How do visually mediated encounters differ from traditional interviews?


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Abstract
Increasing interest in visual research methods within the social sciences reflects an expansion beyond those disciplines where they were initially developed (Banks, 2001; Prosser, 1998). In education this increased interest is clear, but it remains necessary to demonstrate to researchers, and their funders, that visual methods can add to, or replace, traditional research tools, such as interviews.

Research has been carried out in educational settings using various visually-based activities to mediate interviews. These methods are usually judged to produce different information from that collected through traditional interviewing. For example, Bragg and Buckingham (2008) comment on teenagers creating scrapbooks that “the method gave us access to a wider range of voices than might have been obtained through interview alone” (p.121). Although Bragg and Buckingham do not argue that “any version of the self our participants presented was more authentic than any other”, we question whether the emergence of different information suggests that in certain situations visual methods might be more appropriate than traditional interviewing.

We will examine the use that we, and other researchers, have made of visually mediated encounters. Our research has included participants ranging in age from children to younger adults and adults, and has provided data about a wide range of issues, including experience of the school learning environment, the ethos of a school and attitudes to a student professional placement. We will consider the potential of these methods to be more inclusive and empowering of participants; to generate novel ideas and as part of an iterative pattern of research.

Introduction

Background
There is increasing interest in visual research methods within the social sciences, which is perhaps best understood as an expansion of visual methods beyond those disciplines and areas where they have been initially developed (Banks, 2001; Prosser, 1998). As Banks (2001) points out, it is possible to overstate this case, but “Euro-American… societies are also strongly in the thrall of language” (Banks 2001, p.8) and the academic world of research, in particular, can be seen as “a sea of words and more words, in which visually based communications are not taken as serious intellectual products” (Collier 2001, p.59).

Furthermore, there are some problems even where visual methods are used. Banks argues that the difficulty is not in using images, but in knowing how to use them, leading to instances of insight without methodological understanding. A related criticism made by the sociologist Douglas Harper, is that visual methods can produce observations “that beg for greater theoretical and substantive significance” (Harper 2002, p.19). In the present context, we consider the methodological assumptions and implications of visually mediated and more traditional methods of interviewing in an
effort to reveal what makes them different, and so when they might be better than traditional interview methods.

It is vital to grapple with these issues because the choices we make about research tools inevitably affect that research since “a tool is also a mode of language, for it says something to those that understand it, about the operations of use and their consequences” (Dewey 1938). These tools “frame practice and thus practice develops as new tools and technologies facilitate or enforce change” (Baumfield et al. 2007, p.4; Hickman, 1990). The relative ease, with current digital photographic technology, of putting together a set of photographs for photo elicitation means that it is more important than ever to develop methodological understanding of this and other visual research tools if they are to be useful in furthering understanding of the educational experience.

**Traditional interviewing**

Interviews have been defined as ‘conversational encounters to a purpose’ (Powney and Watts, 1987, p.vii) predominantly involving the ‘gathering of data through direct verbal interaction’ (Cohen and Manion, 1997, p.272). It is a method chosen by researchers, from a wide range of disciplines, who give primacy to a view of knowledge that is ‘personal, subjective and unique’(Cohen and Manion, 1997, p.6) and who aim to discover the thoughts and experiences of the individuals they encounter.

As a research method, interviewing has developed over time, reflecting both advances in technology and trends in research. Thus as well as the more traditional one-to-one, face-to-face interviews, researchers can choose to conduct focus group interviews (first used in market research in the 1950s), telephone, mobile phone, or even more recently, email interviews. Additional variation within the structure of the interview procedure itself, offers the researcher even greater flexibility. Interviews can be structured, whereby a question protocol is strictly adhered to; semi-structured, where the protocol offers guidelines and prompts for discussion, or completely unstructured where the respondent determines the direction of the interview.

