Using visual activities to mediate a learning conversation about how a school community regards its premises

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Abstract

Britain is in the early stages of a wave of school building which many hope will be much more participatory than previous programmes. This is centred on the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) initiative, through which the government intends to rebuild or refurbish every secondary school in England over the next ten to fifteen years. An important part of the BSF scheme is the consultation of users (DfES 2002, p.63), with the participation of users in the design process being recommended by many in the field of school architecture (e.g. Curtis 2003, p.27). This parallels a movement within education more generally for the student voice to be heard and considered. Ideas about pupil consultation and pupil voice are driving many initiatives and policies, as well as the process of school development and evaluation (Flutter and Rudduck 2004).

Putting these ideas about participation into practice within the design process, however, may not be straightforward. A fundamental decision is over who gets included in the process (see Woolner et al. 2007), since excluding certain people may well make the resulting participatory process inherently flawed (Richardson & Connelly 2005). Within a school, it seems important to involve teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents and the wider community. However, the involvement of such a wide range of individuals, with their differing relationships to the school, may raise further problems in deciding how to proceed.

Applying ideas from the more general area of pupil participation to the issue of school design Burke argues that real participation is based on genuine dialogue which is “more than a conversation” (2007, p.361). Such dialogue could be termed a learning conversation, where shared meanings are established among the diverse group of
participants, allowing knowledge to be exchanged and learning to be achieved for both the individuals and for the school community as a whole.

This paper describes and assesses a consultation exercise undertaken in a secondary school which is going to be rebuilt under BSF. It considers whether the activities and organisation used with the school community may be said to have supported learning conversations about the premises needed by that school and, perhaps, about the learning environment more generally. The consultation was approached from a perspective of pragmatism, where the activities chosen were seen as tools through which to develop the discussion necessary to build a complex understanding of how the school is currently used and perceived by its various community members, together with their needs, desires and aspirations, to inform the rebuilding process.

The participants comprised a total of 38 teachers, 28 support staff and 107 students. The teachers represented a variety of subject areas and ranged in seniority from NQT to Assistant Head. The support staff included SEN learning supporters, teaching assistants, administrative staff, technicians, lunchtime supervisors, cleaners, the caretaker and the groundsman. Although parents and other members of the local community might appear not to have been included, a number of the staff lived locally and often spoke from the perspective of a parent, resident or community-user of the school facilities. All the year groups (Y7-Y11) were represented among the students.

A range of visual and spatial activities was used to mediate the encounters, providing something to talk about, and also intended to allow more opportunity for participants to initiate and influence the resulting conversations than answering questions would. These took place in approximately homogenous groups of 3-6 participants, where it was anticipated that some shared assumptions and experience might make it easier for people to engage in constructive dialogue. In each group, a researcher guided the activities, engaged in discussion with participants and noted any comments or ideas which were not recorded elsewhere by the participants themselves. These notes, together with the products of some of the activities, were used to inform the writing of a report for the school, which drew together the experience of the consultation.

It is necessary to question whether this consultation achieved its underlying aim of developing shared knowledge and understanding to be taken forward by the school to support continued participation in the design process. In such an evaluation it is useful to consider the contribution of the particular approach to the consultation and, specifically, evidence of learning conversations taking place as a result.

Introduction

There is currently much interest, within British education policy, practice and research, in the possibilities offered by increased participation. This is seen both in initiatives which get learners more involved in activities that they are less typically involved in, and in efforts to get other people, besides learners and teachers, involved in the activities of a school. So, for example, school councils have become very popular as a way of increasing student participation in school decision-making, while the on-going extended schools initiative includes the provision of support to parents and wider community engagement through the use of school facilities.

The participation of learners, and associated phrases such as student voice are driving many initiatives and policies (Clark 2004), as well as the process of school
development and evaluation (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). This movement for the student voice to be heard and recognized (for example, MacBeath et al., 2003; McIntyre et al., 2005) is underpinned by a wider philosophical and cultural shift towards listening to the views of children initiated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Importantly, the Convention asks for the inclusion of children and young people in decision-making on structures and initiatives that concern them (Article 12).

