



fig. 02.13 Spatial Conceptual Mapping

The Desk - workshop

[Abandon your teacher desk]

The following fictitious workshop series was written to address the concept of the 'desk' in school and what it represents. Moreover, it reflects on my decision a number of years ago not to have a 'teacher' desk or chair in the classroom in which I teach.

with:

Peter Kraftl: Geographer;
 Ivan Illich: Philosopher;
 Betsy Greer: Craftivist
 Mitch Resnick: MIT Media Lab

A selection of protagonists were invited to share their perspective on learning, community and spaces in a series of performance monologues designed as a sequence of participatory workshops. Centre stage was an artefact synonymous with school in the traditional sense—the desk.

OPEN SPACE -DISRUPT

Desk: *(Through a voice recording resembling digital voice transcription)* Thank you for joining me today. Let me begin by introducing you to my learning space. As you can see I am not alone and generally on a good day can be accompanied by 20 or so 'colleagues'. There is a tendency for repetitive actions to define our daily interactions and little opportunity for our interaction apart from that of the student who uses my environment. You can see by markings left on me that I have been a temporary learning home to many students over the years. There are bigger versions of me, usually one which sits at centre stage, generally regarded as the 'teacher's desk' and the most looked at.

The school desk in this performance sits within the confines of a classroom. Here the classroom is defined as an enclosed space of four walls. The audience is invited to sit /stand around the edge of four walls as each protagonist presents their interpretation.

Enter Peter Kraftl:

Kraftl: In many settings...physical activity is used to break down the formal 'educational' relationship between the teacher and learner.

(pause as Kraftl takes two chairs and proceeds to place them side by side by the desk. He invites a member of the audience to sit alongside him.)

Kraftl: ...we see the importance of 'taking time' and having space, especially compared with the heavy routine of school.

