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Where does most of your school-related learning take place? I asked this question to students, aged 17 to 18 to find out how they experience the significance of space in relation to learning. They were also informed that they themselves would define the range or extension of this place. The place could be a specific chair in the classroom, a certain room, the school as a whole, in the library, at home, in their own room at home or cyberspace. It was up to the students to decide the place.

The reason for examining this field is due to the changed conditions of teaching and learning during the last five to ten years. Traditionally, the physical classroom has been considered the place where school-related learning takes place. My presumption is that the “digital revolution” has changed the conditions for teaching and school-related learning. At the school where I conducted this study, an upper secondary school, every student and teacher since 2006 has had their own laptop and with that tool, new patterns and methods of teaching and learning have emerged, patterns and methods more based on individual initiative and performance than on social and collective activity.

The Visual Turn

The project has been constructed within the field of the “visual turn”. Roughly, as I see it, this field has two ways of dealing with the value of the visual (photos, film, images and pictures) as far as education and the history of education is concerned. One perspective is occupied with the issue of tracing the past
and understanding the present by asking if and how photographs and images can help us better understand a variety of phenomena. The other perspective deals with questions related to teacher and student opinion concerning the educational environment of today and what impact this environment has on education and learning. In this study, I deal with both aspects. First, I am interested in how the students experience the significance of spaces and places in relation to school-related learning and secondly, I want to know what kind of information can be gleaned by letting the students answer the question with a photograph they have taken themselves.

Aim and Study Questions

Though the concept “school-related learning” is quite complex and my instructions were not that specific, my intention was to be able to discuss the main question from the following concretising perspectives:

- Does student learning take place in the physical classroom? If not, then where? Their most common workplace.
- What spatial dimension is comprised by the expression the “digital classroom”? Cyberspace, “new media”, the home environment? The nicest place for taking a short break.
- Who does the learning process involve? The teacher, classmates or just the individual students themselves? A place where, for some reason, they disliked being.
- Has the teacher been replaced by Google?

Theoretical Starting Points and Relevant Literature

The literature on the visual turn is extensive and versatile. In this section I will outline some of the themes, trends and theoretical positions relevant to my study and in the discussion to follow, I will relate my results to some of this literature.

From the material in *The School I’d Like…*, Catherine Burke and Ian Grosvenor show in a very concrete way that
pupils, if given the opportunity and responsibility, have a lot to contribute concerning the function and architecture of schools. The pupil’s opinions are not restricted to choices of colours and criticism of smelly toilets. What appears in their reflections is that they do have the capacity to critically examine aspects of democracy, authority and effective learning environments. In a sense, Burke touches upon the same issues when she describes how a research cluster from different disciplines was created to work with questions of visual culture in relation to learning contexts. The project covered areas and questions like how children read their environment visually, how designers, teachers, children and parents can optimise the visual environment in learning contexts and whether visual methodologies and tools such as photography, drawing and art can help in achieving this. To me, this kind of practical visual work seems to have the potential for developing reflective insight among the pupils.

The problem with reading pictures and using photographs as images of “reality” is a central theme in literature about the visual turn. This aspect is equally important when photography is put to contemporary use or when old photographs are used to write the history of education. Grosvenor conducts a thorough inquiry of this issue by creating a long list of question concerning the photographer’s gaze, technology, purpose, audience and meaning(s) that must be dealt with when using photographs as “reality”. The central theme is what photographs actually say and how they should be read. Despite the difficulties, he is positive to their use. Burke and Peter Cunningham are of the same opinion, though they draw their conclusions from analysing the video documentary “Ten Years On,” which was produced in 1976 for professional use. This documentary focuses on the role of one classroom teacher. It shows that a lot of things go on in the classroom, but their final words also reveal the difficulties of the visual perspective: “Ten Years On thus becomes in our eyes a kind of palimpsest, where multiple readings and references enrich our visual experience but intriguingly complicate our work as historians”. António Nóvoa discusses these delicate is-

