

Virtual Travel and Learning. Challenges and Perspectives for an *Extended Pedagogy*

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Abstract: The evolution of digital technologies and the spread of the internet have given rise to new experiential modes of travel, including virtual travel. This is an important area of research within the broader field of “travel pedagogy” (Raccagni, 2025). While virtual travel offers opportunities for knowledge and discovery, it is characterised by an absence of direct physical experience — a fundamental element of embodied and situated learning (Lo Presti, 2016). This limits sensory and contextual interaction with the environment and others, affecting the depth and evocative power of the experience. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the technological tools that facilitate virtual travel can enhance distributed learning when integrated into complex socio-technical networks. From this perspective, virtual “tourism” goes beyond simulating real environments to take on a world-making function, generating new relationships, encounters, and hybrid realities that transcend the traditional distinction between online and offline dimensions (Gerosa & Milano, 2011). This pedagogical configuration challenges isolationist paradigms of cognition and learning by proposing metadisciplinary reflection on the implications of co-evolutionary learning. This places dynamic human–technical artefact interaction at the foundation of an extended pedagogy (Kilteni et al., 2012).

Keywords: virtual travel; learning; physicality;



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1. Pedagogical Reflections on Travel

*If you don't take risks,
if you don't go out,
neither stories
nor journeys can begin.
(Riva, 2015, p. 99)*

Travel cannot be reduced to mere physical movement in space; it is a fundamental anthropological experience capable of profoundly affecting the construction of individual and collective identities (Riva, 2015). Travelling involves exposing

oneself to otherness, temporarily suspending the order of everyday life and opening oneself up to a state of “elsewhere” that enables the individual to redefine their relationships with themselves, others and the world. From this perspective, travel takes on symbolic and metaphorical value, making it a privileged means of mediating between time and space, past and future, subjective experience and the cultural dimension.

The link between travel and pedagogy is based on the fact that travelling provides a valuable *learning* opportunity. This is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but a transformative process involving the individual as a whole (Raccagni, 2025). Travel can therefore be interpreted as both an educational metaphor and a real pedagogical and training opportunity capable of activating reflective, narrative and transformative processes. In this sense, it encourages individuals to confront new contexts, different cultural codes and alternative lifestyles, thereby promoting cognitive and emotional decentralization processes.

This perspective is particularly relevant in adult education, where travel intersects with central pedagogical concepts such as experiential and informal learning (Zini, 2024). As Mezirow (2016) points out, learning can be defined as the process through which an individual uses a pre-existing interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of their experience, thereby guiding future action. Travel, being an intensive and often discontinuous experience compared to daily routine, is well suited to activating such processes of meaning restructuring.

Therefore, the path of self-knowledge and the critical reinterpretation of one’s personal history is always possible, provided the individual is willing to traverse it with reflective awareness. Adulthood is therefore not viewed as a static phase, but as a condition characterized by ongoing transitions. In this context, the opportunity to reinterpret one’s biography emerges in relation to the events, experiences, and contexts that shape the course of one’s life. In this context, categories and learning environments become more diverse, taking on multifaceted, hybrid and dynamic forms.

It is precisely this predisposition to critical reflection that enables travel to be considered within a broader educational context, focusing on the development of conscious global citizenship. As Morin (2004) states, education involves training individuals to engage with the complexity of the world in a critical and responsible manner, actively participating in the development of a global civilization. In this sense, travel is not only an individual experience, but also a pedagogical opportunity that prompts reflection on the relationship between the individual, otherness, and the wider world.

2. Travel Times: From the Past to *Virtual Journeys*

Throughout history, travel has taken many different forms and meanings, occupying both social and symbolic spaces in cultures. From antiquity to the present day, various forms of travel have played a role in shaping worldviews, educational practices and models of experience. Indeed, travel can be considered a paradigm of human experience in its own right (Raccagni, 2025, pp. 55–81).

In classical antiquity, the Homeric journey is an archetypal example of physical and symbolic crossing, where movement coincides with the formation and transformation of the individual. Similarly, religious travel and pilgrimage have historically embodied a dimension of spiritual quest and purification, while thaumaturgical travel

has always been configured as an itinerary primarily oriented towards care and healing. Other forms include the journey of expedition and conquest, linked to territorial expansion and domination, and the cultural journey, one of the most emblematic expressions of which is the Grand Tour: an elitist educational device aimed at cultivating a cultured and cosmopolitan mindset.

