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Gordon Waitt, Michael Adams, Jenny Atchison, Lesley Head, Michael Jones, Pat Macquarie, Katarina Saltzman, Gunhild Setten and Marie Stenseke

Hello Gothenburg! Hello Trondheim! This is Wollongong calling. Welcome to the Landscape Seminar Series. Great to see you!

The teleconference is now being applied in the broadband contexts of the minority world, or Global North[1], by both geography teachers and researchers as well as by conference and seminar organisers. The implications for how teleconference technology transforms physical distance has long been considered in relation to businesses (Rosetti and Surynt, 1985) and teaching (Sherry, 1996). Here, we consider some wider implications for geographical knowledge-sharing that arise from teleconference technologies on the basis of a seminar series on landscape research between nine scholars who are simultaneously located in Sweden, Norway and Australia. What are the implications of virtual travel for geographical knowledge-sharing? Does the teleconference provide a route that satisfies the desire to be physically co-present with peers, while at the same time offering emancipation from the tyrannies of physical distance in geographical knowledge-sharing? This article explores these questions in two sections. The first outlines the importance of intermittent face-to-face meetings in conveying geographical knowledge and describes the teleconference seminar context that encouraged us to think about the importance of physical propinquity. The second section discusses our experiences and reflections on the teleconference as a knowledge-sharing technology that transformed physical co-presence. We conclude by discussing the wider geographical implications of applying teleconference technologies.

The LSS: the importance of physical propinquity for geographical knowledge-sharing

Intermittent face-to-face meetings are fundamental to the professional social networks that convey geographical knowledge. The demand for physical travel in order to present ideas at a conference is often configured in academia as a social obligation of knowledge formation, legitimisation and dissemination. Conference-style travel to be physically co-present with peers is exemplary of what Urry (2003) termed the 'compulsion to proximity'.

Our argument draws upon three years of virtual

travel experience. Our Landscape Seminar Series (LSS) was initiated to allow us to grapple with complexities related to the contested notions of nature-culture-landscape, and the interface between landscape research and policy framing. Fundamental to the initiation of the LSS were pre-existing social networks – established through face-to-face meetings facilitated by the social networking of international conference travel, internationalisation programmes and visiting scholarship schemes. Several key players in the seminar series had already met face-to-face, shared experiences and established 'local' ties. Teleconference seminars were held approximately every four months from 2008 to allow researchers to present work-in-progress which reflected on the geographical contingencies of conducting landscape research.

At the flick of a remote control, teleconference technology compresses physical distance and crosses temporal boundaries. Landscape researchers come together on teleconference screens in Göteborg (Sweden), Trondheim (Norway) and Wollongong (Australia) when it is simultaneously 8am Central European Time and 6pm Australian Eastern Daylight Time. Sitting in front of the teleconference camera and television screen in our respective institutions, we find ourselves in three geographically disparate places at once. Each participant experiences some sense of being both 'here' and 'there'. The teleconference practice has given this group of landscape researchers a different spatial sensibility in knowledge-sharing. Drawing on our experiences of and reflections on the LSS, we consider the potential implications of the teleconference for the wider architectures of geographical knowledge. Our point is not to declare the end of conferences or seminars that bring geographers together physically. Rather, our concern is to explore the possibilities that teleconferences provide to extend, if not change, the ways scholars communicate, share knowledge and set research agendas.

Challenging the tyrannies of physical distance in geographical knowledge-sharing?

Among the strengths of teleconferencing revealed over the course of the seminar series was how it facilitated the desire among scholars for proximate social relationships. Postgraduate students and early career researchers in particular valued the chance to 'meet regularly', to 'get to know' scholars in the field and to engage in live discussions rather than solely within the pages of journals. Clearly, for postgraduates the teleconference is a fertile way to enrich the research process, enhance a sense of belonging to a research community and develop a level of familiarity and rapport with scholars and their work (Wenger, 2000). Furthermore, because of the burdens associated with the financial and temporal costs of travelling large physical distances, the teleconference offers greater flexibility in terms of attendance. Research communities that traditionally rely upon face-to-face interactions no longer need to equate close and collaborative working relationships with propinquity.

