Viewing Places: Students as Visual Ethnographers  

BY KIMBERLY POWELL

Micro-ethnography as a Viable Classroom Approach

Historically, ethnography is a process of inquiry that involves the description and interpretation of the cultural and social practices of people, "the written representation of culture" (Van Maanen, 1988) that emerges from a lengthy period of in-depth study and, often, residence in, a particular setting. But this time-intensive approach can be particularly challenging to meaningfully implement as part of a classroom curriculum. One approach is to have students engage in micro-ethnographic research projects, which share the same characteristics of long-term ethnographic practice (e.g., field research, participant observation, interviews) but focus on a site, community, or issue for a short period of time (Beach & Finders, 1999). For classroom purposes this might mean site visits during class time that occur often enough for students to conduct meaningful inquiry into a question or issue that is related to social and cultural practices or conventions pertaining to place.

Our study was a micro-ethnography that took place during a summer research course for six undergraduate and four graduate students majoring in the disciplines of architecture, art education, geography, landscape architecture and an integrative arts program. I co-taught this course with Peter Aeschbacher, Assistant Professor of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at The Pennsylvania State University. The audience for our work primarily included the Oficina de Antigua, a Panamanian government-sponsored office responsible for the urban renovation and development of El Chorrillo, Panama. Situated between Panama City's old town, Casco Viejo, a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the Canal Zone, sites of urban renewal for commercialism and tourism, El Chorrillo (The Little Spring) has become an urban zone of interest for commercial redevelopment due to its location between these sites and its waterfront property.

We engaged in what is often called "critical ethnography," (e.g., Madison, 2005) in that we sought to bring about change and awareness of El Chorrillo as a viable residential neighborhood that could continue to exist alongside continual urban development, and, most importantly, benefit from renewal efforts. Our research built on the work of architecture professor and program director Bret Peters and his students who had, in previous years, designed an overall urban plan for Panama City that acknowledged El Chorrillo's role in maintaining a socially diverse and affordable community, including recommendations for public space and affordable housing types. During our research, we sought to implement ethnographic, visual methods as a means to investigate and depict urban spaces and places that would capture complex narratives of the lived experience of place that were not addressed through the program's previous surveys and urban planning methods.

Choosing and Developing Visual Methods of Research

Certain methods mark ethnographic research: participant observation, in which the researcher is immersed in the context of those studied; detailed, daily written fieldnotes based on first-hand encounters and observations; the development of rapport and reciprocity with participants; interviews with participants; and the collection, recording, and analysis of documents, records, and artifacts. Visual ethnography is an extension of these principles and methods but takes as its premise the importance of visual representation of experience. While film and photography have historically constituted the
Implications for student ethnographers include the consideration of the ethics of "capturing" someone's image, the violations of privacy that might occur in documentation or a public exhibition of the work, and the appropriateness of sites to study.

right
Students mapping an older section of El Chorrillo. Photo by Garrison Gunter.

below
Garrison Gunter's "Two Stories." These are 4 of the 13 pictures from his photo essay. Photos by Garrison Gunter.
primary modes of research, art, drawing, video/film, and hypermedia now also constitute major categories of methods for visual documentation and representation (see Pink, 2009, for examples of these categories).

In our project, we built on students' and our own academic strengths to determine visual methods. These methods, and the corresponding visual displays of data, were not pre-planned; rather, they were responsive to and emergent from the context of our study. The student projects thus reflected the skills and expertise unique to our class context, which meant that our approach utilized design practices, studio art practices, mapping, and the use of tables or graphs. The following section depicts six major modes of visual documentation developed in our project and offers examples of how these methods were responsive to the research questions and context for study (they are by no means the only visual modes). These categories are fluid and highly interactive in terms of their uses and representations of data, as several student projects are mentioned across these categories.

One important consideration should be noted. Visual ethnography has paid increasing attention to reflexivity and subjectivity as part of the collection and interpretation of data (Banks, 2001; Rose, 2007; Ruby, 2000; Pink, 2007) in which the researcher attends to his or her biases, assumptions, and personal experiences and how these affect and interact with the research. These considerations reflect a concern for the ethics of conducting visual research with others. The implications for student ethnographers include the consideration of the ethics of "capturing" someone's image, the violations of privacy that might occur in documentation or a public exhibition of the work, and the appropriateness of sites to study.

