

Title: Wayfaring in the digital age: an innovative framing of researcher positionality

“My giant goes with me wherever I go.” (Emerson, 1841, p.36)

American essayist [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) (1803–1882) bemoans the fact that, when travelling, we cannot help but bring ourselves– our ‘giants’ – with us. He describes crossing the ocean and waking up in Naples only to find “the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from” (1841, p.36). Poor old Emerson, one might say, but what does this have to do with educational research?

As a PhD student I have encountered a similar problem. As qualitative researchers, once we arrive in a research setting, how can we escape the presence of ourselves and generate objective data? And the best answer I have come up with is this – we cannot.

In other words, I always bring my own giant to the setting. And this being the case, I had better find a way of accounting for my giant’s looming presence.

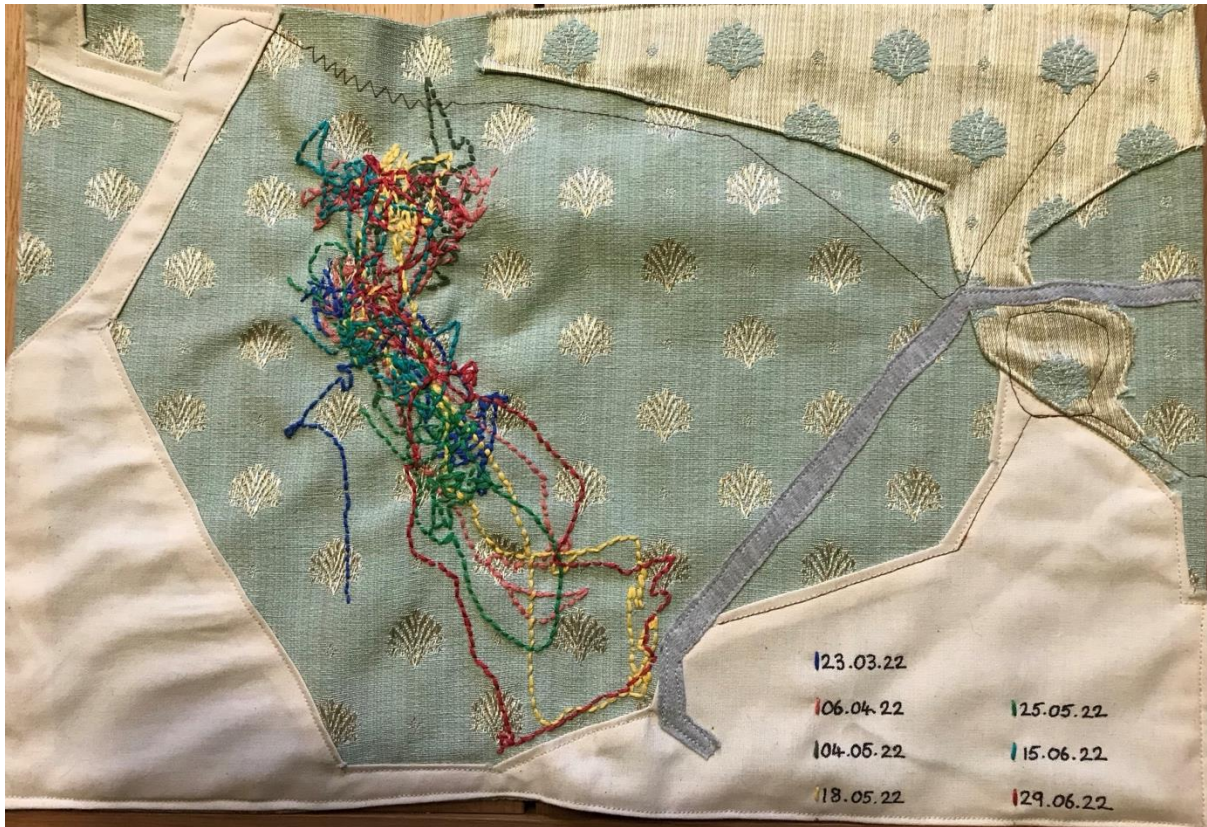
My doctoral research setting is a forest school. Forest school is a long-term outdoor woodland-based children’s education programme which encourages curiosity and independence (Harris, 2021). As you might imagine, it is a complex site for study. As a participant-observer in the woodland space, I often set out to observe *this* group of children, or *that* activity, only to find myself distracted and waylaid, rapidly forgetting whatever I had planned to record. I began to wonder whether my data could possibly be worth anything at all when I was clearly so very involved in its generation.