Successful interviewing relies heavily on the relationship that is established by the researcher with the respondent, who must ensure that an authentic voice is heard and thus genuine data is collected. In the majority of interviews, the key to this relationship is the interaction (predominantly verbal) which occurs. Yet, it is this ‘overt privileging’ (Prosser, 2007, p.15) of verbal interaction in qualitative research and the extent to which it may exclude the voice of particular groups of people, that has been questioned over recent years (Schratz and Steiner-Löffler 1998, Pearson and Somekh 2003, Prosser 2007).

**Visually mediated encounters in education research**

Within education research there has been a growth in interest in visual methods. Much of this involves enhancing the traditional interview through using visual items, such as photographs, pictures or diagrams to mediate interviews and discussions. A range of research has been carried out in educational settings using various visually-based activities to mediate one-to-one interviews or small group discussions (e.g. Thomson, 2008; Varga–Atkins & O’Brien 2009; Wall, 2008; Woolner et al., 2007, 2008, in press).

These activities tend to facilitate revealing discussions and are usually judged to produce useful information, which is often somewhat different from the data collected through traditional interviewing. For example, Baggis and Buckingham (2008) comment on their method of asking teenagers to put together scrapbooks about their perceptions of the media that “in some cases the voices that emerged through the scrapbooks were very different to those in interview...the method gave us access to a wider range of voices than might have been obtained through interview alone” (p.121). In attempting to understand the nature of this different perspective, it is interesting to consider the features of these methods to which researchers in education, and within social science more generally, draw attention.

A central emphasis is generally given to the potential for visually mediated encounters to be more inclusive. This is partly because methods which make more use of visual and spatial material, and are less demanding of literacy skills, may widen participation (Lodge, 2007; Prosser, 2007). For example, Allen, researching sexual cultures in secondary school, comments that she has chosen to use photodiaries as a research tool to widen participation after some students in a previous study
indicated that they had found the text-based questionnaires difficult to answer in this context: “visual methods offered a means of encouraging such students to participate without having to rely on written or spoken words” (Allen, 2009: 551). Working with very young children (aged 3-4) to explore their educational surroundings, Clark has developed a ‘Mosaic’ approach which includes children’s photography, map-making and child-led tours of the environment (Clark, 2005). Clark argues that 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).

Many researchers develop this emphasis on inclusivity further, arguing that visual methods are particularly empowering: “Emancipatory and participatory research such as photo voice and photo elicitation can gather valuable input from teachers, pupils and others” (Prosser, 2007: 16). Schratz and Steiner-Löffler (1998) found when undertaking traditional research with pupils and students that “we suffered from the fact that the power relationship proved to be too much in favour of the adults when confronted by verbal arguments”, (p.236) and that in contrast, using visual methods (in this case photographs) meant that there were no expectations as to “correct or incorrect” (p.246) responses. Moving beyond this idea of visual methods as a way of avoiding problems with language, Prosser asserts that they allow participants to “set the agenda, to decide what is important, and to work at their pace” (Prosser, 2007:24).

An important aspect of using mediating visual items, which is suggested by these reflections, is the way that they give researcher and participant something to create, look at or discuss together. This has the potential to empower participants and allow them to drive the encounter, but also facilitates understanding between researcher and participant. Considering his extensive experience of photo elicitation, Harper writes that “There is a need...of bridging the gap between the worlds of the researcher and the researched. Photo elicitation may overcome the difficulties posed by in-depth interview because it is anchored in an image that is understood, at least in part, by both parties” (2002: 20).

This facility for mediation may be due in part to the immediacy of visual images. This aspect of visual materials has been noted by other researchers, though it is not always completely helpful in the wider context of carrying out the research. For example, when researching sexuality in schools, Allen found that school staff were nervous of students taking photographs because in this context they were considered to be “potentially more exposing and dangerous than written text” (2009: 553).

Why use visual methods to mediate interviews?
As discussed above, a range of researchers have pointed to the advantages of visually mediated interviews, sometimes specifically comparing these methods with more traditional interviews, and often for certain situations or for certain participants. However, many researchers have gone further than suggesting that visual artefacts can help ameliorate the difficulties of traditional interviews with some participants. It is argued that the information produced by such methods is different. So, for example, Harper claims that “photographs can jolt subjects into a new awareness of their social existence” (2002: 21). Although Baggis and Buckingham, referring to their research using scrapbooks with adolescents, are careful to point out that they are not arguing that “any version of the self our participants presented was more authentic than any other”, it must be questioned whether the emergence of different information suggests that such visual methods might sometimes be more appropriate than traditional interviewing.