The influence of these ideas about participation can be detected in the current wave of school rebuilding in the UK. This burst of building is centred on the Schools for the Future (BSF) programme for secondary schools in England but includes increased building in Scotland and Wales as well as some expenditure on primary schools. There is increased interest in the involvement of the school’s users, especially the students, and within the BSF process it is stipulated that there should be “proper consultation with the staff and pupils of the school and the wider community” (DfES 2002, p.63). Some advocates of student involvement have explicitly addressed this issue, arguing that learners need to be properly involved in the design process if the resulting schools are going to be appropriate (Flutter 2006; Frost & Holden 2008). Meanwhile, architects and planners have a history of considering and attempting public participation which may also be drawn upon (Arnstein 1969; Blundell Jones et al 2005) and a number of architects working in the education sector have for sometime urged that school users should be consulted (Curtis 2003, p.27; Dudek 2000) so that new school buildings facilitate learning and support current teaching practices.

It can be seen then that the current wave of school-building necessitates the participation of users in the design process, forcing those involved to grapple with the challenges entailed by public participation in planning and design (see Blundell Jones et al 2005, especially Richardson & Connelly). However, this situation also “provides an authentic context” (Frost & Holden 2008) in which to develop methods and approaches to dialogue that could enhance understanding and interpersonal relationships within a school community. It was in this spirit that the present study proceeded, aiming to produce useful information for a school about the design and use of its premises, but also allowing a range of methods of facilitating discussion and conversations to be employed and so investigated. In this way, having recognised the present context for participation in an educational setting, this study considers what might be achieved in practice.

Across many explorations of participation, in various circumstances, it is possible to discern some commonalities and it would appear that communication is central to any successful participatory process. In their reflections on participation in planning decisions, Richardson & Connelly (2005) argue that these processes fail to be genuinely participatory. They impose limitations on discussion through excluding people, issues or outcomes (p.90) and produce “bland statements which can be agreed by all” (p.98). Within the area of general school improvement, Lodge argues that the genuine participation of both adults and children depends on the “building of a shared dialogue” (2005, p.134). Burke takes this as her starting point for her exploration of how the various views of children, in particular, might be included in the design of school environments, and advocates a process which is “more than a conversation between adults and children occupying shared space” (2007, p.361).

As potential solutions to these challenges, in the context of designing learning environments, various tools and activities are employed by practitioners of child and student participation (Hartnell-Young and Fisher 2007; Clark 2005; Koralek and Mitchell 2005). Clark has developed a ‘Mosaic’ approach to researching the views of
very young children (aged 3-4), which includes children’s photography, map-making and child-led tours of the environment. Clark argues that the range of activities with the children is necessary to capture the “complexity of their everyday lives” (2005, p.10). Furthermore, the visual and physical basis of the methods focus on “young children’s strengths – their local knowledge, their attention to detail, and their visual as well as verbal communication skills” (p.10).

The activities used in practice in this context are often pragmatically chosen, however, because they have previously worked with similar participants. Detailed reflection on the individual methods is less frequently attempted and there is little comparison between different techniques. There may be a tendency to overlook how methods work and their potential to increase the involvement of other users, besides children, in the redesign of schools. For example, Clark's description, above, of young children's knowledge, and the advantages of the 'Mosaic' approach for accessing it, could equally apply to any user of the school environment. This is important since a tendency to ignore the viewpoints of adults can systematically bias a participatory design process (Woolner et al 2007). As Mannion argues, “There is a need to deal with the intergenerational aspects of the processes we are investigating if we are to more fully understand them” (2007, p.417).

It is clearly necessary, then, that the methods chosen to facilitate participation successfully engage all sorts of people, of all ages, and with various relationships to the school. Burke reminds us of the power relationships that exist in schools, stating that, “schools are places where adults are in positions of power over children” (2007, p.363), but of course there are complex adult hierarchies as well, with some adults in powerful positions over others. Successful participation must allow all of these people to talk about their own experiences and understandings of the school, but in such a way that they avoid simply reiterating their own positions, and so that a new, more complete, shared appreciation may be developed. Such dialogue and discussion to produce a complex, yet coherent, understanding of the school environment might be termed learning conversation – a conversation which begins to address ‘why’ and not just ‘who’ or ‘where’.