I found a useful way forward in the work of Ellingson and Sotirin (2020), who propose the concept of *data engagement* rather than data generation. In this model, data are made (not found), assembled (not collected), dynamic (not complete/static). Accepting that I was an entangled part of the dynamic data that I was generating, I came up with a new way to record my engagement.

I drew upon British anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2016) concept of wayfaring to describe my movements at forest school. But how to record this haphazard journeying? As a runner, I was familiar with the concept of creating digital art with smart watch technology (check out the hashtag #StravaArt on the X (Twitter) app for some creative examples of this). Perhaps my meanderings around the forest school site could be captured as a sort of digital wayfaring line?

And so, over seven separate visits to the forest school site I tracked my wayfaring around the site using the Global Positioning System (GPS) technology in my watch. Abstracting the raw data from my sports watch, the digital lines of travel (representing my muddy, entangled, traipsing through the undergrowth) generated a clean, linear trace of my movements around each session. I used this data to stitch a ‘more-than-digital’ map which I made from scraps of fabric, as seen below.

Figure 1: *the ‘more-than-digital’ scrapmap*



The physical sewing process caused me to consider how the forest school site, rather than being an inert landscape or backdrop, acted powerfully upon me and guided my movements around the site. Oddly barren areas where children and adults did not tend to linger were hastily crossed with a quickly stitched line. The area around a dangerous fallen tree was never ventured into, and the fabric remained untouched.

I presented my researcher-wayfaring data, with the scrapmap attached, at the BERA 2023 conference. I observed delegates tracing my hand-stitched lines with their fingers, following my wayfaring tracks through the forest. As with all data, the task is to communicate meaning to others involved with and/or invested in the research context. The creation of the physical map, I hope, allowed me to do just that; to share in a visual and tactile manner how I inhabited the forest school.

My work is situated in the theoretical fields of posthumanism and new materialism (Braidotti, 2019). These approaches reject traditional divides between human-material, subject-object and researcher-researched. What, then, could other researchers take away from my approach?

First, posthumanism and new materialism encourage a creative approach to data engagement, seeking insights from beyond traditional humanist research paradigms. A recent [BERA article](#) uses this lens to examine the sensorium and physical experiences of schools (Page & Sidebottom, 2022).

Second, this approach has implications for researcher positionality. Researchers may no longer hide behind a cloak of objectivity. Making this map-artefact allowed me to better understand my own entanglement in the research activity. In other words, it allowed me to both know and show my 'giant', rather than trying to hide him. I hope Emerson would approve!

Joanna Hume received the BERA Annual Conference 2023 Best Poster Prize for the paper ‘The “more-than-digital” scrapmap: Exploring the generative possibilities of digital data in outdoor contexts (from nature entanglement via digital abstraction to material artefact)’.

Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge* (1st edition). Polity.

Ellingson, L. L., & Sotirin, P. (2020). *Making Data in Qualitative Research: Engagements, Ethics, and Entanglements* (1st edition). Routledge.

Emerson, R. W. (1841). *Emerson’s Essays: The First and Second Series Complete*. Lulu.com.

Harris, F. (2021). Developing a relationship with nature and place: The potential role of forest school. *Environmental Education Research*, 27(8), 1214–1228.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2021.1896679>

Ingold, T. (2016). *Lines: A Brief History* (1st edition). Routledge.

Page, D., & Sidebottom, K. (2022). The sensorium and fleshy schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(4), 771–784. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3793>