Equally, for those who travel to conferences, potency arises from tracing how the teleconference works in parallel with increased awareness of the 'travel burden' of carbon emissions (Shove, 2002). The consciousness of distance is heightened among many geographers in an era when the key means of national and international academic connection, air travel, is environmentally problematic. Developing carbon-reduced means of connection, such as the teleconference, are now high on academics' agendas. This is not to suggest that the teleconference is a replacement for physical travel. Indeed, the success of our network is partly due to intermittent in-person connections. Rather, the teleconference supplements and enhances the outcomes of scholarly air-travel, thereby arguably offsetting greenhouse gas emissions. The teleconference provides us with the possibilities to extract more academic value from each kilogram of carbon dioxide equivalent units through enabling the continuance of conversation. We are convinced that the LSS has not only enriched and encouraged a specialist research grouping in each domestic institution, but also facilitated the potential for international research collaboration in the future. Teleconferencing between spatially dispersed scholars engaged with the research of cognate specialists provides potentially exciting futures for sustaining alternative professional networks.

Yet, while the 'time-space compression' of teleconferencing has the potential to encourage more international cross-cutting seminar series and

research networks, arguably both structural constraints and the types of social relationships that teleconferencing enables may also undermine building such research networks. On the one hand, structural impediments of global broadband networks may make the spatial decentralisation of geographical knowledge from the Global North elusive. Even though teleconference technologies reconfigure time and space, the friction of limited technological capacity in various institutions of the Global South will inhibit their capacity to 'meet up' in a virtual seminar series.

Further, the frictions of language, sense and sensibilities may also operate as impediments. Not only are there the conventional language barriers to overcome, but also the teleconference is a weaker communication medium than face-to-face meetings for bodily idiom and sociality. Being brought together in a disembodied teleconference space is, as Larsen *et al*. point out, 'still not yet like face-to-face meetings' (2006, p. 39). It is a less favourable means through which to achieve a sense-of-place and learn more about someone besides their work. Working against the teleconference is tactile geographical knowledge that is only accessible through direct physical interactions and often provided through the conventional conference fieldtrip. The teleconference deprives scholars of the embodied geographical knowledge that is generated through experiencing the entangling rhythms that sustain place, including those sustained by driving or walking. There is no sense of the different pace of traffic flows or changing textures of the ground underfoot. Nor is it possible to be affected by smells, sounds, tastes, light or temperature. According to Edensor (2010), Smith *et al*. (2009) and Wylie (2005), these experiential learning attributes are the very qualities that make spaces come alive. In contrast, the rather disembodied qualities of the teleconference restrict sharing tactile geographical knowledge. And the knowledge shared from projects is often, at best, a representation of a representation.

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Equally, the type of sociability is restricted to professional knowledge-sharing practices. The teleconference meeting space is conducive to reconfiguring the subjectivity of the 'expert', through introductions, allocated speaking-time and facilities for electronically sharing presentations, slides and documents. However, it is impossible to have sustained eye contact or a private conversation, share a private joke, whisper a comment while someone is talking, taste each other's tea and biscuits or indeed sense anything beyond the confines of the camera lens and microphone. Hence, few opportunities are provided for the blurring between professional and social life. There are no 'off-screen' moments and few possibilities to describe aspects of life outside of the professional. The professional orientation of the tele-visual meeting space points to important questions about informal social relationships in sustaining geographical knowledge-sharing, making and dissemination. The informal spaces of the conventional conference are equally important in knowledge-sharing and making practices that bring together the personal and the professional. At some level, the time-space generated by the teleconference facilitates the performance of scholars as professional subjects, excluding possibilities to explore the importance of the personal in our research.

In response to our experience of these frictions, we implemented writing tasks that began to explore why, how and what we write as landscape researchers. While the language defaulted to English, intimate thoughts were shared among the network through email attachments and became the basis of several seminar discussions. Writing and talking about ourselves may initially seem self-indulgent. However, for those participants who had not met face-to-face this writing exercise became a strategy to help address how the teleconference worked against those intimate personal relationships normally associated with face-to-face interaction and the sociability of 'being there'. Sharing personal thoughts facilitated developing an emotional and bodily sensitivity to each other's work. The outcome was enhanced communication.

