

Tool: Diamond ranking of images

Range of contexts of use

Over the course of the CoReD project, Diamond ranking has been used in a range of schools, from kindergartens to secondary institutions, in Denmark, Sweden, Italy and the UK. The existing premises were extremely varied, ranging in age from recently built to 50 years old to over a hundred, including some renovated buildings, and based in urban, suburban and rural areas. An apparent similarity across this diversity was an intention to consider the educational environments currently being provided and plan future alterations. The activity has been successfully conducted with children of all ages, from a minimum of 5 years old, as well as with adults in a number of different roles, including teaching, teaching support, leadership and afterschool care. Depending on exactly how the activity was used, Diamond ranking was able to contribute to the design stage of *planning* or form part of *reflection* on current spaces and practices.

Rationale for activities and tool adopted

School communities used Diamond ranking for exploring particular educational issues in relation to the design and use of space. This occurred in a number of differing contexts, including as part of continuing professional development, but mostly as evaluation of premises or due to dissatisfaction with specific areas of the premises. Some projects were led by people at the municipal or district level, but others were initiated and carried out by school staff, including principals, teachers and teaching support staff. An overarching concern was for school space to support pedagogy, but this could involve staff discussing the adequacy of specific areas or the use of diamond ranking activities to develop staff, or indeed student, understanding of the relationship between space and practice.

Nature of starting environments

Most, though not all, of the case studies involved participants based in a shared educational environment with which they had some concerns, but where there were broadly supportive professional relationships. Thus, the tool does seem to appeal particularly to people within school communities that are not entirely satisfied with their setting, although they might not be able to articulate the reasons for this. The municipal use, however, of Diamond ranking with educators from a number of schools demonstrates that it is not necessary for users to have shared space or to be particularly dissatisfied with their educational spaces.

What happened?

All the uses of the Diamond ranking tool centred on collaborative participatory working between education practitioners, sometimes completing rankings themselves, sometimes using the tool with students. Often, though not always, there was involvement of municipal actors or project partners as external facilitators. The particular processes were varied, reflecting the flexibility of the tool. The variation is best understood through the range of images used and the criteria used for the rank. Rankings were completed with photographs taken of a range of areas in the school, centring on an existing, shared concern (e.g. student support) or to identify major shared concerns (e.g. problems with indoor-outdoor connection). Other tool users ranked sets of generic images relating to a particular sort of learning or issue (e.g. outdoor learning) or generic images of a range of educational spaces ranked according to different criteria (e.g. suitability for instruction; suitability for concentration).

All uses of the tool produced the rankings themselves and the discussion about the ranking, sometimes with comments recorded, either as written notes on the diamonds or as audio recordings. In most cases, the activity was intended to be the first stage in longer term redesign processes, but the rankings were used in differing ways, principally either to highlight and discuss concerns or to begin to explore possibilities and initiate design ideas.

In all cases, participants and facilitators reported that the Diamond ranking activity was engaging, and it is evident, from recorded and observed uses, that it supported discussion about the design and use of educational space. For example, a teacher facilitator talked about 'excitement' when 11-12 year old students carried out the ranking, while one of the students commented that it was 'easy to do'. Teaching staff participating in Diamond ranking commented that looking at photographs of their own school spaces enabled them to look anew at familiar places, although this was sometimes uncomfortable as they did not look as child-friendly and welcoming as they had hoped (this was noted particularly by kindergarten practitioners in Italy). Thus, productive discussions about the design and use of educational space were enabled between educational practitioners with a diversity of roles as well as with student users of school space.



Danish educational practitioners used Diamond ranking to discuss the design and use of space within their schools as part of a continuing professional development initiative.

Outcomes

There was a range of outcomes to the projects using Diamond ranking. The use of the tool with Danish education practitioners from a number of schools as part of a professional development event resulted in the initiation of four practitioner-led, focused projects to redesign specific areas of their schools. It is intended that these practitioner-led redesign projects will enhance student engagement and, ultimately, achievement. Following a similar rationale, a project with students in England also produced plans for a redesign of a school area, but this looks less likely to progress further as students are less able to make changes. In another school, the (limited) responses generated from the local community were seen by the school principal as justifying her decision not to invest further time and money in developing an area of the school.

More general feedback about the successful and problematic aspects of a particular school environment were produced by other projects, which have been shared across these school communities and will provide a basis for future discussion and redesign. In particular, in Italy, within a district where there is existing concern about the alignment of school design with pedagogical intentions, the understanding generated by the Diamond ranking will contribute to refurbishments that are planned for several schools.

Across the projects, the tool empowered educational practitioners to develop an understanding of the importance of the physical environment for teaching and learning. This learning has informed decisions taken at the levels of district, school and individual teacher.



Actual and planned changes to school space in Denmark (left) and UK (right) resulting from collaborations initiated by the Diamond ranking tool.



Conclusions

Who should use this tool and when?

The case studies tended to confirm the view we have developed through previous use of Diamond ranking: that it is a versatile and flexible tool, which can be used in differing ways, with a range of participants, including young children. A key contributor to the flexibility of Diamond ranking is the way it can be used with photographs of either a specific school setting or with generic images, with this choice emanating from the aims of the project and affecting the resulting discussion. It is notable, however, that where facilitators assembled sets of generic images, they chose to work with pictures that were broadly nationally and culturally appropriate.

Conclusions

Although the tool does not require specialist facilitation (which is important, given that lots of systems of participatory design rely on architects or designers to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration), it does appear that thoughtful and insightful results are particularly produced when someone outside the participant group (e.g. the teacher where the participants are students) or external to the educational institution(s) oversees the activity and the discussions that are generated. Given that seeing the school from an external perspective seems, for some participants, to have been a key experience, initiating new conversations about the design and use of their school space, it is worth considering if there are generic prompt questions that could be provided for participants managing their own ranking activity.

Although the case studies support our assumption that Diamond ranking can be used at any stage of a redesign process, there is a clear tendency for the tool to be chosen as part of *planning change* or *initiating the development* of space. Its use frequently centred on facilitating users' reflection on existing space, but with this more often being a first step in altering to a well-established space, as opposed to evaluating a new space. It is notable that within other CoReD projects, where new premises were evaluated ('post occupancy evaluation' - POE), Diamond ranking was not the chosen tool.

Key findings from case studies and changes to tool instructions or recommended process.

Diamond ranking is particularly suited for use with the earlier stages of collaborative engagement with school space. Based on the analysis of experiences across the case studies, we added a recommendation about enlisting a facilitator for the activity and suggested some questions that participants can ask themselves as they complete the diamonds, preferably prompted by this facilitator.

Heuristic: Four principles to facilitating collaborative engagement about school space

This tool is extremely effective as a first step in supporting users to think about the relationship between their educational space and the teaching, learning and other activities that take place there. Across the case studies, it enabled the investigations and evaluations to '**start where people are (mentally and physically)**'. Then, through generating conversations about how the specific educational space is or could be used, or about how unknown spaces might be used, the tool helps people to '**understand the intertwining of physical, organisational and social aspects of school environment**'.

Some, but not all, case studies made use of the tool to '**facilitate the exploration of ideas and possibilities**', with key factors in this regard being the choice or images and the assistance of a facilitator. Most of the case studies involved the tool as a stand-alone activity, rather than combined with other tools into a series, but most had ambitions for shared learning generated through activities with the tool to influence '**the complex lengthy process that is change**'.