**Sketchbooks and Artist Journals**

As part of the documentation process, we encouraged students to keep sketchbooks/journals to log fieldnotes, personal journal entries, sketches, maps, and drawings, as well as materials and documents collected at sites. An organic part of many art classrooms, sketchbooks offer a powerful site for writing, noting, and sketching observations and reflections. Several of the students, trained either in landscape architecture, architecture, or art, drew sites, maps, and other images that would either help them remember a particular experience or place or were interpretive of an experience or place. Trieste, an undergraduate majoring in interdisciplinary arts, routinely sketched what she was observing. During one class sharing of and reflection upon these journals, we commented on the expressive nature of these sketches and how they brought a unique, subjective quality to what she was seeing. Trieste later used some of the sketches in her final research project.

**Photography**

Photography can be used as a tool for documenting events, places, and people that, in the final presentation of work, render contextual complexities that are difficult or elusive to depict through narrative text. Our students used photography in a variety of ways, but many of them chose to display their work organized into categories, often with narrative explanations. Mike, an undergraduate student in architecture, was interested in informal and formal recreational spaces in the adjacent neighborhoods of El Chorrillo and Casco Viejo. He organized his photos of these spaces into categories of informal spaces, formal spaces, usage, and more interpretive categories such as well-used space and poorly used spaces annotated with key features of how spaces were used.

Photo essays are a particularly powerful mode of visual documentation of places and presentation of final work. A photo essay generally has a narrative intent and format. Garrison, a photographer and a graduate student in art education, became interested in a particular type of one-story structure that jutted out from very tall multi-story buildings known as the **barraca**. A research question that developed out of this interest concerned the multiple stories embedded in this one-story structure. Garrison aligned his photographs visually in ways that simultaneously highlighted similarities and differences across design features (windows, doors, ornamentation). Choosing 13 photos from a total of 50, his final project was an aesthetic exploration of place, structure, personalization, and difference that emerged from a single basic building design, thus highlighting the multiple personal stories within.

**Maps**

Maps are a particularly powerful means for the representation of place and lived experience. As a visual method, maps convey a range of features related to physical landscapes as well as the psychological and social connections among people and places. Maps take a variety of forms; in fact, all of these student projects could be categorized as types of maps. Three students used cognitive mapping (Lynch, 1960), a technique that prompts participants to draw their own maps of communities and neighborhoods. Justin, an undergraduate major in geography, became interested in where and how informal social networks existed in El Chorrillo. To pursue this question, he asked three community members to map where they go during the day, the results of which were displayed in three maps: pathways between people, places, and relationships; locations and pathways; and a time-place continuum of people, place, and pathways. The notions of time and pathway in his project emphasize the fluid, active relationship between people and place, and the ways in which social networks transform places and spaces: "Is [public space] your traditional entity of a park or community center?" he later wrote in his research statement that accompanied his three visual maps (p. 48). "Absolutely not...[Church and home] transform as they become social nodes of activity" (Berkatek, 2006, 1-2).

**Found Images and Artifacts**

Photographs, objects, billboards, and artwork that exist within and are created or owned by community members are frequently collected and analyzed in visual research (Prosser, 2008; Rose, 2007; Weber, 2008). Students can analyze the content of photos taken by community members, the aesthetics of objects, and/or discuss images within the context of visual culture theories. Marisa, an undergraduate majoring in art education, was interested in the visual culture of El Chorrillo and the adjacent neighborhood Casco Viejo, an increasingly gentrified area that serves as a major tourist attraction in the old part of Panama City. She developed a photo table display, organized categorically, that focused on art as it was found and situated within the community, some of which included signs, tourist art, and painted buses. The photographs served...
as a pragmatic means of documenting and representing both the type of art as well as its location in the city, since many of the art forms could not be collected or bought.