Methods to facilitate a learning conversation about a school

The central aim of the current study was to facilitate just such involvement of a diverse sample of individuals from a school community and so develop understanding of the learning environment. It took place in an 11-16 secondary school in the North East of England which is to be completely rebuilt as part of BSF. The existing building was built in 1965 and extended in 1973. It is a CLASP construction, a system of building with standardised parts, developed by a consortium of Local Education Authorities in the 1960s, and designed around the need to withstand the mining subsidence which is common in the counties involved. When the research was carried out there were approximately 1100 students, 62 teaching staff, 40 support staff and a number of cleaners and lunchtime supervisors.

Over two consecutive days, the team of five researchers worked with a total of 38 teachers, 28 support staff and 107 students. The teachers represented a variety of subject areas and ranged in seniority from newly qualified to Assistant Head. The support staff had been chosen to represent as many job categories as possible and included Special Educational Needs learning supporters, teaching assistants, administrative staff, technicians, lunchtime supervisors, cleaners, the caretaker and the groundsman. Although parents and other members of the local community might appear not to have been included, a number of the staff lived locally and often spoke from the perspective of a parent, resident or community-user of the school facilities.
All the year groups (Y7-Y11) were represented among the students. They were fairly equally split between the two genders, and because whole classes were generally provided it seems unlikely that particular types of student were being excluded or included.

The participants worked in groups which were broadly homogenous, consisting of, for example, administrative staff; cleaning staff; Design and Technology teaching staff; senior managers; a group of Year 7 pupils. This was done to reduce time spent addressing assumptions and background knowledge, but also to reduce any reluctance to discuss issues of school organisation in the presence of more powerful individuals. As is common practice in this area, a range of activities was used to facilitate discussion and collect data about the school. The quality and extent to which each method succeeded in provoking insights – and indeed ‘learning conversations’ - and how far different methods gather discrete or overlapping data can be judged.

In each case, however, a mediating activity, or ‘something to do’, was provided, which participants worked on either individually, in pairs or as a group. This was based on the success of mediated interviews and of photo elicitation in ‘bridging gaps between the worlds of the researcher and the researched’ (Harper 2002, p.20), providing a focus for all parties so that ‘awkward silences can be covered’ (Banks 2001, p.68). Furthermore, it was decided that visual, rather than purely verbal, prompts and activities would be used. This was partly in response to the nature of an enquiry into school premises, but also in recognition of the success noted by Clark (2005) of such an approach in overcoming differences between participants in literacy skills, confidence and articulacy.

It was intended that the tools used would tap a wider understanding of visual, non-verbal meaning, so some activities were photograph-based (more visual) and some were map-based (more spatial). There were four main activities:

*Picture sorting* involved the participants, working as a group, discussing a set of 15 laminated colour pictures taken around the school premises. This group-discussion centred on places that were particularly liked or disliked,

*Diamond ranking* is a recognised thinking skills tool, usually carried out with written statements (Rockett and Percival 2002, p.99). Here the activity involved a subset of nine of the photographs, reproduced on two sheets of A4 paper in black and white. Participants, working in pairs or threesomes, cut out these pictures and stuck them onto a piece of A3 paper in a diamond shape, ranking them by position so that the preferred picture is at the top and the most disliked one at the bottom (see figure 1). They were encouraged to annotate their diamond with comments and explanations.

![Figure 1: Organisation of diamond ranking](image-url)
Mapping usage and preferences involved each person mapping their location during a typical day on individual copy of a plan of the school premises, adding stickers (yellow for ‘places I like’ and red for ‘places I don't like’), plus any other comments or annotations.

Mapping places that work was the other map-based activity and involved each person or pair of participants annotating plans to show ‘places that work’ and ‘places that don't work’, using coloured pens, to shade in or circle big areas, and stickers to pinpoint spots (green and blue; green for places that do work).

On the first day of the consultation, each group of participants took part in one photograph and one map based activity. The activities were each facilitated by a researcher, who attempted to draw out discussion based on the maps and photographs, encouraged participants to add comments and explanations and made notes of opinions and ideas not recorded elsewhere. Ideas and issues revealed during the first day’s activities were used to structure discussion on the second day. It was intended both to check the validity of the views expressed and to link developing ideas to the discussions of the previous day.

