



REVIEW

Taking academic skills for a walk

Dixon, D. J. (2024). *Walking tours for academic skills: London: Introducing academic skills for university*. Independently published. ISBN 9798882829024

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I have walked across the Millennium Bridge countless times, yet until I found myself standing there with David Dixon's *Walking Tours for Academic Skills: London* in hand, I had never looked down to see the miniature artworks painted on discarded chewing gum. On a route dominated by St Paul's Cathedral, the book intentionally draws the eye away from the monumental to focus on small details. This shift in perspective perfectly captures Dixon's premise that 'the world outside the classroom presents an incredibly rich and almost untapped variety of stimuli' (p. 7). Designed to introduce academic skills to university students, the workbook harnesses these stimuli by moving academic skills out of the classroom and into the streets, teaching students to look more closely, read more deeply, and think critically. Across six walks of varying lengths, the book places criticality and memorability at the heart of the learning experience. Walking itself becomes a compelling spatial metaphor for the curiosity and attentiveness that should underpin academic study.

The walks bring this metaphor to life by asking students to engage physically with the city. By completing the walks, students begin to view the places, histories, and communities around them as part of their learning rather than simply as a backdrop to study. A walk through Bloomsbury, for instance, presents the area as both a shared public knowledge space and one of London's historic intellectual centres. Several walks invite students to take

photographs, asking them not only to notice their surroundings but also to document and reflect on their observations. The workbook therefore does not simply relocate academic skills teaching outdoors: it uses students' encounters with the city to make critical observation and reflection more tangible.

In an increasingly crowded university curriculum, learning developers might understandably question whether students and tutors can dedicate several hours to a walking tour when the same concepts could be introduced in a shorter classroom session. The walks, however, create forms of engagement that would be difficult to reproduce in a classroom. This alternative mode of learning is particularly relevant given sector-wide concerns about students' sense of belonging. While this has improved in recent years, the 2026 HEPI and *Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey* found that just 20% of students 'agree strongly' that they feel a sense of belonging at their institution, suggesting that this remains an area requiring attention (Neves et al., 2026, p. 35). A classroom-based workshop might efficiently introduce concepts relating to essay structure or referencing, but place-based activities provide opportunities for students to engage with their surroundings and with one another in ways that extend beyond the classroom. Such activities cannot in themselves address the complex factors that shape students' sense of belonging. They may, however, create shared experiences that build connection at a point when the university and the wider city may still feel unfamiliar.

The workbook's engagement with place is particularly effective when activities require students to work together. The book is at its strongest, and often at its most enjoyable, when students are encouraged to ask one another questions, share interpretations, and construct meaning from their surroundings. Dixon's approach aligns closely with an academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998), positioning knowledge not as a set of decontextualised study skills but as a socially situated practice developed through interaction with texts, places, and other people. For example, activities that use historical plaques to prompt deductions about the area illustrate how academic enquiry can become a shared act of interpretation.

Not every activity makes equally effective use of the urban environment. The fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises, for instance, feel less closely connected to the rich stimuli of the walking routes. This is not merely because they could be completed more conveniently in a classroom, but also because they highlight a tension within the workbook between an exploratory



pedagogy, in which students construct meaning through collaborative observation and interpretation, and a more traditional model in which academic skills are presented as discrete conventions to be practised. Although these activities may provide useful opportunities for consolidation, they make less use of place as a learning resource than the workbook's more distinctive enquiry-based activities.

The value of Dixon's enquiry-based approach becomes especially apparent when the workbook uses the city itself to engage students with difficult histories. Activities addressing the 2017 London Bridge terrorist attack and the slave-trade investments from which Thomas Guy profited encourage students to reflect on how London's history shapes how places are understood and remembered today. Although six relatively short tours can cover only so much, there is scope to further develop this critical perspective. The different routes pass close, for instance, to the Wiener Holocaust Library in Bloomsbury and the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho. Engaging with sites such as these could build on the workbook's exploration of difficult histories by prompting further questions about whose stories become visible in urban space, whose remain hidden, whose lives are commemorated, and whose voices are marginalised. For practitioners adapting this model, such questions offer a means of extending the workbook's pedagogy of noticing into a more sustained critical examination of how local histories are represented and remembered.

Alongside these questions about how London's past is remembered and represented, walking the routes revealed both the opportunities and uncertainties of using a living city as a learning space. The rhythms of city life inevitably shaped the experience. Some of the workbook's most effective activities required students to seek out easily overlooked details, such as the chessboards in Russell Square and the decorative fish on Fishmongers' Hall. The city, however, is not a controlled classroom. While waiting for the clock on the Spirit of Soho mural to strike the hour so that I could watch Karl Marx take a mechanical sip of Coca-Cola, I discovered the mechanism was broken. This unpredictability is inherent in working within a living urban environment, but it is also part of what makes the tours so engaging.

Realising these opportunities also requires attention to both the workbook's design and the practical demands of the routes. Using the A4 workbook on busy streets proved somewhat cumbersome, and I would have welcomed a more portable version. Clearer signposting might also be helpful for a small number of activities. Locating the foundation stone for Vintners'



Hall, for example, required an internet search because it is situated on the bridge opposite rather than on the building itself; if anyone had been watching the CCTV, they must have been quite confused by what I was looking for. Reference photographs in the answer section could help students verify that they have located the intended feature, although this would need to be balanced against the workbook's exploratory ethos. Some practical uncertainties will inevitably remain, so practitioners would benefit from completing each route in advance to check directions and identify potential barriers to participation.

For learning developers based outside London, the routes will function as a model rather than as an off-the-shelf resource. The book's greatest value to the wider Learning Development community lies not in the routes themselves but in the pedagogical blueprint they provide. Practitioners can adapt these principles by asking students to interpret features of their local environment, compare accounts of a place, and consider how knowledge about places is produced and contested. The routes may be specific to London, but the underlying sequence of noticing, questioning, discussing, and interpreting offers a widely transferable model for academic enquiry.

Walking Tours for Academic Skills offers an imaginative approach to Learning Development. The walks were both instructive and genuinely enjoyable and, even as someone familiar with the city, I learnt a tremendous amount about London. By keeping the routes manageable, Dixon has created an engaging and practical framework for experiential learning that moves academic skills out of the classroom and into the streets. As universities look for ways to support belonging and meaningful learning beyond the classroom, Dixon's workbook offers a timely contribution. More broadly, it invites learning developers to reconsider where learning takes place, how students encounter academic practices, and how the environments surrounding our institutions might become resources for critical enquiry.

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