concept but one that needs embodying in research too. We encourage

critical reflection on mobile methods and discuss how students and practitioners should be sensitive to such issues, to their own and their potential participants' capacities to be mobile with methods, and therefore the need to pluralise the research methods we might too quickly reach for.

The kinds of remote working that were accelerated by COVID lockdowns, to a certain degree, suppressed some of this innovation as teaching moved away from the more obvious physical setting of the classroom. However, it has presented other opportunities to play and experiment with mobility and space. For some students, moving classes online into remote Teams session, replete with breakout rooms and a lot of different team collaboration tools, allowed them to experiment at being liberated from the classroom setting. When tasked with describing an experience of mobility, one student joined their group while on a walk. This illustrates the different engagement with mobilities that different educational spaces afford.

Another experiment from class further exemplifies this and helps explicate the limits of representations of mobility in different ways. Students were asked to simply take 30 seconds to move and were then posed the task of trying to explain what they did beyond the technical sense of their body's limbs having moved. The idea is to repeat Thrift's engagement with Ludwig Wittgenstein's formulation, 'what remains over from the fact that I raise my arm when I subtract the fact that my arm goes up?' ^{xxii}. In the space of the classroom, the experiment had been treated somewhat bemusedly by semi-embarrassed students as all kinds of social norms and codes of bodily presentation and self-consciousness play out. Some students found it difficult to get into the physical movement, doing it in front of their friends and in the space of the classroom was problematic. It exposes bodies to a kind of expression and visibility they are uncomfortable with. In a semi-private virtual setting, however, beyond our window-into their private spaces, their movements came alive a bit more. Many students moved out of the camera's view but one span in their chair, others did different circuits of

their bedroom; some jumped up and down. This spatial change also challenged students' capacities to talk about those more experiential, ineffable, and partly unconscious mobility issues. In person, they felt embarrassed talking about their embarrassment. And yet online, as a more individual activity and using Teams, many felt able to share their experience in the somewhat dry form of the chat text, but they actually did share, and described the difficulty of putting into text the motion of their experience and feeling of their mobility.

Conclusion: *Where-ing* Mobilities

In this paper we have explored the multiple - what we have called - 'wheres' involved in designing, running, and reflecting on a mobilities class taught within a British Geography department across a complex teaching team, diverse in experience and expertise, within a particular institutional setting, and with students who bring their own interests, life experiences, desires and fun – as well as some angst – to the pedagogical experience.

As we reflect on these 'wheres' and the way they locate, situate and in some ways hold down mobilities, we realise they might appear somewhat incongruous with a subject supposedly about movement and flow. But, of course, that has almost never been the point of mobilities research. Mobilities works through geographies, (re)making them, settling, slowing in spaces and places, not outside or above them. A consideration of *where* mobilities is taught from is vital in understanding how our pedagogies are situated and the perspectives, approaches and knowledges they emphasise at the expense of others. These are central in encouraging the understandings of mobility we aspire to, and in turn, affecting how students of mobility may put its thinking to work in policy, practice and society, as well as what future mobilities research and engagement it may inspire.

In these ways, teaching mobilities directly (re)produces the future of the field by engaging mobility-researchers-in-training in critical considerations of what mobilities research does,

who does it, how it thinks and what impact it can have. We see the question of ‘where from?’ as central to these considerations and foundational discussion points for mobility pedagogies. We hope the reflections offered here are valuable starting points for considering the *where-ing* of mobilities and how they play out in the classroom – conversations we hope continue.

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