Yet, social science researchers are familiar with traditional interviewing and there is extensive theoretical understanding of these developed methods. As Banks points out, this level of methodological understanding has not so far been articulated for many of the range of approaches which are classified as visual methods. If it is anticipated that visually mediated encounters can add to, or replace, traditional interviews, it remains necessary to demonstrate to researchers, and their funders, that they are particularly appropriate. The nature of the different information that they are said to produce will be related to the characteristics of the visually mediated processes. This demands a more detailed examination of the use of these methods in a range of settings.
Recent education research projects using visually mediated encounters

This paper considers the use of visually mediated encounters in three recent projects. They were all conducted as education research, by The Research Centre for Learning and Teaching based at Newcastle University ([http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cflat/)), but involve a range of purposes and participants.

Student Social Workers: developing an understanding of their role in schools
The Social Workers in Schools Project (SSWISP) places 20-25% student social workers in schools in Newcastle and Gateshead. The overall aim of the research was to contribute to theoretical thinking about the roles of social care professionals in schools by looking at the role development of student social workers on placement in schools. In order to gain access to the detailed experience of work and relationships of student social workers on placement in schools we used two sorts of visually mediated encounter in addition to focus groups. The research team of 4/5 researchers met student social workers on three occasions during their placement. 14 student social workers attended the first meeting, 11 the second meeting and four the last meeting.

The methods used on the first two days consisted of three group activities, with the groups of students moving to different rooms to carry out the next activity with a different facilitator. These activities were:

**network diagrams** – the student social workers were sitting at the same table, facilitated by a research team member, and placed post-its on an A3 sheet on which had been written names and roles of people whom then came across in their work. There was some arranging of and annotating of the post-its to indicate something about the relationship/ interaction.

**annotated workplace mapping** – the student social workers were asked to draw maps of their school and to write or draw on the maps to indicate what they felt about or did within the different areas.

**focus group discussion** - the student social workers were asked a variety of questions which included: Which school are you in and what’s it like? What have you done? What do you know of your role so far?

On the second research day although the activities remained unaltered, the instructions given to the participants with regard to the completion of the network diagrams and workplace mapping were slightly changed. When the first visual items were analysed it was found that some of the student social workers had provided considerably more detail in their annotation than others. In order to obtain more consistency of detail, the researchers gave more explicit directions about the annotation required. For example on the network diagram, rather than instructing the participants to just write the names and roles of people who they came across in their work, the researchers encouraged them to include: 1) what the contact has been about; 2) the frequency/ time etc of the contact; and 3) a comment on the quality of the contact/ the kind of support etc

At the end of each activity, the students’ previous map or network was given back to them, and comments on how the two compared were encouraged. The students were asked to write comments on the back of the maps.

On the third research day the methodology was very different. This was more of a feedback day both on the methodology and initial findings, but also an update was asked for from the students on their experience of their school placements and their training overall. Students were also consulted about their views on how we should use this research.

BSF School Rebuild Consultation
We facilitated an initial consultation with members of a school community in an 11-16 secondary school which is to be completely rebuilt as part of BSF. 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. All the year groups (Y7-Y11) were represented among the students.

The participants worked in groups which were broadly homogenous, consisting of, for example, administrative staff. 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. A range of mediating activities was used to facilitate discussion and collect data about the school: 

*Photo sorting* involved the participants, working as a group, discussing a set of 15 laminated colour photographs 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. 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)

*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.