This paper will focus on the use of the visual methods on the first day and, specifically, the success of these methods in supporting learning conversations, and so developing an understanding, over the two days, of the multifaceted experience of this school community.

Facilitating a learning conversation

The school study undertaken tested the ability of facilitated dialogue, mediated by a set of visual activities, to generate shared understanding based on diverse information and experiences from a cross section of school users. The approach taken was found to be central to this outcome, as will be explored below, and, in the process, understanding has developed about how to facilitate a learning conversation within a school community about the learning environment.

Three aspects to the approach were found to be central to its success: the use of mediating activity; the particular advantages of visual and spatial material; and the use of a collection of complementary activities. Each of these aspects will be addressed in turn as a way of reporting the experience of the school study but also of examining the proposition that this is an example of genuine participation through a learning conversation.

The use of mediating activity

All the activities were effective in putting the participants at their ease and initiating dialogue about their experiences of the school environment. In general participants appreciated having a fairly clearly defined activity to carry out with physical representations or through producing their own representation. Tracing a route on the map, sifting through or trying to rank the photographs all seemed to provoke and focus discussion, so mediating between researcher and participant, as other researchers have noted in relation to photo elicitation (e.g. Banks 2001; Harper 2002).

During picture sorting the photographs were useful in stimulating discussion, although some groups were initially more reluctant to talk. The diamond ranking activity, like the picture sorting, succeeded in eliciting preferences for particular parts of the school, but it also forced participants to quantify their preferences and allowed the collection of background reasons, through annotations to the constructed
diamond (see figure 4, below). Participants worked in pairs or threesomes and deciding on their ranking of the pictures provoked discussion between participants, which the researcher-facilitator was able to engage with, develop and ensure was recorded.

The mapping activities also provided a good starting point for conversation, perhaps better for some participants than the more open photo elicitation. Some of the staff and pupils were very obviously nervous when they sat down, but the mapping activities, particularly tracing a personal route, were practical and straightforward. Many people visibly relaxed, as they began to draw their route around the school and, consequently, discuss their views with one another. For both activities, using a map of the school enabled participants to pinpoint very specific features that they wished to comment on.

These experiences of the activities providing foci were evident in most cases for the broad range of people from the school community who were invited to participate. This is important since involving a wide range of people is generally considered essential to any participatory process, as discussed above. Many of the participants were clearly pleased to have an opportunity to share their experiences and voice their opinions. Cleaning staff reported that they were particularly pleased that they were included in the consultation – this was unusual they said - and their involvement was also beneficial, in that they were local residents and parents of pupils. These additional perspectives were apparent in their discussions.

The way in which the activities quite immediately involved this range of participants was evident in their responses. During the picture sorting activity, for example, respondents initially tended to focus on images that closely represented their particular ‘areas’ or classrooms they were familiar with; they would pick up the
photographs, sort and sift through them, and talk about the issues related to the image.

The administrative staff, for example, focused on the photograph which depicted the school reception area and spoke of the difficulties of crowding and access, whilst the cleaning staff considered many photographs but offered a unique perspective on the practical aspects of almost all of the areas, such as the type of flooring and the weaknesses of particular furniture. Teachers focused on particular classrooms they used, and pupils considered the images that depicted communal areas such as the toilets, dining room and corridors.

The exception to this generally positive response was observed for a small minority of the participants. The groundsman and one group of technicians were reluctant to complete the diamond ranking activity, demanding instead that their views on the school premises were simply recorded. Although this was done, it was not then easy to feed these ideas into later consideration of information, as the opinions given did not relate to the ideas produced by the other participants through the activities. The technicians engaged with the subsequent mapping activity, however, and contributed substantially to our understanding of how learning spaces in the school were being used. The contrast between this integration of their experiences and the difficulty experienced when they did not engage in the diamond ranking demonstrates the utility of these approaches, provided participants are willing to engage. When successful, the methods were assisting the sort of genuine dialogue that is important to a participatory process (Burke 2007; Lodge 2005) and, indeed, to much education research. This is quite different from various participants just talking at each other, which, it may be argued, was what occurred when the participants did not engage with the activities.