187 Burke and Grosvenor (2003), 17–22.
188 Burke (2006).
190 Catherine Burke and Peter Cunningham, “Ten Years On: Making Chil-
sues of reading and interpreting images in similar manners in respect to Paulo Catrica’s photographs of school spaces:

Paulo Catrica’s photographs are a strong invitation to see what we already know, but adopting a different way of looking at it. He is aware that the familiarity of visual experience is an obstacle to the exercise of seeing. Each one of his photographs is a provocation that compels on to ask ‘And if…’. Hence, he gives us the possibility of telling new stories, and of imagining new histories.

Focusing on the design of classrooms, Chris Comber and Debbie Wall discuss how the shape of classrooms, interior design and information technology affect patterns of teaching and communication in the classroom. In their opinion, the environment/room/space always matters and teachers and pupils always have to relate to the environment. A more specific opinion is expressed by Alexander Koutamanis and Yolanda Majewski-Stiejns. Among other things, they focus on the concept “affordance” and discuss this concept in relation to classrooms. What I find interesting here is that, according to the concepts, there are different action possibilities latent in the environment. These action possibilities are objectively measurable and, if correct, would have a huge impact on how pupils and teachers experience and perceive the design and architecture of educational spaces.

In the text “Pupils Using Photographs in School Self-Evaluation,” Michael Schratz and Ulrike Steiner-Löffler grapple with the issue described in the title. Quoting Rob Walker, the major advantage of using photographs as they see it is that: “[i]n using photographs the potential exists […] to find ways of thinking about social life that escape the traps set by language” and that “it touches on the limitations of language, especially language used for descriptive purposes”. The conclusion is that pupils, when using photographs for this purpose, start to talk about their individual experience of school life.
Local School Context

The school (Figure 1) is an upper secondary school, built in the late fifties and originally intended for educating teachers in home economics. The classrooms are quite traditional (Figure 2). It is a small school with no more than 120 to 130 students in attendance and studies focus on language and social studies. For seven years, since 2006, both teachers and students each have had their own laptop, with the effect that pedagogy in the classroom is far more based on individual information searching, reading and writing than social activities like group discussion.
Ethical Issues

I would not say that there are any specific ethical issues involved in my study. In one way you can always argue that when dealing with people and their lives you are automatically dealing with ethical issues, but I would not say that my question in general is ethically delicate. The students participating in this study do not appear by name and they have all been informed that the results of the study may be used for research purpose. The school is mentioned by name but the students’ contributions cannot be traced to individuals and they all participated on a voluntarily basis. The students picked for this study are aged 17 to 18 and in the third and final year of upper secondary school. They were chosen because they have studied in this school context for two and a half years and therefore familiar with it and probably also influenced by it.

Methodological Considerations

In order to discover what kind of information I could acquire by letting the students answer the study question with a photograph they had taken themselves, and thereby discuss the relative value of the visual, the students were divided in two groups, where one would answer with a photograph and the other with a short text no longer than five sentences. In response to the visual turn, my first idea was that images could and should replace the written or spoken word. After receiving the photos, I added an extra step to the study, discussing the photos taken by the students as a group, to see how they were interpreted and if the interpretations corresponded to the intentions of the photographer. Well aware of the limited number of answers, I will not draw any further conclusions beyond this specific empirical material.

Result and Discussion

Only one of the five pictures I received was taken in a classroom. Three others were taken in home environments and one outdoors (Figure 3, 4 and 5). After attempting to read and interpret these pictures, I decided to see them as, at least in my project, complementary to text. I decided to have a discussion with the
student photographers about their intentions and how they thought that their pictures should be read.