**Evaluating the Positive Psychology programme**

The Positive Psychology programme runs across two secondary schools and is designed to help learners access a curriculum that is better balanced between the content of what they have to learn and the skills that they will display in order to be successful. The researchers were keen to explore the idea of the ethos of a school environment, and how this can have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of students and staff. The methodology aimed to document the development of the programme over its pilot year and an element of this involved visits to the schools, one towards the beginning and one towards the end of the academic year, where the researchers met school staff (teachers and non-teaching staff) and some students who were experiencing the innovation.
At the beginning of the academic year the research team spent two days in each school and interviewed approximately 100 students and 70 staff. At the end of the year one day was spent in each school and approximately 70 students and 20 staff were interviewed. The students (Year 7 and Year 9) were all involved in the positive psychology programme and the staff members interviewed included teachers, head teachers, support staff technicians, catering and administrative staff.

The mediating activities were:
- Diamond ranking where the participants were asked to rank nine photographs based on their judgements of 'good things happening in your school' and 'rubbish things happening in your school'. The photographs represented formal learning spaces (classrooms, learning resource centres), social areas (playgrounds, dining halls) and public areas such as corridors and entrances.
- Network diagrams where the participants were asked to write the names and roles of 'people who help you learn' on post-its, then arrange these and annotate them with detail about how the person identified helps them to learn.

**Elements of the visually mediated encounters experienced in these projects**

**Immediacy**

'It is] there is black and white. Visual had more of an impact’

(Student social worker, referring to network diagram)

In all the projects, we were struck, and so were some of our participants, by the way the visual materials provided an immediate way into discussions about their experiences. So, for example, during the school rebuild consultation, the photographs used in the photo sorting activity were useful in initially stimulating discussion. Respondents would pick up the photographs, sort and sift through them, talking about the issues related to the image, although some groups were still initially more reluctant to talk. When this sorting was more structured by the diamond ranking activity, in this project and during the Positive Psychology evaluation, there was less unevenness to the initial responses, though perhaps correspondingly less wide-ranging discussions about the photographs.

This immediacy extended to the activities not based on photographs, as the above quotation demonstrates. During the school rebuild consultation, the maps also provided good starting points for conversations, perhaps better for some participants than the more open photo elicitation exercise. Some of the staff and pupils were very obviously nervous when they sat down, but the mapping activity was practical and straightforward. Many people visibly relaxed, as they began to draw the routes of their typical days and discuss their views with one another. Using a map of the school enabled participants to pinpoint very specific features that they wished to comment on. Through the mapping and colour-coding, the picture that was created provided instant visual feedback to all.

The immediacy of the visual artefacts was also useful to the researchers:

'I have learnt things about the role of the student social worker in schools via the two mappings that I would not have learn had there only been interviews or focus groups. I still have the school maps in my head when I think of this research.'

(Researcher, Student social worker project)

An additional advantage for the researchers of the immediate connection with the participant was where the researcher was unfamiliar with the content focus of the research, such as social workers in schools or school architecture. In these cases, the participant was able to connect with the activities, using language which was appropriate to the particular context, and the researcher could allow their own understanding of the area to develop through the encounter. This can be seen as an aspect of the empowerment of participants in visually mediated interviews, which is often claimed for visual research methods more generally. The issue of empowerment in these projects will be further explored below.
Inclusivity
The invitation to draw a route on a map or look at photographs was welcomed, in both the projects which took place in school, by some of the students and non-teaching staff. Although their literacy skills would have probably been quite adequate for various written responses, some participants expressed relief that they did not need to express themselves in this format. Once they were engaged in the activities, most were quite relaxed about annotating their maps and diamonds with comments and we were only very occasionally asked to scribe for participants. Therefore, for these participants, the inclusivity advantage of the visual mediation seemed to be related to confidence rather than absolute skills in literacy. This lack of confidence could still cause gaps in participation, however, through people asking not to take part or only offering minimal involvement.

