

The Experience of Travel

by

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It is often thought that the main reason for travelling is to arrive, that is, to end the journey. And journeys can be judged by how fast one is conveyed from A to B. In research conducted at UWE and Lancaster University we have explored travel time, and especially seeing whether travel time use affects the choice of the means of travel itself. We have also been interested with whether transport providers and designers consider the uses of travel time when planning and developing different kinds of environment for our travel.

Our conclusions are clear - first, people in general do seem to consider that they would not want to be instantaneously 'teleported' from A to B. Part of the point is to 'travel hopefully'. Second, people do find travel time can be productive and useful. The majority of rail passengers in the UK in a 26,000 person survey found that time worthwhile or very worthwhile. Even commuting time can be a period of transition, a time to shift gear and to prepare for the next activity. And third, rail travel seems to provide the widest array of uses of travel time. These range from sleeping, window gazing, relaxing, reading, talking face-to-face, working, studying, listening to music, watching DVDs, communicating with friends and family via mobile phones and computers, and preparing cognitively and emotionally for the next activity. But fourth, there are many frustrations of travel time, getting wet while walking, being stuck in congested roads while driving, feeling sick while on a coach, or being cramped for space while flying. Train travel is *potentially* the best place to use time productively especially because of the range of activities available to *all* passengers and not just those in business class on the planes. It is also a place being transformed by new technologies that are often 'at-hand' while travelling by train and which are more conveniently used on a train than on other means of travel. For example, the recent rise of mobile television, podcasting, and Wi-Fi internet access, which complement the more familiar technologies 'at hand' such as portable music players, books and newspapers.

So what does our research suggest would improve the travel time experience for UK rail travellers, to make an even starker divide between coach, car and air travel on the one hand, and rail travel, on the other?

First, there should be larger and better designed table space that fits contemporary computers for standard class passengers, with plugs easily available. There should be more space to keep valuable equipment 'ready to hand' and in sight. There should be well-policed quiet carriages uninhabited

by mobile phone users, or playful children, who instead should have areas specifically for play and entertainment. And all of these should be integrated into the ticketing system, so that they can be booked in advance. There should be places for good conversation (and even good meals) with friends, perhaps in café areas, which have mostly disappeared on contemporary trains (except for first class passengers). There should be windows that can be seen out of, so the passing scenery can be appreciated, and also known about through guides to the local landscapes. There should be minimal train announcements that are often the most disruptive sound in quiet carriages.

And stations should be pleasant places to wait. Many journeys involve changes and most stations provide few of the opportunities available on the train, they are often devoid of productive and enjoyable waiting spaces. How people 'wait' is as important as how they 'travel' and yet most such places are scruffy and full of intrusive sound.

So we think the rail industry is partly missing a trick. It's not thinking hard enough about the majority of its passengers, cramped in standard class, who do not have the spaces to unpack and enjoy the journey. Other research on the changing nature of work, family and friendship patterns brings out the great importance of communications while travelling. These communications involve making arrangements, keeping up with contacts, arranging and rearranging meetings, or literally being there as a colleague, a friend, a family member. What can get done on the move can be almost as important as what gets done when one arrives - even if it is simply relaxing, allowing the passing scenery with some music to create a period of calm. The journey should be, and can be, a place for enjoyment, work, anticipation, adventure and productivity.