

# Walks and Wonders (based on what the “number” commands us)

Yanru Zou

Numbers are so powerful, as the exhibitions reveal. They represent all corners of our lives, showing how deeply we are affected by numerical measures. As accounting faculty members working with our international accounting students, we discussed how numerical indicators shape our health and accountability bodies, the soaring property market, and the despair and anxiety triggered by everyday competitive rankings and performance measures. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner<sup>1</sup> describes this as the “dark” side of a neoliberal society, where quantification plays a major role.

I strongly support exploring and engaging more with these exhibitions to bring discussions alive in my daily classroom teaching. However, sometimes I also wondered, beyond being a visual bystander, whether more embodied participation might be useful, helping students pay attention to their surroundings, move around and experience the spaces where we live, work and study.

After a hectic semester, some postgraduate students and I finally found a brief gap between exams and future concerns. We decided to leave the classrooms and take a walk together to celebrate the end of the teaching year on a summer day.

On 12 August 2025, I walked with the 5 postgraduate students. Instead of going somewhere remote, we followed our everyday path near the campus. But this time, we let numbers guide us.

Using a local guide that marked the bridges along the River Kelvin with numbers, we agreed not to walk randomly but to follow the numbered signs as our path.

The walk lasted for a couple of hours. Time felt slow. It seemed as if something was always happening along the path, guided by the stand-still numbers. I was lucky to have some of the participants’ original words as their reflections. For me, these accounts went beyond the surface of the numbers on the map, bringing them to life in everyday use and interpretation. One of the participants recalled:

*“This journey had no formal lesson, and there was no destined goal to claim, unlike our ILOs (intended learning outcomes) in everyday study. It was not a class, nor an extracurricular club activity, but rather an experiment, both gentle and profound. We set off from the familiar learning hub and stepped into our city’s lesser-known quiet spaces. From the narrow paths, we wandered deep into the woods, crossed the bridges and passed beneath the carved stones along the river until reaching the Botanic Gardens.*

*The afternoon was woven through with the golden sun. The air was tender. We somehow shared a bright and uplifted energy – perhaps through a simple collective act of walking with one another. Does our walk release something happy inside our bodies and blood? Maybe. Our conversations flowed like intersecting streams, natural and*



Photo 1: Numbered stops along the river. This photo is credited to me

clear: we spoke of rental pressures, some were anxiously waiting for the prospects of the job market, and we shared the culture shock and loneliness of living in Britain too. We spoke of now, of the time to come, and what we have gone through over the year. Each topic was touched upon lightly, yet none felt shallow. We seemed all like strangers in a city unfamiliar to us. However, during the hours of our walks, every single word grew soft and true. We shared the breath of our walk, settling slowly into the quiet warmth of trust and closeness.”

I have walked this path hundreds of times over the years while working at the university. Yet this summer, the walk felt less familiar. I was facing eviction from my rented flat due to the rising rents and competitive housing offers. This experience left me feeling unusually uprooted and estranged. Nevertheless, having promised the group of students to organise the walk, I forced myself to follow the numbers suggested by the map and walk along with several companions. Through their eyes, life revealed new insights.

We all stopped in front of a tree. One of the participants pointed out a tiny bird nest nestled among the branches. It was small, with an umbrella-like shelter above the wooden chair. In Glasgow where it always rains, the nest’s warm red shade seemed to open its wings and provide tremendous protection for the little birds. Everyone seemed intrigued by this cute, interesting installation. When I was able to hear what they thought at the scene, I gained a deeper understanding of their inner desires. One of the participants recalled:

*“I remember a bird’s nest installation perched on a tree. It drew our attention and called the whole group to pause and wonder. Like a miniature sculpture, this intricately made handcrafted art reminded me of a video I once saw on YouTube: a group of high students spending weeks building wooden birdhouses, drawing plans, sawing wood, assembling, painting, and waiting for the paint to dry. In my own upbringing, we might have done crafts like that in kindergarten, but soon afterwards, it almost completely vanished in later schooling. However, I do remember that in the middle school,*

*on my way home after class, I often saw an old man in a corner of the sports field making kites by himself. Every dusk, he was there, flying a kite soaring high. That image suddenly returns to me now, a person quietly devoted to a simple task, day after day. And in that persistence, something light slowly grows weight.”*

This is only a fleeting moment in our walk. While we encounter and experience despair and stressed caused by many quantified measures, can numbers do something good? I hope so. Over time, these fleet moments led by numbers flow into our inner hearts, carrying memories of warmth and connection. Educationist Jan Masschelein<sup>2</sup> promotes the idea of a “poor pedagogy” as a way of e-ducating our gaze. In his words, e-ducating the gaze is not about obtaining a liberated or critical view, but about liberating or displacing our view (p.43). Therefore, paying attention or being truly attentive, becomes the core of education. These exhibitions together are powerful visual forms that disrupt and dislocate us; they certainly achieve the goal of weakening us in a world dominated by quantification. I felt unarmed in front of the screen of these photos and images, to the extent that we all recognised and experienced some form of numerical measure in our own life. I hope that one day I can share a walk with our students at these exhibitions beyond the classroom, and create our own accounts of a world where numbers e-ducate us.

<sup>1</sup> Ortner, Sherry B. «Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties.» *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 1 (2016): 47-73.

<sup>2</sup> Masschelein, Jan. “E-ducating the gaze: the idea of a poor pedagogy.” *Ethics and education* 5, no. 1 (2010): 43-53.



Photo 2: Bird’s shelter. This photo is credited to me.