This leads to a related consideration: that of whether any of the mediating activities used in this study was generally more successful than the others. Although one group were not willing to carry out the diamond ranking activity, but completed a mapping activity, this preference was not typical, and the other unwilling adult did not engage with any of the activities. Since the reluctant minority were all adults, it might be questioned whether the activities were really appropriate for all ages. This is of interest given current tendencies to prioritise the involvement of children in schools, overlooking adult members of the school community, and perhaps resulting in bias (Mannion 2007; Woolner et al. 2007) as discussed above. However, the thoughtful and enthusiastic participation of the other adults, who represented the full range of teaching and support staff, with all the mediating activities, suggests that the limited failure to engage was unfortunate but not inevitable. Furthermore the various activities enabled the triangulation of the perceptions of the participants through having varying appeal across the range of participants, producing different emphases and generating slightly different information. This will be discussed in more detail below, once the particular features of the visual and spatial materials used in the activities have been considered.

The particular advantages of visual and spatial material

The provision of photographs and school plans generally succeeded as ice-breakers, engaging participants and initiating lively discussions. This could perhaps have been achieved through written material, but there did seem to be an immediacy to the visual material. Places around the school could be recognised from the photographs and comments made. The school plans were more abstract representations to deal with, but the instruction during one mapping task to trace a personal path around the school appeared to bridge any gap between the participant and the map. The other
mapping activity, identifying ‘places that work’ was perhaps slightly harder to introduce to the participants. However, the more objective description of ‘places that work’ provoked more debate and discussion of wider issues among groups of participants than did the request for clearly subjective and personal ‘places I like’. This wider perspective was seen in discussions about separate blocks for different school subjects and in suggestions made for improvements to layout and organisation for the new school building.

The maps and photographs continued to give the participants and facilitators something to look at, focus on, and refer to as the encounters developed, which did not depend on literacy skills and confidence. Importantly, for three of the four activities, they also provided a record of the discussions, in the form of stickers, routes and comments attached to the maps and the completed, annotated diamond rankings. Furthermore, the use of a pre-selected set of photographs and a pre-drawn plan of the school for all the activities considerably simplified analysis of the information collected, allowing comments made by the various participants to be directly related and, so, integrated. For example, during picture sorting it was revealing when places were discussed in a number of groups. Considering the photograph of the school garden, members of the administrative staff who had worked in the school for over 25 years had a long, animated conversation and recalled a time when the garden was used differently through being accessible to all. This contrasted sharply with younger pupils who had never known the garden as an accessible area. Although in both cases, the picture prompted comments about access arrangements, the different users were able to offer subtly different perspectives on the issue, so providing a more complete understanding.

As this suggests, it was entirely possible for the same picture to suggest to different people different ideas, associations and indeed opinions about the school. Despite being of particular, identifiable places, the photographs seemed to successfully avoid being prescriptive and, instead, allow space for individual reaction. So, for example, Picture 10 (see figure 3), provoked comments about narrow corridors, including discussions by teachers of transitions between lessons, revealed that the younger children felt “overwhelmed” at these times and prompted some students to talk about improving signage and theming corridors around curriculum areas. Similarly, Picture 11 (see figure 3) provoked comments which ranged from the need for daylight, and the use of blinds, through complaints about window opening and temperature control in the school, to discussion of children climbing on the roof.

Figure 3: Pictures 10 (left) and 11 elicited a wide range of responses
Similarly, many of the comments made during the diamond ranking activity demonstrate that the pictures were prompting reactions to quite generalised ideas about the school, including aspects of its construction and organisation, not just to a specific classroom or corridor. For example, in the diamond reproduced above (figure 2), the annotations included comments such as “unwelcoming” and “claustrophobic” and in another diamond two quite different rooms are bracketed together with the annotation “learn but have fun”.

Sketching individual use of the school on a provided map revealed both consistencies in use and contrasts between different groups of user, which were immediately obvious when the plans were examined. In general, the students’ mappings covered much of the building, while teachers, and most other staff, tend to stay in more limited areas. For example, in the maps reproduced below, the Year 8 pupil (figure 4) visits many more places than the science teacher (figure 5) during a typical day.