**Photo and Graphic Elicitation**

Elicitation is a participatory technique that uses photos, drawings, diagrams, artifacts, and other forms of visual or material data as the basis for gathering participant opinions and perspectives, often through semi-structured interviews (see Harper, 2002). Rather than mere documentation, these methods become tools for dialogical inquiry into the “lifeworlds” of participants (Prosser, 2008, p. 19). Elicitation techniques using photos and video/film are gaining popularity as a visual research method (e.g., Prosser, 1992; Weber, 2008; see Stokrocki 1984, 1985, and LaChapelle, 1999, for examples within art education) Participants can be asked to comment on existing photos, photos taken by the researcher, or photos that they take as part of the research study. Participants might also be asked to take photos or video for the purposes of social critique from an *emic* (insider) perspective (e.g., Hubbard, 1994; Wang, 1999).

Graphic forms of elicitation, such as drawing and mapping, are particularly effective for place-based research. Cognitive mapping (Lynch, 1960) is a mapping elicitation tool that is intended to represent how persons perceive the relationships between space, place, and social and physical features of the physical and built environment. As a method, it has been used to geographically record a person’s memories and perspectives of a particular place and has been advocated within art education as a critical tool for understanding spatial literacy, sense of place, and the built and social environment (e.g. McFee & Degge, 1980; Langdon, 1999).
Ken, a graduate student in landscape architecture who was interested in how community members might define and map El Chorrillo, collected and analyzed four cognitive maps drawn by a former gang member and resident who grew up in El Chorrillo, by the director of Officina de Antigua who lived outside of the neighborhood, by a long-time female resident, and by a retired accountant who had recently moved into the neighborhood to assist with a vocational program. As they drew their maps, Ken asked them to comment on what they were drawing. He collected these maps and analyzed them for scope, scale, and particular hubs of activity, as well as each individual’s approach to drawing the maps. Ken’s final project visually enhanced the original drawings that show the sequence of the drawings, a juxtaposition of the drawn maps on top of a traditional street grid map, and an overlay of all of the maps to view similarities and differences in perspectives. For example, the former gang member’s map reveals an intimate scale and understanding of invisible borders and hubs of activity, while the director’s map revealed a large-scale, formal depiction of existing buildings and public spaces that did not contain spaces and places viewed as important by residents.

**Arts-Based Approaches**

An advantage to arts-based approaches is the ways in which they allow for ambiguity in both the rendering and representation of data, an approach that aligns with contemporary concerns with representation in both ethnography and art practice. Two students developed collage-based projects, an important form of inquiry that can be effective in representing multiple narratives and interpretive spaces (Butler-Kisber, 2008; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008). Trieste, an undergraduate student majoring in interdisciplinary arts, became interested in the claiming of space through music. Through a series of interviews with local community members, she photographed and sketched the places and spaces in which residents engaged in music.

The subject of musical identity began as notes in my sketchbook and slowly rose out of the pages into color and sound... Through the photos, sketches, maps, interviews, and recordings, my understanding of how these people embody sound identity became evident. (Lockwood, 2006, p. 1)
Male

20 - 30 Years Old

Lived in Chorrillo until age 16. Maintains friendships and ties to Chorrillo but no longer lives in Chorrillo.

A section of Ken's poster display, depict an individual's map and sequencing, one of four individuals. Ken first scanned the pen-drawn maps, changed the black lines to white and set it against a background color-coded for each individual.

Below

Colored lines from Ken's map series indicate the scope and range of each individual's cognitive map, juxtaposed on top of each other and over a street grid map of El Chorrillo in order to examine the relationships between people's perspectives and standard map perspective.

Her resulting composition was a collage of three places—a domestic landscape, a studio recording space, and a streetscape—juxtaposed with her own sketches that expressively mark people and the experience of sound in order to show the convolution and nonlinearity of space and place that occurs through human interaction with music.