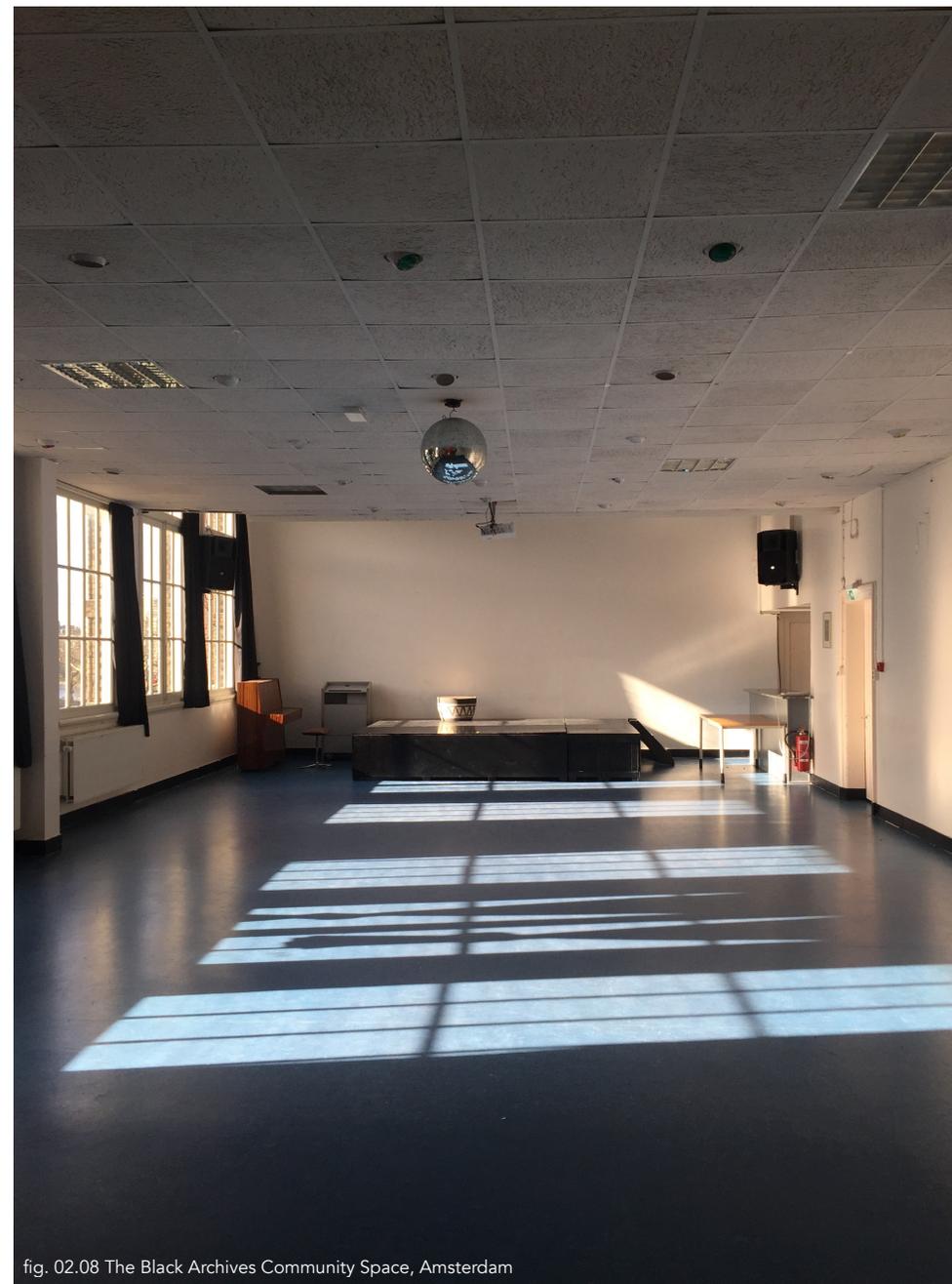


fig. 02.08 The Black Archives Community Space, Amsterdam

(Kraftl motions to participants to stretch out by the desk in a series of gestures. The two 'actors' proceed to stand and perform a series of exercises in unison. PK inviting the 'student' to copy- then lead. All the space including within and amongst the rest of the participants in permitted. The audience is invited to join in the movements and positions mapped with tape on the ground)

Enter Ivan Illich:

Illich: The man-made environment has become as inscrutable (difficult to fathom out) as nature is for the primitive.

(Illich invites members of the audience to help him pick up the desk. They begin to remove the desk from the bounds of the classroom, negotiating space to take the desk outside onto the street. The desk is situated on the pavement- the audience are invited to follow the movements of the 'actors'.)

Illich: At the same time, educational materials have been monopolized by school. Simple educational objects have been expensively packaged by the knowledge industry by school. They have become specialized tools for professional educators, and their cost has been inflated by forcing them to stimulate either environments or teachers.

(Illich situates pencils and sticky notes on the desk. He invites passers by to join the group. Participants are invited to share a thought with each other

regarding the idea of educational materials- note it down and stick it to the table for others to see.)

Illich: If we are to deschool, both tendencies must be reversed. The general physical environment must be made accessible.

(the audience are motioned to take a note from someone else, read it, fold it and take it with them)

Enter Betsy Greer

Greer: The creation of things by hand leads to a better understanding of democracy, because it reminds us that we have power.

(Greer sits on the desk producing hand printed labels and some crochet work from her bag. She invites audience members to attach the labels and crochet work to the desk and/or surrounding area)

Create something that gets people to ask questions...invite others to join the conversation about the social/political intent of our creations.

(with this she invites the audience to tie a thread of yarn to the desk and walk away from the desk, unrolling the ball of yarn)

Enter Mitch Resnick

(participants remain in their chosen position. Resnick produces a large sheet and places it over the desk and attached threads of yarn. He then sits under the desk which appears as a tent)



fig. 02.09 Nassib's Bakery, Documenta14, Kassel

Resnick: As I am sure you have read, I believe that school, indeed most of our working life should be more like kindergarten, therefore when referring to a sandbox I am alluding to an open-ended approach to learning where projects, passions, peers and play are essential features. When I see a desk I see more than a place to complete worksheets. I see a den or cave, a game board, a house on stilts, a tunnel or lighthouse. With a large collection of these, when giving ownership over the space to the children I imagine a whole city of caves growing. This open ended exploration is what I refer to as wide walls, plenty of space for exploration and iteration. With high ceilings I refer to opportunities to challenge and deepen inquiry.