In the contemporary era, these models have not disappeared, but have been renegotiated alongside new ways of experiencing travel. Mass tourism redefines the relationship between the individual, place and otherness, and we are also witnessing a resurgence of pilgrimage in new forms. Alongside these practices, we are seeing the emergence of journeys linked to international cooperation and volunteering, as well as migratory journeys, which are taking on an unprecedented centrality in light of globalization processes and global inequalities. Raccagni (2023) also identifies the so-called “radical journeys” of second-generation individuals, characterized by identity tensions relating to roots, belonging and the search for meaning. These are accompanied by mystical and ancestral journeys oriented towards the rediscovery of profound symbolic dimensions.

Virtual travel has emerged in the educational and tourism fields as an experience of exploration and symbolic crossing, mediated by digital technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), 360° video and social VR environments (Yang, 2019, pp. 1–20). These technologies allow users to simulate real or reconstructed spaces, such as the Archaeological Area of Pompeii (thanks to the Italian Ministry of Culture) or the UNESCO Virtual Museum of Stolen Cultural Objects. Such experiences form part of the wider eXtended Reality (XR) ecosystem, incorporating various immersive and semi-immersive technologies such as mixed reality (MR), virtual worlds, and associated wearable devices (Luzzi et al., 2024, pp. 4–5).

Made possible by the evolution of digital technologies and the widespread availability of the internet, these environments introduce new ways of accessing places and redefine the relationship between presence, distance, and experience. This type of travel is now a relevant field of investigation within the broader pedagogy of travel (Raccagni, 2025) as it raises new questions about how the experience of movement, encounter and discovery can be mediated by technology without being limited to a purely simulated dimension.

From a cognitive and educational point of view, every encounter with a digital environment is a real experience, as it activates learning processes that are more or less stabilized at the neurobiological and symbolic level. Interacting with virtual environments has effects that extend beyond the instrumental dimension to affect the imagination, worldviews, and relationships, generating a profound anthropological impact. This directly challenges pedagogy, calling into question the ways in which these environments contribute to the construction of meanings, representations and learning practices.

The ability – and possibility – to “be elsewhere” without physically moving introduces a significant difference to traditional travel, raising questions about the relationship between experience, technological mediation, and learning. While virtual travel fits into a historical continuum with previous types of travel, it also marks a new epistemological threshold. This requires interpretative tools capable of grasping its complexity and educational implications.

3. We Travel Everywhere, but How?

Although it offers new opportunities for knowledge and access to places that would otherwise be inaccessible, virtual travel is characterized by a reduction — or, more precisely, a radical transformation — of direct bodily experience. This is a central element of embodied and situated learning (Lo Presti, 2016). The absence of physical presence in traversed spaces affects the possibility of full sensory interaction with the environment and others, influencing the journey's perceptual, emotional, and symbolic density. Indeed, corporeality is not merely the biological basis of experience; it is also a fundamental epistemic condition of knowledge. As Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) point out, human beings are inevitably embodied; actions, perceptions and cognitive processes originate from the individual's physical presence in the world. From this perspective, cognition does not precede the body, but emerges through it, with all its possibilities and limitations. Lo Presti (2016) also emphasizes that the structuring of perceptual experience always occurs through the body and is an essential step in the development of cognitive activity and forms of knowledge. The body is therefore not merely a vehicle for sensations, thoughts and emotions, but a biopsychic structure that determines modes of perception, affectivity and understanding of the world. Without a fully situated bodily experience, the transformative capacity of virtual travel is reduced, as is the intensity of encounters with otherness.

However, in contemporary debate, the body can no longer be considered exclusively as a closed, self-sufficient biological entity. Post-humanist perspectives emphasize that the human body is increasingly hybrid, influenced and augmented by technological extensions that alter its functions, capabilities and modes of presence (Talovic & Aleksandar, 2020; Tello, 2020). Digital and immersive technologies do not eliminate the body; rather, they reconfigure it, generating forms of experience in which presence is mediated, distributed and amplified on a performative level.

Virtual travel falls within this area of ambiguity. On the one hand, it represents a loss of the sensory and contextual richness of physical travel. On the other hand, it introduces novel modes of interaction and exploration that redefine the relationship between the body, space, and learning. It is not simply the body that is lost, but a specific form of embodiment, which is replaced by a mediated personal presence. This raises relevant pedagogical questions.

Another critical issue is the concept of departure. In traditional travel, the preparation for departure is a pedagogically significant moment in which the individual is fully engaged in a period of suspension and symbolic reorganization. Turner (1986) describes this as a transformative liminal phase, during which the everyday order is temporarily suspended, enabling individuals to redefine their position in the world and their relationships. In virtual travel, however, this threshold is often absent or blurred: access to other places occurs immediately, without any real separation from the ordinary context.