![Figure 4: Student’s map of school day](image1.png)

![Figure 5: Teacher’s map of school day](image2.png)

There are exceptions to this, with some (often more senior) teachers, the cleaners and one member of the administration staff drawing diagrams to show more extensive movement. However, the students’ maps are considerably more likely to range over the whole school, consequently using more of the corridors, stairs and other circulation routes, as well as taking in more of the school facilities and various subject-specific rooms. Explanatory notes attached to the maps further related usage of the premises to particular roles. While pupils seem to experience the building in terms of the organisation of their school day, writing “break”, “lunch” and “form room” on their maps, teachers’ comments centred on their responsibilities, including the note on an exterior space of “Duty – out here all year!”
Using the same map also allowed the participants’ preferences for particular parts of the building to be collated, producing a very clear picture of the areas that are liked as well as those that cause problems. This becomes clear when the ‘places I like’ and ‘places I don’t like’ are accumulated on two maps, one showing the students’ responses and the other representing that of staff (figures 6 and 7).

The visual and spatial nature of the mediating activities also seemed to help participants avoid more formulaic or over-rehearsed responses, which often result from asking more straightforward interview questions. This is seen in the success of the methods in bringing out positive, as well as negative, aspects of the existing school premises. Given that the school was widely perceived as inadequate by its users, it might be expected that positive aspects would be hard to find. Notably the tone of much of the discussion during the picture sorting activity was quite negative but the other activities, through explicitly requesting positive views, succeeded in provoking them. This ranged from diamond ranking, which necessitates a top-ranked picture, to the map based activities, where the appropriate stickers were provided, for ‘places I like’ and ‘places that work’, but participants could choose not to use them. These activities highlighted successful features of the school and also provoked some positive comments, annotations and discussions. It would seem that they did something more than just demand positive comments in the way that an interview question might. As an indication of this, when the head teacher was asked during the initial visit to the school what he liked about the existing school premises, he had replied that it was a “nightmare of a building” and opined that there was nothing good about it beyond the people within. Yet the positive impressions elicited by the
mapping and diamond ranking activities were validated by discussions on the second day. It is clear that these methods uncovered a real, though less obvious, side to experience of the existing surroundings, which proved helpful in forming ambitions for the rebuild.

The use of a collection of complementary activities
The necessity of involving a wide range of individuals from the school community in any participatory activity has already been argued. It has also been shown how the approach taken, using mediating visual and spatial activities to initiate and support dialogue, appeared successful in facilitating such involvement and in allowing the experiences and opinions revealed to be integrated. It might be questioned, however, whether the range of activities was actually necessary or whether the same information could be produced by a single activity, given a broad enough range of participants.

Contradicting this suggestion is the way that the various activities produced different emphases and generated slightly different information, which enabled the triangulation of the perceptions of the participants through having varying appeal across the range of participants. This experience concurs with that of the 'Mosaic' approach (Clark 2005) to investigating the responses of young children to their environment, and supports the tendency of practitioners in this area to use a range of activities. In this project, the map-based and photograph-based activities, in particular, complemented each other. To generalise, the maps tended to prompt consideration of where events took place, leading to comments about organisation and movement, whereas the photographs provoked ideas about what took place, accompanied by description and judgements.

Triangulating across the activities both validated some general impressions and added further depth and detail. So, for example, strong comments provoked by the photograph of the student toilets, its position at the bottom of the diamond ranking and the build up of red stickers in the location of the toilets all demonstrated the extent of dissatisfaction and provided descriptions of the nature of the problem. With more complex areas of the building, about which feelings were more mixed, the various methods highlighted different aspects and allowed a genuine understanding to be constructed. Since the effects of the different emphases produced by the differing activities were not entirely predictable, it seems advisable to use a variety of activities.

The approach taken in this study using a range of activities facilitated discussions between the participants and the researchers, and revealed much interrelated information about the users' experiences of the school. Through the range of visual and spatial activities, the resulting conversations went beyond conveying what is happening in a context. This included understanding where and to what extent things occur, and beginning to suggest why. In methodological terms, this research successfully applied genuine participation to the issue of consultation on school design, and was indeed based on genuine dialogue which was “more than a conversation” (Burke, 2007, p.361). Such dialogue could be termed a learning conversation, where shared meanings are established among the diverse group of participants, allowing knowledge to be exchanged and learning to be achieved for both the individuals and for the school community as a whole. This allowed a more complete and coherent understanding of the school to be constructed, which should be useful to this school community as they continue through the process of rebuilding.
References


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