It must be noted here that the visually based activities were sometimes questioned or even rejected by those participants who felt more able to express themselves in words to researchers. During the school rebuild consultation, a small minority of the adult participants were reluctant to complete some of the activities, demanding instead that their views on the school premises were simply recorded. It seemed that their ideas about the school were so clear, and they felt so confident of their ability to put these into words, that they considered the visual activities to be distractions. Although none of the student social workers refused to complete the activities, there were some reservations expressed. Speaking at the end of the project, one student commented that

‘At the time I thought it felt a bit childish’
(Student social worker, referring to mapping)

Empowering participants
As discussed above, this aspect of visually mediated encounters is often linked, with reason, to claims for inclusivity. However, during these projects, we were particularly aware of how the methods enabled participants more generally to have more control over the research agenda. It seemed that the visual mediation resulted in them being less reliant on the researcher’s perspective and knowledge of the area, and so more able to contribute their own understandings. For example, during the school rebuild consultation, members of the cleaning staff completed the photograph sorting through considering many photographs but offered a particular perspective on the practical aspects of almost all of the areas, such as the type of flooring and the weaknesses of particular furniture. During the mapping exercise, these cleaners made related comments about carpeting in various places across the school. Needless to say, the same activities provoked quite different discussions within other groups of participants. During the Positive Psychology evaluation’s diamond ranking, a single set of photographs was used in each school for both adult and student participants. These were used to produce different patterns of ranking, reflecting the differing concerns of students and staff.

Something to look at
Other researchers have tended to concentrate on the advantages of having visual mediation between researcher and participant, but during these projects the benefits of visual mediation were felt more widely.

Researcher and participant
In all the projects, researchers found it invaluable to have the mappings, network diagrams or arrangements of photographs to which to refer during the encounters. It felt very natural to ask “Why have you picked that photograph out?” or “Do you spend much time in that part of the school?”. There is something here about having another focus whilst talking other than the person you are talking to, having something visual.

Participants also volunteered information as it occurred to them through the activities. This was often not the well rehearsed aspects of the subject matter which they already felt clear about, but other ideas that emerged through completing the task. This was observed during the school rebuild consultation. The school was widely perceived as inadequate by its users and 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 activities succeeded in unearthing successful features of the existing school and also provoked some positive comments, annotations and discussions. These
positive impressions elicited by the mapping and diamond ranking were validated by discussions on the second consultation day.

The conversations with the student social workers seemed to benefit from the visual mediation in a similar way. During the focus groups, it was felt that some participants aired quite well rehearsed positions and discussions did not progress. In contrast, during the mapping and network diagram activities, new ideas emerged as the participants described and explained parts of their representations to the researcher. Reflecting on the experience of mapping, one student offered the following comments:

‘I enjoyed the conversation around it…it made me think about other work that I could be involved in…’

(Student social worker, referring to mapping)

Researcher and researcher

Across the projects the researchers appreciated having the mappings, network diagrams and diamond rankings to refer to and discuss as the projects progressed:

‘easier for us in a group to look at the maps and talk about them, compare and give cursory analysis’

(Researcher, Student social worker project)

The visual artefacts provided particularly helpful points of reference where researchers had quite different background knowledge and understanding of the contexts in which the investigations took place. This was especially experienced during the student social worker project where the researchers were widely differentiated in this respect. Within the individual projects, the various visual methods also aided triangulation of themes. This was sometimes completed visually, as when the liked and disliked places from the school rebuild consultation mappings were collated. The resulting maps for students and for staff revealed commonalities and contrasts in the preferences of these two broad groups of participants, and were also part of conversations between researchers.

Particularly in the Positive Psychology and student social worker projects, which took place over more than one occasion, the possibility which the visual items afforded of being able to refer back to earlier representations was useful to the researchers. This important aspect of these methods, which suggests their appropriateness to iterative projects, was also evident to the participants in the student social worker project who were given the opportunity to use them in this way, as will be discussed in the next section.

Participant and participant

Within all the projects, the visual activities provoked discussions between participants, as they engaged in the same activity and made comparisons between their revealed experiences and those of their neighbours. The act of recording visually enabled the participants to see what they are ‘saying’ in a way that would be more difficult to ‘see’ what was coming from a solely verbal discussion. They could add to their network diagrams and mappings, revising them in response to what they heard and thought about.