What became apparent was that the pictures, if they had a descriptive purpose, could stand alone. Numerous other issues related to education came up during our discussion, like individual preferences in relation to specific qualities of the educational space. This was obvious when the students tried to read each other’s photos. Different interpretations were made. A picture may be worth a thousand words, and if the intention is to describe something specific, my conclusion is that photographs really can work as a trigger and initiate a fruitful discussion by clearly focusing on certain aspects of educational space. My conclusion however is that photos should be seen as complementary to discussion. Seeing the same picture, the students have to relate to the same “object” and even if their readings and interpretations do not necessarily correlate, they at least have to relate to each other’s photos.

Of the thirteen students who responded to the question about where student learning takes place in text, seven answered “at home.” Five of those seven answers included “a computer/the Internet”. Two students said “in the classroom”. One
of those two mentioned the “importance of the teacher”. One student tried to give a balanced view and said “at home and in school”. That student also stressed the “importance of the teacher”. Three students said “no specific place”, but two of the three mentioned the “computer/Internet”. None of the students mentioned their classmates.

Evaluating the Visual Approach

Using photos in my study established a very clear focus and that is a major advantage of the visual. This conclusion is similar to the one reached by Schratz and Steiner-Löffler even though my students are older and should be more readily capable of using language for informative and analytical purposes.\(^{196}\)

Furthermore, I would like to stress the complexity inherent in the sentence “most of your school-related learning” (as posed in the initiating question), which can be understood in both a qualitative and quantitative way. If your intention is to follow up the photographs with a discussion, this vagueness may work to your advantage. If you ask for written answers, it is easier for the students to respond more exactly. My general conclusion is that text is easier to interpret for informative purposes, because when reading a photograph, as already discussed, you have to consider a much broader range of questions.\(^{197}\) But if you use the photographs as a starting point for discussion, you will achieve a clear focus that allows the students to start talking about their individual experiences. This can in turn be informative for visual research while providing the pupils with reflective insights into their own learning process.\(^{198}\)

Spaces and Places for School-Related Learning?

Finally, I will comment on the questions asked at the beginning of this study, using both the photographs and subsequent discussion, including the written answers, as empirical material. The questions asked were:

\(^{196}\) Schratz and Steiner Löffler (1998), 249–250.
\(^{198}\) This conclusion relates to and matches the conclusion in Burke and Grosvenor (2003), 20–22 and Burke (2006).
Does student learning take place in the physical classroom? If not, then where?

What spatial dimension is comprised by the expression the “digital classroom”? Cyberspace, “new media”, the home environment?

Who does the learning process involve? The teacher, classmates or just the individual students themselves?

Has the teacher been replaced by Google?

More than two-thirds of the students claim their home environment as the most important educational space, and just as many name the computer/Internet. None of the students mention their classmates. As previously mentioned Koutamanis and Majewski-Steijns uses the concept affordance. The concept is understood to be that there are different action possibilities latent in an environment, which allows individuals to perform certain actions. If the students describe their homes as quiet places for focused, individual study, this gives us an idea of the kind of task they are performing. And this might tell that the “ordinary” classroom (Figure 2) is not the optimal space for studying in the “digital era”. This may be jumping to conclusions, but students and teachers should be asked how classrooms could be designed to better accommodate the new, digital didactical orientation.

Only two students discussed the importance of the teacher. This could be interpreted as though Google has effectively replaced the teacher, though in discussion, none of the students believed that could ever happen. The teacher and the search engine have different advantages and both are very useful. This brings me back to the question of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the phrase “most of your school-related learning,” and raises the all-important question: What should be done in school and what should be done at home? I have no clear answer to that question, but I think that the visual as a method make meaningful contributions.

Conclusion

By asking students at an upper secondary school where most of their school-related learning takes place, I have found that more than two-thirds of the students consider their home environment to be that place. New digital conditions have engendered new patterns of teaching and learning, and I believe that schools, teachers and students need to discuss and compose strategies as to how the classroom of today and tomorrow should be designed and used. In this process, my study indicates that methods from the field of the “visual turn,” such as using photos for evaluating spaces and places of learning, can be extremely helpful.