



# Organic Public Geographies and REF Impact

Ian Cook et al.<sup>1,2</sup>

Associate Professor of Geography  
College of Life & Environmental Sciences  
University of Exeter  
I.J.Cook@exeter.ac.uk

---

How can I write about liking the UK Research Excellence Framework's (REF's) new emphasis on 'impact' (see Rogers et al., this issue), and looking forward to its increased importance in the next REF? The REF's new 'impact' agenda opens up considerable potential for less traditional research to be officially valued. I agree with Rachel Pain et al. (2010, 185) that it "presents radical scholars with new opportunities to exceed the apparent limits of the audit game, in ways that allow geographical research to contribute to wider struggles to social change". 'Follow the things' fits this description. It's a radical research and public pedagogy project. It taps into public curiosity about 'where stuff comes from', and draws into its processes a proliferating genre of non-academic 'follow the things' work, including documentary films, art work, journalism and activism. Its intellectual / political purpose is to critique the fetishism of commodities, to show abstract relations between things as social relations between people (Harvey, 2010). Its pedagogical/political purpose, within and beyond academia, is to encourage critical thought, conversation and 'do it yourself' research that enables diverse people to follow their own things, consider the social relations and trade (in)justices in the lives of those things, and then to share, discuss and perhaps be activist with their findings (Cook et al., 2007a; Cook and Woodyer, 2012).

I initially thought that the trade justice activism 'shopping' site I run (followthethings.com) might be a good REF impact case study. However, while



<sup>1</sup> Published under Creative Commons licence: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works

<sup>2</sup> This is a 'nom de plume' used by Ian Cook in his 'solo' writing, to acknowledge the fact that he never works alone (see Cook et al., 2008).

there was plenty of Google Analytics data on hits, bounce rates, and so on, none of this showed that the site impacted on anyone's understandings or practices. I was asked about the work that was behind it, and ended up talking about 20 years of disparate, often 'under the radar' projects. What came together in that conversation was a longstanding 'follow the things' research project that could be evidenced by work produced by some collaborators and reflective letters from others. When this project was in its infancy, I had been warned that "for career as well as the advancement of the School it is important not to be too distracted with engagement with non-academic audiences" (in Cook et al., 2007b, 4). Now, with the REF's new and emerging focus on impact, all of this work may at last be 'officially' valued.

When you publish academic work and make it freely available online, people read it and get in touch with you asking if you'd like to take part in work they're (thinking of) doing. So you end up doing all kinds of unexpected things. This way of working is a core principle of 'organic public geographies' (Fuller and Askins, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2012). And it involves writing critical, radical, scholarly papers that are both publishable in academic journals and books, and accessible to more than academic audiences – like school teachers, journalists, filmmakers and artists: the people who make and use the work you're researching. This is not the kind of "unidirectional knowledge" transfer that aims to make clear interventions in public debates (Pain et al., 2010, 185). It's the kind that has critical pedagogy at its heart, that treats knowledge as "emerg[ing] only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1996, 52-3). Here, as Rich Heyman (2010) argues, academic writing should not be treated as the end point of research. Instead, it should aim to encourage research and conversation to continue beyond publication by offering its readers, for example, catchy and surprising narratives to engage with, unheard voices to listen to, unfamiliar concepts to use, tricky problems to think through, new skills to learn, and intriguing detective work to do (Cook and Woodyer, 2012).

My concern about the REF is that, while critical pedagogy-ready 'outputs' may be publishable, they are not necessarily REFable. Hawkins et al. (2011) was my/our attempt to get on paper a vivid sense of how "effective knowledge production is a ... diverse and porous series of smaller transformative actions that arise through changed understanding among all of those involved" (Pain et al., 2011, 187). It details much of the work that could form the basis of an impact case study, and outlines how my research became drawn into geography teacher education and curriculum development in the UK. This started to take shape after, it now seems, two short, academic 'follow the thing' papers on art and critical pedagogy (Cook et al., 2000; Angus et al., 2001) were made freely available online. These generated some unexpected contacts and invitations that I, and then we,<sup>3</sup> followed up. Quite quickly, we found ourselves participating in ongoing

---

<sup>3</sup> In particular, PhD student Helen Griffiths and her co-supervisor James Evans.

processes of teacher education and curriculum reform in the UK that were based on more or less the same pedagogical principles and academic literature that we were using (Griffiths, 2010). That 2011 paper wasn't our reflection on this work. We weren't its authors. We wanted the people we'd talked to and worked with to be authors with us. Twenty three people, altogether. My role was to instigate, orchestrate and edit that paper, to everyone's satisfaction. It would comprise short sections each written by one person. What each of us had to say was equally important.