In the student social worker project much more opportunity was given to the smaller number of participants to use the mapping and network diagrams to make comparisons between their initial responses, early in their placements, and their later experiences. They found this to be a very useful reflection process, to which a number of participants referred:

‘It made me think about what it was like…about how [my] perceptions had changed’
‘Memories fade but we had the [original] map’
‘I had more a sense of belonging. I knew who my little tribe were…had a better understanding of peoples’ roles. I’d left people off first time’

(Student social workers, referring to mapping)

‘An aid to reflection’
‘It helped me reflect on who was in school’

(Student social workers, referring to network diagram)
Iterative aspect

As suggested above, there was a very strong sense that the use of visual mediation over the two separate occasions in the student social worker project aided reflection. The longitudinal aspect of the student social worker project, and the way that the networks and mappings from the previous session were provided to compare with their subsequent versions, allowed them to identify and consider changes in their ideas, feelings, patterns of work, expectations and relationships. Thus the student social workers appeared to engage in learning, through the visual processes and the accompanying discussion, in a way that they did not through the focus group sessions. These focus groups seemed to provoke comparison of the different school experiences and complaints about particular placements. When students were asked to recall what they liked from the different methods they could refer to particular things they had learnt from the visual approaches and accompanying conversations but not from the comments on the focus groups.

The other projects discussed here did not facilitate such intensive reflection for the participants, but the visual items produced during the visually mediated encounters have allowed the researchers to reflect and develop themes. In the Positive Psychology evaluation, this process was made fundamental to the design of the research, with mappings and network diagrams being completed by samples of the relevant people on two occasions, so comparisons could be made. During the school rebuild consultation, the comments and ideas about the school, which were used as starting points for the second day’s activities, were taken directly from annotations on maps and diamond rankings, as well as from comments made by participants during the activities.

Furthermore, as is suggested by many of the previous observations, the presence of the visual materials and the actions of the participants in creating them, arranging photographs, post-its and stickers, facilitated a conversation that genuinely developed. These more implicit iterations allowed ideas to be considered, adjusted and developed between participants and researcher.

Spatial aspect

‘Having a post-it that you could move was helpful’
(Student social worker, referring to network diagram)

The arranging of various items during the visually mediated encounters seemed to assist individual participants in their thinking. During the student social worker project, a participant remarked that it was helpful that when thinking of people for the network diagram they ‘could write in any order’. The network diagram allowed thoughts to be built up separately from the person, and rearranged as became appropriate, whereas in speaking one has to make sure it is all formed and coherent before it is uttered.

The development of ideas through the spatial organisation of more purely visual information was also observed when participants completed diamond ranking. Since in both the projects, participants generally worked in pairs, this arranging of the photographs while discussing their content was an important part of reaching agreement on ranking. Interestingly where participants worked individually, however, they were also observed to order and then reorder the photographs.

The mapping activities carried out during the school rebuild consultation also allowed reflections on experiences in the school to be developed through engaging initially with the spatial aspect of that experience. Since the participants in this project were provided with plans of the school premises, this was perhaps more of a spatial than a visual task but still seemed to facilitate reflection. Participants who were initially quite nervous were able to orientate themselves with the plan and structure their responses to the research through reference to the plan and their additions to it.

Conclusions

How are visually mediated encounters different?

During the projects described above, our observations of the characteristic elements of visually mediated encounters overlap to a large extent with those of other researchers. However, as will be discussed in more detail below, we tend to give more prominence to the iterative and spatial aspects
of our methods, seeing these as important contributors to the ability of the methods to provide participants with agency and produce different information from a traditional interview.

The apparently obvious fact that the visually mediated encounters provide something to look at or refer to has been noted by others in this area. However, such observations generally centre on the way that this links researcher and participant, with the focus often being upon inclusivity and the breaking down of barriers between researched and researcher. In our projects, we also noted how this aspect of visual mediation is also important in meetings between researchers, within groups of participants and as an aid for reflection for individual participants. The availability of a visual artefact was therefore important in allowing an iterative element to several of these projects.

The immediacy of visual-spatial information is an important part of why having something to look at is helpful. Participants are drawn into the research process; their discussions and reflections can run in parallel to looking at or creating a visual item. Other researchers have drawn attention to how photographs can bridge gaps in understanding (e.g. Harper, 2002), and this would seem to be central to the utility of a wide range of mediating activities.