Gillian, another undergraduate in integrative arts, became interested in residents' perspectives of architectural spaces, and how people define space in and around their homes. Gillian took photographic close-ups of buildings, floors, the street, and objects as a means to "zoom in" and document these textures. Her final project was a hybrid booklet that was part encyclopedia, personal journal, and maps. The collaged maps provided an index to the booklet and depict the subjective, lived sense of place that highlights the shifting, fluid nature of community identity with place across time and history, indexes to her documented accounts of areas within El Chorrillo.

Analyzing, Interpreting, and Representing Place

The analysis and interpretation of data involves systematically searching, arranging, and categorizing all collected materials (e.g., fieldnotes, interviews, maps, and photographs) to understand patterns, themes, paradoxes, and issues in relation to the research questions that students have posed. Ethnographers also consider their own subjective experiences as part of their fieldwork (e.g., personal written reflections recorded in a journal). Interpretation involves explaining the social significance of findings, situating patterns, issues, themes and/or stories within a broader context. There are a number of texts that are useful in the analysis of visual and ethnographic data (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Glesne, 2005; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Pink, 2007; Rose, 2007). What follows are some approaches to visual analysis and interpretation that we used in our study.

Marisa's photo display (see images on p. 49) was categorized into three major themes about the role of art as tied to place that emerged from her observations and photo collection: Outside-In (art with its origins outside the communities that made its way into the communities); Inside-In (art and images generated from within the communities); and Inside-Out (e.g., art that was created for non-residents, tourists, or outsiders, or moved in some way outside of its origins). The types, or genres, of art and their locations in El Chorrillo and Casco Viejo were further depicted in a single page that noted its genre, location, frequency, time, location, audience, and artist. This information was then collapsed into two tables so that the viewer sees immediate comparisons and contrasts between the sites within each neighborhood and across each neighborhood.

An understanding of visual literacy, artistic skill, and/or design principles is important for the effective use and representation of visual material. Picture/graphic type; variables such as color, texture, angle; design principles such as consistency, repetition, contrast; and avoiding cliché, oversimplification, or too much ambiguity are just some of the aspects of visual literacy that can be discussed with and demonstrated for students (see www.visual-literacy.org for examples). Ken's cognitive maps (see images above), for example, are color-coded, sequenced, scaled, and layered in order to assist the viewer in situating individual perspectives within a larger context, thus highlighting the relationality of his participants and their maps.

Visual ethnographers often mix images with text, as text supplies a narrative or descriptive context and thus becomes...
above
Trieste's "Claiming Space and Community through Music" is an arts-based approach using sketches, photo collage and narrative.

right
Close-up of a segment of Trieste's narrative and collage.

Interactive with an image, contributing to "the production of ethnographic meaning" (Pink, 2007, p. 151). With our research in Panama, we were accountable to a government-level audience of community planners and architects as well as to the community residents. Each student wrote a research abstract or artist statement (depending on the work) that described the context for the issue studied, the research question, methods used, interpretations, and implications for urban planning. Visual tables accompanied some of the images in order to summarize images and/or provide textual descriptions for the viewer.

Trieste's project on community music and space was initially an arts-based collage of photos and sketches supported by a table depicting categories not evident in the pictures, such as a description of social access to sound. Trieste later integrated narrative that visually flowed with and became part of the collage, the result of which invites the reader to engage in meaning and interpretation across text and image in an interactive way.

Observations

- Calle Octo is a historic location that originates in Mexico. The people have been called Calle Octo on television and in newspapers, and they explained their presence at the corner.
- A young man had an encounter with a man who wanted to help us with our project, a man who wanted to help us with their project, and a man who wanted to help us with the project.
- The church reaches out to the community and those reaching for education.
- The church was built in the area, and the church site was the location and purpose.
- It is located in the more modern area with more open space for recreation.
- The church is located on the opposite side of the street from the church, and it is located in the opposite direction.
- Have someone, bring, and occasionally, alone are used in this architecture.
- Calle 27 and Calle 28 house a large amount of students.
- In this area, there is more room to use for things and because of the location of the area has the tendency to have more students.