Conclusion

Teleconference technology makes possible sharing knowledge between spatially dispersed scholars in the Global North. Drawing upon reflections from the experiences of the Landscape Seminar Series

between scholars in Australia, Norway and Sweden, we have begun to think about the geographical implications of connecting through teleconference technology at planned meetings with disembodied others. The thrust of our argument is that the teleconference can enhance the sharing of geographical knowledge at a distance through the possibilities to co-ordinate a virtual co-presence and communicative travel between physical meetings. As evident in our seminar series, the teleconference has the potential to reduce the burden associated with greenhouse emissions of air travel. The reduced financial cost of virtual travel also facilitates participation. Hence, the teleconference has the potential to connect scholars at a distance.

Yet, infrastructure and bodily frictions may diminish the salience of how teleconferences can facilitate knowledge-sharing. Our argument is framed by the physical distance between Scandinavia and Australia combined with a position of affluence with access to teleconference technologies. Different kinds of distance would be experienced

by academics and communities with limited access to the necessary teleconferencing technologies, meeting places and broadband. Nevertheless, social network websites such as Skype are helping to erode the once substantial capital of teleconferencing facilities accessed normally through university campuses. Personal computers are already widely deployed in the Global North to 'log-on' to such social networking websites. However, again many individuals remain relatively immobilised by teleconferencing facilities offered by Skype, for instance, because personal computer and broadband internet access are a necessity to participate in the conversations and debates. And,

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personal computer and broadband access is uneven globally, nationally and regionally.

Furthermore, meetings mediated by the teleconference alone may not facilitate ongoing conversations simply because of the type of socialities involved in communication. Alone, the teleconference operates against the possibilities to build up intimate knowledge of individuals because of the lack of 'off-screen' moments. Hence, sustaining the research network required the teleconference to operate in combination with a mix of physical travel, emails, shared documents and phone calls. At this point it is crucial to again acknowledge the importance of face-to-face contact in initiating our own teleconference seminar series and a shared interest in how the concept of 'landscape' can urge understandings that speak to politics and policies. There are also limits to how many people can actively participate in a seminar conversation. The physicality of the teleconference experience determines its workability. Six to twelve people appears optimal; however, this could easily be scaled up for a keynote lecture at a conference. Alert to the implications of employing teleconferencing technologies, we would encourage other geographers who are physically distanced to deploy virtual travel in the process of knowledge-sharing as a means of enhancing conventional forms of communication.

Note

1. Australia and New Zealand are included in the minority world, often termed the Global North, meaning the wealthy developed nations located mainly (but not exclusively) in the North, as opposed to the Global South, comprising the less developed and poorer nations located mainly in the South, a distinction derived from the Brandt Report of 1980 (Rigg, 2007).

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Gordon Waitt, Associate Professor, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia (email: *gwaitt@uow.edu.au*).

Michael Adams, Associate Professor, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia (email: *madams@uow.edu.au*).

Jennifer Atchison, Senior Research Assistant, Honorary Fellow, Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research, University of Wollongong, Australia (email: *jennya@uow.edu.au*).

Lesley Head, Professor, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia (email: *lhead@uow.edu.au*).

Michael Jones, Professor, Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway (email: *Michael.Jones@svt.ntnu.no*).

Pat Macquarie, PhD student, School of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Wollongong, Australia (email: *pcm496@uow.edu.au*).

Katarina Saltzman, Senior Lecturer, Department of Conservation, University of Gothenburg, Sweden (email: *katarina.saltzman@gu.se*).

Gunhild Setten, Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway (email: *Gunhild.Setten@svt.ntnu.no*).

Marie Stenseke, Professor, Department of Human and Economic Geography, University of Gothenburg, Sweden (email: *Marie.Stenseke@geography.gu.se*).