Similarly, the dimension of return is puzzling. While physical travel involves a significant phase of processing the experience and reintegrating into everyday life upon return, this phase appears weakened in virtual travel, as the subject has never really left the starting point. As Riva observes, «without an elsewhere, there is no journey. Elsewhere is the place, the culture, the words, the flavors and the customs. Elsewhere is the other» (2015, p. 104). A meaningful journey always leaves traces in the form of landscapes observed, sounds heard, tastes savored and encounters experienced. These traces take the form of a story-memory that engages all the senses and

continues to act as a narrative and identity resource over time. The risk of virtual travel is an experience devoid of sensory perception, in which the visual dimension tends to dominate other perceptual channels, limiting the depth of experiential processing.

However, focusing exclusively on the “shortcomings” would be reductive. In fact, the technological tools that make virtual travel possible can expand the forms of distributed and integrated learning within complex socio-technical networks. It is now possible to be physically located in one place while accessing other spaces, experiencing a state of co-presence that redefines the concept of “elsewhere”. Immersive devices such as virtual reality headsets allow increasingly sophisticated environments to be simulated, opening up new possibilities for exploration and interaction.

From this perspective, virtual “tourism” is not merely about reproducing real environments; it also has a *world-making* function, creating relationships, encounters and hybrid realities that transcend the traditional online/offline dichotomy (Gerosa & Milano, 2011). Virtual travel enables us to observe places and contexts without subjecting them to the processes of consumption and defacement often associated with mass tourism. In this way, it presents itself as a sustainable alternative to traditional forms of enjoying spaces. At the same time, it enables us to encounter people, cultures and symbolic heritage that would otherwise be difficult to access, thereby promoting valuable forms of mediated intercultural knowledge for educational purposes. Through digital environments, immersive platforms and interactive narrative devices, individuals can engage with distant stories, languages and cultural practices, activating processes of recognition and decentralization. Another important factor is the reduction of economic, geographical and logistical barriers that traditionally limit access to travel. Virtual travel requires relatively widespread, low-cost technology and can therefore contribute to democratizing the exploratory experience and making it more accessible.

As Cadioli (2011) observes, the figure of the traveler in virtual spaces takes on multiple connotations - from *cyberconboy* to *net-surfer* - recalling historical figures such as the *flâneur* and the explorer, but placing them in a radically changed context (Manovich, 2002). The current landscape of extended and virtual reality applications is characterized by an increasing level of accessibility and diffusion, driven by advancements in mobile technology and simplified interfaces.

However, a crucial pedagogical and ethical question remains: *if virtual travel expands the possibilities of experience, to what extent is this freedom actually acted upon by the subject? To what extent are exploratory trajectories the result of autonomous choices, and to what extent are they guided by algorithmic logic and experience design devices?* It is in this tension between possibility and constraint, between openness and prescription, that virtual travel challenges contemporary travel pedagogy.

4. Conclusion: so, does the Internet represent an opportunity?

In conclusion, it is evident that virtual travel does not permit unambiguous responses or simplistic evaluations. Instead, it raises pedagogical questions that encourage us to critically reconsider the traditional categories of experience, learning and educational mediation. The issue is not so much the choice between “real” and “virtual” travel, but rather how the travel experience is being reconfigured within complex socio-technical ecosystems.

From this perspective, *virtual travel* forms part of a pedagogical framework that challenges isolationist paradigms of cognition and learning. It proposes a multidisci-

plinary reflection on the implications of co-evolutionary learning. This type of learning is based on the interaction between humans and technological artefacts, providing a foundation for an extended pedagogy that can overcome dichotomies such as subject/environment, natural/artificial and online/offline (Kilterni et al., 2012; Luzzi et al., 2024).

We are thus faced with an intrinsically dynamic dimension of learning that distances itself from linear, individualistic models, taking the form of a relational, distributed and situated process instead. Learning develops in synergy with multiple elements of the system — people, contexts, technologies, languages and cultural practices — in a continuous interweaving of interactions and mutual transformations. In this context, virtual travel cannot be interpreted as merely an impoverished simulation of physical experience; rather, it is one of the ways in which the contemporary subject constructs meaning and knowledge.

From this perspective, learning is not merely the acquisition of information; it is a complex and articulated journey, which can include immersive and virtual experiences. These experiences expand the possibilities for exploration, encounter and understanding of the world, but they also require critical guidance to make their limits, ambivalences and ethical implications explicit.

Therefore, rather than asking whether the internet represents an opportunity, it is necessary to question the pedagogical conditions under which such opportunities are designed, acted upon and interpreted. It is in this tension between possibility and responsibility, and between openness and constraint, that pedagogy plays its part in understanding and guiding contemporary forms of travel and learning so that they can offer authentic opportunities for personal and collective transformation.

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