This ability of the visual mediation to make a more direct connection with participant experience, which may be particularly observed when participants create their own photographs or maps, is clearly linked to the issue of participant empowerment. Researchers frequently claim that visual methods are more appealing to participants, contributing to their inclusivity, and we certainly observed some instances of this effect. However, discussions of how these methods allow participants to set or take more control of the agenda of the research is clearly a more general and important claim. From our experience and that of other researchers, it would seem that it can often be substantiated. Visual mediation can facilitate the progressive development of shared understanding on a range of topics between researcher and participant. However, it is necessary to remember that occasionally participants do not experience these methods as empowering and may use their agency to subvert or avoid the visual activities. This was experienced during the school rebuild project and other researchers have described related problems with teachers using lots of words when they were invited to draw diagrams or pictures to represent their experiences (Varga-Atkins & O’Brien, 2009).

Within our projects, we used a range of visual mediation activities and artefacts, which reflects the variety of methods used by social science researchers in this field, particularly in education research. Across this range of methods, however, we were struck by the importance of the spatial aspect of the activities. We see this as linked to other ideas about immediacy and inclusion, since the request to trace a typical day on a school plan seemed to function as a way into the research for the participant, as others have described using photographs (Harper, 2002; Banks, 2001). The spatial aspect of the visually mediated encounters was not just a part of widening participation, however, since rearranging elements of networks and diamond ranks seemed to facilitate the development of participants’ ideas and opinions. This is part of the iterative process, which we feel is valuable in any research, and which perhaps deserves to be more closely observed and recorded.

Interestingly, this spatial aspect of the visually medicated encounter is not dependent on presenting visual materials. Discussing the use of diamond ranking of statements with children, O’Kane reports that her participants “preferred methods of active communication (doing or moving) rather than passive communication (‘just talking’)” (O’Kane, 2000: 153). It is also notable that within Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955), encounters are based around the spatial location of elements, such as people, events or roles, along constructs, which are bipolar representations of qualities within the client’s world. The idea is that understanding and reflection about the client’s views of their world are developed through locating and reordering items along these constructs.

**Is the information produced different?**

In all three of the projects discussed, information was produced which appeared to be different from the results of traditional interviews. This was most clear in the student social worker project, where a focus group interview was also conducted with the participants. However, it was also apparent during the school rebuild consultation that the methods, in finding positive aspects of the premises, uncovered a real, though less obvious, side to experience of the existing school. This discovering or construction of different ideas and information through visually mediated activities has been reported by other researchers (Baggis & Buckingham, 2008) and is clearly a central reason for advocating their wider use.
It is still not clear, however, exactly how the process of a visually mediated encounter facilitates this production of different information. Our reflections on our use of these methods with a range of participants in a number of projects provide some suggestions, but more focused methodological research is required.

The relationship of visual and verbal approaches to interviewing

Finally, we began by setting visually mediated encounters in opposition to traditional interviews with their central reliance on verbal communication. Yet, throughout our research we have made use of the comments, annotations and verbal reflections of our participants. In this we are not alone. For example, the established visual method of photo elicitation proceeds by examining the discussion provoked by looking at photographs. As noted above, the aspect of some visually mediated encounters which we term the spatial element is central to some non-visual, word-based research and reflection methods.

The projects reported above, however, together with the experiences of other researchers, provide evidence that there are some characteristics of visually mediated encounters, and the information they produce, which are distinct from traditional verbal interview methods. The context of a particular project will probably indicate whether this suggests using one or the other, or seeing them as complementary and combining them. As methodological understanding of visually mediated encounters develops they should certainly not be seen as off the wall methods to plug gaps in traditional interviews. In contrast they are methods which provide distinct insights and should not continue to be considered in relation, or reaction, to traditional non-visual methods.

References


Woolner, P., Clark, J., Hall, E., Tiplady, L., Thomas, U. and Wall, K. (*in press*). Pictures are necessary but not sufficient: using a range of visual methods to engage users about school design *Learning Environments Research* 13(1)