Socio-Spatial Mapping

Identifying place qualities and local knowledge

THINKING | Perspective Skills

What you will need:

- Up to 24
- Group
- 1 hr preparation
- 1.5 hrs execution
- Printed maps, clipboards, transparent sheets, notebooks, stickers and pens

Related Tools:

- Experiencing Interdisciplinarity
- Shared Problem Definition

Menu:

"Learn to look at a place and listen to its users. By immersing on-site, students gather information about a place and its qualities from different perspectives to foster a holistic understanding of public spaces. "

—Katusha Sol

I. Overview

Understanding a place and its complexity requires being present at the location and using different methods and perspectives. Students identify place qualities – functional, natural, social – and local knowledge – informal knowledge that people have about their places, territory, local uses and local culture.

With this tool, students immerse themselves in the local environment and integrate more objective data (observations) with experiences (conversations) into a map. End users, local stakeholders with valuable knowledge, are considered experts. In addition, observing the area yields useful information about the status quo.

Socio-spatial mapping serves as an introduction to data-gathering. The student learns to see a place and listen to its users, without judging. The tool helps students to understand the importance of using their senses and combining different methods in location research. They learn who is in a place and their interests, wishes and limitations.

Drawing upon insights from sociology, urban psychology and anthropology, socio-spatial mapping can be used to gather data from different perspectives (i.e., interviewer perspective or observant perspective) and integrate them. Consequently, this information can be used to:

(1) get a better understanding of a public space (its facilities and experiences);
(2) be a conversation starter for researchers from different perspectives;
(3) provide starting points for further research.

Learning outcome

- The student is able to combine observations and conversations to investigate a place and create an integrated map that encapsulates diverse perspectives on a local environment

II. Learning Activity

Students visit a specific place to analyse its socio-spatial qualities by applying observation and conversation methods and integrating the findings in a layered map.

1. Assignment Briefing and Grouping Up

10 mins

Prepare by selecting a public space as the research location. Define a central challenge, such as *'How can we improve [the place] for users and visitors?'* Then, provide relevant topics for each team to explore, such as 'sitting possibilities', 'eye level facilities' or 'green space'. Optionally, formulate specific questions for each team in advance.

In class, outline the central challenge and topics. Show students the required materials for this tool and briefly explain their purpose in the mapping process. Organise students into teams of four for each topic. Within each team, one pair will conduct observations, while the other engages in conversations with users.

Emphasise that students must venture outside the classroom for observations or interactions with people.

Tip: students may need to step out of their comfort zones when approaching strangers to talk to them. Therefore, consider being available for questions or discussing challenges. It might also be helpful to give an example of how to approach people and have a meaningful conversation in class.

2. Desk Research

60 mins

Students perform brief desk research – either in class or as homework – on the location, exploring its history, the physical environment and the range of commercial or other

functions and services it offers. They can use online tools like Google Maps or information provided by you.

The aim of collecting contextual information is for students to familiarise themselves with the location and to have some basic knowledge about it.

3. Visiting the Place

30 mins

Hand out the materials for each team. The observation pair and conversation pair in each team both have transparent layers.
Divide the roles between the two pairs: one person will handle stickering and jotting down brief notes on the map, while another will take additional notes in a notebook or on a separate sheet. There are no rules for note-taking; the key is that they help to remember who, where and what.

Prior to delving into research, students write about their first impressions of the place and experiences of its users.

- **Instructions for the observation pairs:** focus on observing your topic (i.e., green space or sitting possibilities).
  On the transparent that is on top of the map, you will mark data relevant to the topic, for example, materials, how people use these and so on.
- **Instructions for the conversation pairs:** focus on what people say about the topic (i.e., green space or sitting possibilities). Approach users of the space, such as passersby and people seated, and ask them if you can chat briefly about [topic] in this area, how they use it and any suggestions for improvement. On the map, mark down positive and negative experiences related to your topic, along with areas users see as opportunities and/or potential improvements. Aim to talk to as many people as you can.

Tip: transparent sheets are available at craft shops and office supply shops or online.

4. Connecting Perspectives 30 mins

Invite each team to overlay the two layers of data (observations and conversations) and engage in a discussion.

Encourage students to reflect on the differences and similarities in their findings. How can they integrate these findings and what can we learn from this?

Tip: these prompts provide guidance for group reflection.

5. Integrating Insights 20 mins

In teams, students share their combined insights on user experiences and opportunities for improvement with the entire class. Students have the option to do this through brief presentations where each team shares their findings using their maps, or by arranging a “poster session” where students move around to examine all the maps.

Next, facilitate a discussion on the maps and insights, fostering an exchange of ideas and ultimately arriving at an integrated perspective on the place, its users and opportunities for improvement.

Tip: consider reminding students to allow everyone a say in the discussion and recognise the value of respectful, constructive feedback during these interactions.

III. Assessment

The starting point is the student's input. Before they do the exercise, they think of a question and take a moment to determine what their answer *would* be. At the end of the exercise, the students reflect on the differences between their answers and/or approaches and those of their peers. How do they differ and what can they learn from this? This focuses on assessment *as* learning. By reflecting on the differences, students assess their openness to other perspectives. Moreover, the context and setting further require a vulnerable attitude.

Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Roles

Self-assessment and peer-assessment

Characteristics

Self-regulated learning

Materials

Reflective questions

Assessment

Individual reflective questions

1. Before engaging in research, what were your initial impressions of the place and user experiences?

2. What did you realise by studying the place more closely through observations or conversations?

3. What did you realise by integrating insights (between observations and conversations, and between the diverse topics and maps)?

Please share a few specific examples and reflect on what made them stand out.

4. Considering how fellow students approached the assignment, what lessons could you draw from their approaches?

5. What might you do differently next time?

Instructions for group reflection

Instructions for group reflection

First, each pair presents the data they collected. Then, as a group, discuss:

- What has caught your eye and attention?

- How do the two perspectives align or differ?

- How can the two perspectives help to explain how users experience the place and contribute to potential improvements?

- How can you specify the challenge based on your findings within your topic?

IV. Key Advice

For this learning activity, no previous experience is required, only some courage.

Local governments often have various interesting maps about the surroundings that can be used for **desk research** (Step 2). For example, see https://maps.amsterdam.nl/.

There are many variations for making maps and many inspiring examples. For example, the Subjective Atlas of Amsterdam presents the Dutch capital as experienced by the residents themselves: https://www.subjectiveeditions.org/atlases/p/subjective-atlas-of-amsterdam.

V. References

This form of socio-spatial mapping is developed together with Rosanne van Wieringen for the location research phase of Placemaking education at the University of Amsterdam. For more information and student projects, see www.placemakingamsterdam.nl. http://www.placemakingamsterdam.nl

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