



Methods for Change

Participatory Mapping

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Participatory Mapping



In this method, a map is understood as 'a space to work in' that can reveal new possibilities and potential, rather than as a tool for representing data about a place. It involves the researcher working collaboratively with groups of participants to think about a neighbourhood, community or institution, and to locate the things that are meaningful to them within that place. Maps are created by participants, who may draw their own map of a place or add to an existing map with place markers, text, or drawings, in response to questions from the researcher. A map contains movement, processes, and relationships, it can illuminate the connections between people and place, and it can be seen as a space for interaction. Mapping approaches can help participants and researchers to see and use data differently, and to access types of data that may otherwise remain hidden, including perceptions, emotions and experiences. Through this method, participants are able to show the researcher and one another where they 'see' themselves and others on the map, to link different activities and feelings to places, to say where they go and with whom, and where they don't go and why. Participatory Mapping can therefore tell researchers something about the nature of a place, and can be particularly useful for understanding how various groups in an area or community may use, experience and value places in different ways.

Participatory Mapping



How does Participatory Mapping create or contribute to change?

Participatory Mapping can offer participants an opportunity to challenge current conceptualisations of a place. Maps produced in the course of the research are not viewed as static, but as open to the potential of being changed. Change can happen for participants in the process of carrying out the activity and discussing it afterwards. As a participatory activity, mapping can build individuals' confidence and foster understanding and connection between group members. Participants are encouraged to see the world from the viewpoint of others, as well as feeling that their own perspective on a place is recognised and valued.

An important aspect of this method is comparing maps that are produced by different individuals and groups. Involving participants in a process of comparison and discussion can lead to deeper understanding of the perspectives and values of different groups, as well raising awareness about challenges, exclusions or barriers that may be faced. This method therefore has the potential to contribute to the development of more inclusive places.

What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Participatory Mapping approaches draw on theories of relational identities, power and positionality; they are concerned with where we position ourselves in relation to others, and where others, particularly those in power, position us. Through this method, researchers and participants can ask what a map claims to represent versus what we and others see and experience. By facilitating deep interaction with varied data on perceptions, emotions and experiences, this approach can prompt critical reflections on traditional, officially produced data about a place. It can therefore be particularly powerful for research in places that are typically viewed in 'deficit terms' – i.e. in terms of what they lack, rather than their attributes. Like other participatory and relational methods, Participatory Mapping research is seen as a process of 'doing with' rather than 'doing to'. It emphasises relationship building among and between different groups of participants, and aims to support the capacity of individuals and groups to develop leadership, decision-making and agency. The visual and artistic elements that are brought together in this method can enable participants to reflect on relationships and experiences and to make judgments about them.

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Why might I want to use Participatory Mapping?

- This approach is particularly useful in research that is interested in belonging. As well as looking at what it means to belong to a place, it can also reveal how particular groups are excluded from certain spaces and can support the identification of practical steps to overcome barriers to inclusion.
- Participatory Mapping can bring quantitative data to life. Looking at a map can make quantitative data or statistics feel more 'real' to the viewer, encouraging them to think more deeply and in a less detached way about the people that use that space.
- It can provide a rich picture of perceptions, emotions, and experiences of a place, in a way that survey data cannot.
- Participatory Mapping can help researchers and participants understand aspects of a place that are important to groups and individuals, but which may otherwise be hidden. It can therefore be useful in research that aims to change the way people or institutions see and understand themselves and their relationships with others.
- It can also raise awareness about unfamiliar places and help to demystify them. The maps created by participants can be used as a starting point for learning about a new place. In sharing their maps, participants are given the opportunity to tell a different story about an area or place than that which is usually presented.
- This method is engaging and interactive, and can be used with a wide range of groups with differing priorities or abilities. It can quickly and cheaply produce captivating visual artefacts, which provide an accessible way for participants to respond to data produced in the research and to play a role in its analysis.

Step by step guide to Participatory Mapping:

- 1. Get some maps.** This method can be used at a range of different scales. The map(s) you use could be an Ordnance Survey map or Google map of a city, neighbourhood, university campus or hospital, to name a few examples. You could also use internal floorplans of a building such as a school or shopping centre. You may want to print multiple copies of large maps, depending on how many people you are working with, or you could use virtual maps.
- 2. Engage with the map.** Look at the map together with participants. This activity may be repeated several times with different groups of participants who use a space in different ways, for example teachers, students and parents within a school. The first question could be: How do you feel when you see this map? What is your first reaction?

It's important to build a trusted relationship with participants before starting the mapping activity so that they understand the purpose of the research and feel comfortable sharing their ideas and perspectives with you. This could involve focus groups, informal meetings or chats, which will also help develop your research questions and understand what areas or issues may be important to explore.

- 3. Ask directed questions.** The aim is to find out about relationships, activities and connections. The specific questions asked will depend on the group and the overarching research questions, but some examples include:
 - Where are you on the map?
 - Where do you go? How do you get there? Who do you go with? How often?

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Step by step guide to Participatory Mapping:

- What do you do there?
- Where haven't you been?
- What are the assets in this community? What makes this place great?
- Where do you go to have fun?
- Where are the important people in your life located? Where are the people who hold the power?
- What emotions do you associate with different parts of the map?
- What would you like to change?

This is likely to generate lots of discussion, including around why participants do not go to certain places. You can also ask what is missing, or what don't they see represented in the map.

4. Use different materials to redraw the map. Participants can be invited to answer these questions in creative, practical ways. Pins, coloured dots, or post it notes can be used to mark important places. Participants can draw or write on the map. Blue tac and string can be used to show connections between people or places. At this point the activity can become a little chaotic and confusing! You could also ask participants to draw their own version of a map or a place, then compare this with an 'official' map. How does it differ?