Personal Experience

The Iglesia De Fatima really captured me for the experience of this church. In this building I met Carmen, Emma, and Anna who took us to the church and its history throughout El Salvador. I first came to the church with Professor Perez who introduced the PUS class to the English class. Within the church, there were many places for visual learning, such as young children. Here a child could have a place to see a computer, to study, and to escape from the neighborhood. Here was a resource especially for clients and adults. Could be like a trade or the English language. There were twelve children in every classroom, and they were interested in every classroom, and they were interested in every classroom. The church and with others who had no idea where we could go.

Personal Experience

Two pages from Gillian's booklet depicting index #5: Iglesia de Fatima.

Students Viewing Places

Dipti Desai (2002) wrote about the ethnographic turn in contemporary site-specific art, or the "artist as ethnographer" (p. 307), suggesting that art educators broaden their conception of artistic practice to include ethnography as a part of studio practice. While the study depicted in this article reflects an interdisciplinary expertise with design and art within a particular context, it serves as an example of how visual ethnography could be conducted as part of a place-based art education curriculum. Although this particular project was conducted with university students, the visual methods for place-based research discussed in this article are equally applicable to elementary and high school settings. The school in which students are situated, the neighborhoods in which students live, and the public art sites in a city or town, are viable, rich places for study.

Embedded in this article are suggestions for the conduct of visual ethnography in an art education classroom. Below is a summary of key points, a suggested framework for planning an ethnographic project in an art classroom:

1. Consider a micro-ethnographic approach, an approach based on a shorter time frame than most typical ethnographies.
2. Introduce students to visual ethnography by reading/viewing studies that have been done, or examining artists who use ethnographic methods in their work and discuss the culturally responsive nature of ethnography with students.
3. Encourage students to brainstorm questions or issues they are interested in about places in their community, or a specific site they have in common (e.g., school). Once these topics have been established, discuss the ethical, social, and cultural dimensions of their topics. Students could work alone or in groups on a topic on which they reach agreement.
4. Discuss with students the ways in which they are participant observers; will become involved with, or at least implicated in, the social practices of people and places; and might consider including a study of themselves as part of the research.
5. Choose visual methods that adequately and appropriately address a research question. An art teacher might consider a particular focus in advance (e.g., photography) that she could then use as an opportunity to teach specific studio techniques, or let methods emerge in response to students' proclivities and the context of study. Some good references for working with children around visual methods (not limited to ethnography) include Ewald and Lightfoot's book (2002), I Wanna Take a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children; Thompson's edited book (2008), Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People, which includes methods such as video diaries and scrapbooking; and the photovoice method (see http://www.youthvoices.ca/ photovoice.html for a particular focus on youth and photography). For visual work that includes mapping and drawing, see Emmonson and Smith's book (2000), Researching the Visual: Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry.

6. Encourage students to develop reflexivity and subjectivity as part of the collection and interpretation of data in which the student ethnographer attends to his or her biases, assumptions, and personal experiences and how these affect and interact with the research.

7. Prepare students for the analysis, interpretation, and representation of their collected materials by examining the work of other visual ethnographers/researchers as well as visual artists who use ethnography as part of their artistic practice.

8. Analyze and interpret visual data, field-notes, interviews, and documents in terms of narratives, social and cultural practices, behaviors, and/or beliefs and consider visually representing these findings alongside a text such as a research abstract or artist's statement (or, perhaps, integrated into the visual work itself) in order to contextualize the visual displays. Consider and discuss with students how they might use their findings toward change and social advocacy.

A place-based, visual ethnographic approach to art encourages students to learn about the social and cultural dimensions of art and its connections to self, community, and the environment. Ethnographic methods can help us rethink sites of and for art exploration (Desai, 2002) as well as meaningfully connect artistic practice with local knowledge, history, uses, and narratives of places. In effect, sites for study can yield new sights and insights for students and, more broadly, for art education practice.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 For a detailed description of this research project, please see Powell (2008).

2 A subsequent fall course in which most of the students enrolled compiled information across student projects to present in a final report to both our funders and the Oficina de Antigua. The end result yielded individual student projects but also an aggregated analysis of El Chorrillo through the study of all of these projects as well as our group data from the surveys.
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