That paper didn't come to any conclusions; say what its contribution was to the literature; or make any recommendations for future work. It's quite difficult to say what it is 'about', even. To repeat Rich Heyman's phrase (2000, 299), it deliberately kept "the problematics of knowing beyond the end of writing". Its readers were positioned as co-learners with, not consumers of, knowledge. They had a job to do, to work with, and make their own sense of, what we'd written, how it was organized, their own perspective on the ideas, and what they might want to say as the paper's 24th co-author. Not surprisingly, however, while the 'impact' work it described could be REFable, the paper itself almost definitely could not. The problem for journal referees and REF assessors is that this kind of paper can be difficult to know what to do with. One journal referee said that it looked like it had been thrown together at the last minute. (It had taken months to get together and get right!) Another said that a busy academic wouldn't have time to work out what it was about. We should make that clear from the beginning. For the REF, it is probably difficult to see how this is 'my' paper or how, exactly, it comprises 'research'. Submitting this as a REF publication may be too risky. It could 'go either way'. Another multi-author paper is likely to be a safer bet because it is written with a single voice (Cook et al., 2013): not, in this case, eleven voices in conversation, although that was how it was produced.<sup>4</sup>

The safest (and perhaps best) REF papers are single-authored, based on substantial (ideally funded) research, and clearly state their purpose and contribution. They're like a great lecture by a persuasive speaker who leaves you with a rich and powerful understanding of something. You might be moved and convinced by their argument. They have theoretical ideas and evidence to bolster their case. It's so clear. It might change the way you think about something. But, clarity isn't the only way to make an impact. Think, instead, about a great workshop, which a diverse collection of fascinating people attend, where everyone speaks, where people share different experiences and perspectives, where everyone listens as much as they speak, where new understandings develop that become richer and more complex through conversation, where people still disagree but can appreciate their differences, and some keep in touch afterwards, maybe to work together on related projects, or continue those conversations with other people on other occasions. That's a much more diffuse appreciation of 'impact'. And the REF

---

<sup>4</sup> See <http://foodculturalgeographies.wordpress.com>

can legitimate and encourage this kind of collaborative work through its impact agenda. The problem, as I see it, is a longstanding and entrenched caution over REFable publications. This seems to be much more conservative and stifling of radical / critical geographies.

## References

- Angus, Tim, Ian Cook and James Evans. 2001. A manifesto for cyborg pedagogy. *International Research in Geographical & Environmental Education* 10, 195-201.
- Cook et al, Ian. In press. Afters: 26 authors and a ‘workshop imagination geared to writing’. *Cultural Geographies*.
- Cook et al, Ian. 2001. Social sculpture and connective aesthetics: Shelley Sacks’s ‘exchange values’. *Ecumene* 7, 337-343.
- Cook et al, Ian (2008) Writing Collaboration: a Work in Progress. <http://writingcollaboration.wordpress.com> (last accessed 20 June 2013).
- Cook, Ian, James Evans, Helen Griffiths, Rebecca Morris, Sarah Wrathmell et al. 2007a. ‘It’s more than just what it is’: defetishising commodities, expanding fields, mobilizing change. *Geoforum* 38, 1113-1126.
- Cook, Ian, Helen Griffiths, James Evans, Alice Williams et al. 2007b. Making the connection: confusing research, administration and teaching in public geographic practice. *Seminar Given in the Department of Geography, Liverpool University*, 7 February 2007.
- Cook, Ian, Peter Jackson, Allison Hayes-Conroy, Sebastian Abrahamsson, Rebecca Sandover, Mimi Sheller, Heike Henderson, Lucius Hallett, Shoko Imai, Damian Maye and Ann Hill 2013. Food’s cultural geographies: texture, creativity and publics. In, Nuala Johnson, Richard Schein & Jamie Winders (eds.), *A New Companion to Cultural Geography*. Oxford: Wiley, pp.343-354.
- Cook, Ian and Tara Woodyer. 2012. Lives of things. In, Eric Sheppard, Trevor Barnes and Jamie Peck (eds.), *The New Companion to Economic Geography*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Freire, Paulo. 1996. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Fuller, Duncan and Kye Askins (2010) Public geographies II: being organic. *Progress in Human Geography* 34, 654-667.
- Griffiths, Helen. 2010. *Engaging Students as Citizens and Consumers in New School Geographies*. PhD Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Exeter.
- Hawkins, Harriet, Shelley Sacks, Ian Cook, Eleanor Rawling, Helen Griffiths, Di Swift, James Evans, Gail Rothnie, Jacky Wilson, Alice Williams, Katie

- Feenay, Linzi Gordon, Heather Prescott, Claire Murphy, Daniel Allen, Tyler Mitchell, Rachel Wheeldon, Margaret Roberts, Guy Robinson, Pete Flaxman, Duncan Fuller, Tom Lovell and Kye Askins. 2011. Organic public geographies: 'Making the Connection'. *Antipode* 43, 909-926.
- Heyman, Rich. 2000. Research, pedagogy and instrumental geography. *Antipode* 32, 292-307.
- Harvey, David. 2010. *A companion to Marx's Capital*. London: Verso.
- Rogers, Amanda, Christopher Bear, Mia Hunt, Sarah Mills and Rebecca Sandover. 2013. Editorial Introduction: the Impact Agenda and Human Geography in UK Higher Education. *ACME* (this issue).