Extending the tactic of openness and the teacher desk I continue to discuss ownership of learning spaces and environments below.

Students respond to the question:

Why isn't there a teacher's desk or chair in our classroom?

I think we don't need one because we don't (tell) respond to that (teacher) alone.

We want to say it aloud so other people so we can **make connections** out of it - having freedom in class.

Because the teacher doesn't want a 'traditional' class.

I think the teacher wants to know what we are doing and this way it is easier.

I think Mr Mark doesn't want to be a 'teacher' but more like a **leading student**.

Because we want to **learn altogether** and that there isn't one very 'important' person in this class.

To have some **freedom** around

[Collective Ownership

Build open spaces - make decisions together around shared values.

Ask what if? or How about...? Consider the learning space to be in constant motion, remixable and responsive to inquiries.]

#open (The internet is) a dynamic, complex and interconnected ecosystem of people, ideas and information. It thrives on collaboration, sharing of information and skills both widely and freely to invite participation, shared decision making and shared resources. (Mozilla Festival, 2017)

What if the above values of open shared by Mozilla were mirrored in school?

The following short examples address this question.

Example One: Open Space

I guided an inquiry into classroom design with my students at the beginning of the school year. I encouraged ownership of the learning space based on shared principles contained within this tactical collection.

"Children are ravenous for spaces that they feel good about. Crafters want their environments to be an extension of their minds " (Rowsell, J., in conversation with Shillitoe, M., 2019)



fig. 02.10 Mapping ownership of a learning space (i)

Following two proposed models considering flow of movement, access to materials, varied seating/groupings, light and wall space, the young learners got to work remodelling the space. It became their space, an extension of themselves as noted above. Throughout the year the space constantly shifted to suit the needs and inquiries, complimented by the abandonment of the designated teacher desk.



fig. 02.11 Open Learning Space

Example Two: Open learning

What if you came to school and you could learner what ever you want- what would you learn?

Considering structures and some barriers, the students and I imagined what a alternative sort of school could be, based on our diverse backgrounds?

Initial thoughts tended to revolve around 'traditional' school subjects such as art, history however in practice our first delve into an 'inquiry lab' led to greater focus on specific interests the group had a curiosity for, listed here: History of the first world war, history of Irene Sendler, making books for family members, foundations of programming, exploring 'Cosmo' robot and combining items from mixed media possibility kits.

These specific learning inquiries unfolded a range of interests that otherwise would remain hidden whilst



fig. 02.12 Mapping ownership of a learning space (ii)

indirectly uncovering preferred ways in which young learners learn or have been conditioned to learn. Whilst the open nature of 'What if...' offered freedom to make any choice, initial ideas were in my opinion very school like and almost created with teacher expectations in mind.

As the inquiry lab developed further, I was interested in how my interventions, such as defining concrete inquiry questions or arts based practices may lead to deeper personal inquiries. Would these personal explorations support more curriculum driven inquiries from the regular inquiry framework.

Example Three: Learner Agency

Intertwined with agency is student action. Concerns were raised by 11/12 years olds about access to outdoor resources and lack of space in the playground especially as this was the first time they had to share the space with kindergarten and younger children.

In response, and directly evolving from some of the initial solutions suggested by the students we held a spontaneous playground meeting with all students. The goal being to create a set of playground essential agreements. The results of this led to a greater ownership of the space, with guidelines to support both differences in age and types of play.

(Note: this approach was questioned and challenged by leadership of the school as they were not informed or included in the process, prior to it taking place)

"Are the children running the school?", was a question raised.

I question whether schools fully embrace a curriculum framework of inquiry with it's heart in agency, when both teacher and student agency is challenged. This is where a critique of school hierarchies is important.