

S_Place!

towards a conception of learning space as 'place' using visual methodology

0055

Candela Emily¹ *University of the Arts London, London, United States*

As UK HEIs face the challenge of supporting growing student numbers amidst imminent funding cuts, there is a need to develop an understanding of what constitutes efficient and effective learning spaces. Even as numerous expensive rebuilding efforts proceed, critics note *'the 'inexplicable failure' of universities to research their environment'* (Hurdley, 2010:47). Indeed, the literature on learning spaces in HE represents a less than cohesive or thorough discussion, with calls for a more clearly defined notion of space (Temple, 2007) and for more creative, participatory research methods that spotlight the student voice (Boys, 2009).

In its conceptual and methodological framework, research in progress at University of the Arts London (UAL) addresses these gaps in the context of Higher Arts Education (HAE), where notions of space take on an urgent resonance. *S_Place! an audiovisual investigation of students' perception of space and place at UAL* is an Appreciative Inquiry, exploring 'what works' within the institution. It focuses on how students cope with recent transformations in the HEI environment hastened by increasing student numbers and, within the context of UAL, the unlikelihood of an increase in the amount of space available per student. This research responds also to the *'globalised sense of place'* impacting today's university environments (Usher, 2002:47), in advancing a *social* conceptualisation of space as 'place'.

Research into student spaces within art and design can provide insights for other disciplines because of its distinctive characteristics, such as the studio element, which some have suggested might serve as a model more widely (Brown, 2004; Ochsner, 2000). Additionally, within many art and design disciplines, spatial concerns have long been intertwined with knowledge creation. *S_Place!* draws upon

this relationship, involving art and design students in a visual, participatory methodology which allows us to explore spaces through students' own images and accounts.

It is surprising, given the visual and spatial nature of many disciplines within HAE, that research on student space in arts education '*remains under-theorised and under-researched*' (Boys, 2009:16). In fact, the literature on student space in HE overall is largely disjointed, displaying confusion regarding both terminology and conceptions of space. Some authors question the basis upon which thought and policy on learning spaces praise '*open*', '*transparent*' and '*multipurpose environments*' (Hurdley, 2010:47; Melhuish, 2009:7), and caution against the simplistic formal-informal binary underpinning these terms (Boys, 2009). Temple (2008) argues for a deeper theoretical understanding of physical space in HE, which '*goes beyond suggestions that certain ideas are embodied in buildings [...] to propose how space becomes place [a 'sense of community']*' (4). UAL's *S_Place!* research addresses this need, exploring notions of place, belonging and validation with a particular focus on the development through these of networks, collaborations and friendships.

A sense of place has been speculated as being necessary to a sense of community and emotional well-being. In turn, a shared sense of belonging to a community, with its requisite benefits and responsibilities, may be linked, through social capital effects, to improved effectiveness of an institution (Lesser, 2000; Preston, 2004). A theory of social capital in relation to space and place requires that we consider how educational spaces need to be designed with an eye toward how they can encourage easy, casual connections among people who might otherwise find themselves in isolated niches. Another aspect of social capital that has recently been shown to have powerful educational effects (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) is the degree of trust and connectedness that may be developed through particular social relations occurring in educational space. This research seeks a better understanding of how such encounters are made within existing spaces in a large institution, within the under-scrutinised context of art and design.

Usher (2002) and Edwards and Usher (2003) note a lack of attention to space within the field of education, *particularly* in comparison to its status in sociology and geography. Sociological work is rich in explorations of, for example, how the public and the private is reconfigured with reference to the effects of globalisation, shifting identities, and relationships with space more nomadic than in the past. These investigations are of increasing relevance to the question of how HEI learning space can become 'place' in large universities, like UAL (which comprises six colleges spread across even more sites), where the student experience is imprinted by the "state of 'homelessness'" associated with globalisation's impact on space and identity (Usher, 2002:47).

The hard to define nature of learning spaces (Boys, 2010; Temple, 2008) may call for a departure from more standard metrics in its researching. *S_Place!* meets the call for 'more creative research methods' (Boys, 2009:18) and an attention to students' perceptions and narratives in researching student space (Boys, 2009; Melhuish, 2009). This research draws upon visual methodologies, which are gaining ground as a recognised force in the social sciences broadly (Pauwels, 2000), in particular, utilising a photo narrative elicitation approach that highlights students' own images and experiences. Student participants are asked to take photographs of spaces at the university that evoke a sense of place, and audio-recorded and filmed qualitative interviews use these images to elicit semi-structured narratives, in which students are encouraged to define and describe which spaces, and which *aspects* of these spaces are perceived as self-validating and nurturing their own particular sense of belonging.

This methodology very aptly spotlights the student voice in an exploration of how students cope with the current challenges of learning in large, increasingly crowded university environments. The particular value of this method for learning spaces research is advanced even further by the fact that it allows the student participant ownership over the research space itself '*through the act of creation*' (Edwards, 2009). This parallels the commitment of this research to refining a social and relational conception of HE learning space, with a view to determining the potential of certain s/places to contribute to belonging and social capital, elements which are

vital to sustaining the effectiveness of institutions in the face of increased participation in HE and the pragmatics of cost.

References

Boys, J. (2009) "Beyond the Beanbag? Towards new ways of thinking about learning spaces" *Networks*(8): 16-19.

Brown, R. (2004) "The social environment of learning" in *Enhancing Curricula: Towards the scholarship of teaching in art, design and communication in higher education*. London, cltad.

Bryk, A.S. and Schneider, B.L. (2002) *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.

Edwards, P (2009) *Arts-based and Creative Visual Research Methods*. 1st International Visual Methods Conference, University of Leeds.
<http://www.education.leeds.ac.uk/research/visual-methods-conference/> (accessed 12 July 2010)

Edwards E. and Usher, R. (2003) *Space, Curriculum and Learning*. Connecticut: IAP.

Hurdley, R. (2010) "The Power of Corridors: connecting doors, mobilising materials, plotting openness" *The Sociological Review* 58(1): 45-64.

Lesser, E.L. (2000) "Leveraging Social Capital in Organisations" in E.L. Lesser (ed) *Knowledge and Social Capital: Foundations and Applications*. Boston, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann .

Melhuish, C. (2009) "Pilot Study: Qualitative Evaluation of Students' Experience of New Learning Spaces" at InQbate-CETL D, Universities of Sussex and Brighton.

Ochsner, J. K. (2000) "Behind the Mask: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Interaction in the Design Studio." *Journal of Architectural Education* 53(4): 194-206.

Pauwels, Luc (2000) "Taking the visual turn in research and scholarly communication key issues in developing a more visually literate (social) science" *Visual Studies* 15: 1, 7 — 14.

Preston, J. (2004) "A continuous effort of sociability: Learning and social capital in adult life" in T. Schuller, J. Preston, C. Hammond, A. Bassett-Grundy and J. Bynner (eds) *The Benefits of Learning: the impact of education on health, family life and social capital*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Temple, P. (2008) "Space and place in the university" at *Exploring the hinterlands: mapping an agenda for institutional research in the UK*, Southampton Solent University, 24-26 June 2008.

Temple, P. (2007) *Learning Spaces for the 21st Century*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Usher, R. (2002) "Putting Space Back on the Map: globalisation, place and identity" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 34(1): 41-55.