5. Record everything that is produced. Audio recordings and notes can be useful for documenting the conversations that take place around the mapping activity. It is also important to photograph the maps – these can then be compared later on to demonstrate visually how different groups have responded to the activity.

6. Use complementary methods. As well as recording the conversation that goes on around the mapping activity, you could carry out interviews, focus groups or other

complementary methods to gather in-depth responses from participants.

7. Compare the maps. Participants involved in the research are invited to share the things they have produced with one another, and compare similarities and differences in their maps. Word clouds can be made to display the things that were said about places alongside images of different maps. This begins the process of analysing the data (the maps themselves and conversations taking place around them) and it can also generate additional data as participants talk through their ideas and compare perspectives.

It is important that it is not just the researcher who gains an understanding of how groups experience a place differently, but for the groups and individuals involved in the research to see this too.

8. Identify what happens next. Ideally, tangible change should result from this activity, and it has the potential to support the formation of more inclusive and collaborative places, communities and practices. It can highlight how there are multiple experiences and understandings of a place that are important to take into account in decision-making, such as the different perceptions of assets in a community by policymakers, members of different communities, or people of different ages, for example. To make the most of this potential, the researcher may wish to facilitate a discussion between different groups as they share their maps, perspectives and findings, with the aim of identifying practical steps that can be put into action. Think about how the maps and any other artefacts produced can be used in the future to illustrate reports, in an exhibition, or to introduce a place to newcomers.



Examples of Participatory Mapping in social science research

Filling in the Blanks: Looking Inside Blakemore School

Researcher: Dr Deborah Ralls, The University of Manchester

This research project, funded by The University of Manchester, aimed to find examples of where a school and its students, parents and community members were moving towards a more 'relational' model of engagement. A Participatory Mapping activity was carried out as this research focused on the forms of interaction and engagement taking place in a large urban state secondary school, Blakemore School (pseudonym).

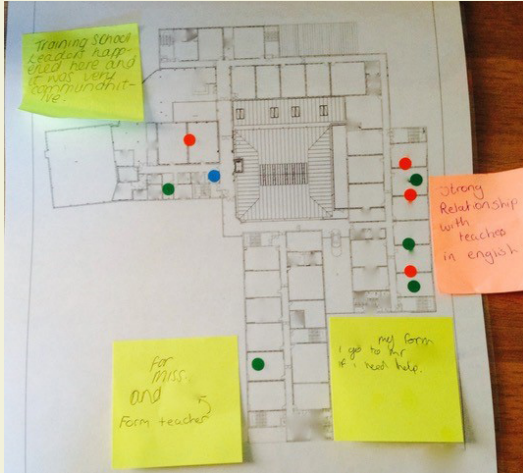
School floor plans were used to explore lived day-to-day experiences within the school, identifying the school spaces where participants understood there to be possibilities for engagement as 'doing with' others. Having already conducted research activities using photographs of the outside of the building, floor plans were used as a way of going inside the school, asking students, parents and community members about the relationships and activities that they had experienced within the four walls of Blakemore School. Teacher interviews had already revealed the ways in which teachers associated strong feelings of belonging with particular spaces in school, and spaces that were linked to participatory and collaborative activities like the drama classrooms and school theatre, and certain team staffrooms.

Each stakeholder group including staff, parents, students and community members was supplied with laminated copies of the school floor plans and asked to put colour-

coded stickers on the plans to indicate where in the school they felt that they were working together with others. Participants were asked 'where have you been?' and 'what did you do?' and were encouraged to use post-it notes to provide explanations, in order to gain an insight into their lived experiences of the spaces within Blakemore School. The Participatory Mapping approach proved helpful in enabling stakeholders not only to look at those spaces (in the form of school floor plans) but also to deconstruct, or read beyond the lines of the school floor plans generating new data that populated the plans with evidence of dynamic social relations, or relational engagement.

The findings showed that students identified particular spaces in school with activities and interactions that generated supportive and collaborative relationships, and provided some description about the detail of these engagements. Parents and community members, however, were far more restricted in their access to time and spaces in the school, allowed into the building by invitation only. As such, their responses to the floor plan were limited to naming an activity or person, rather than describing emotions and relationships. Using Participatory Mapping highlighted the diversity of previously unknown formal and informal lived experiences and social interactions that had occurred within what appeared, physically, to be the same space.

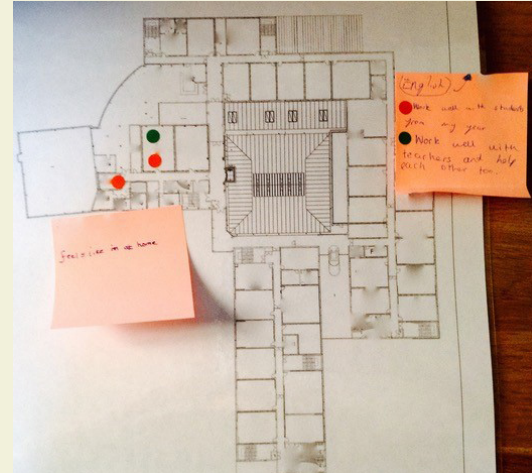
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Student responses to the floorplan. Red stickers show where in the building students work on engagement activities with other students from their year, green stickers show engagement activities with teachers and blue stickers for other staff. Students also had the option of choosing a yellow sticker to show where they worked with students from other years, orange for parents and a blue square for community members.

Post-it notes added by students from top left clockwise, read: 'Training school leaders happened here and it was very communicative', 'Strong relationship with teachers in english', 'My form. I go to Mr [...] if I need help', 'For miss [...] and [...] - form teacher'.

After the Participatory Mapping activities were completed, a final focus group was organised to bring together teachers, students, parents and community members to evaluate the maps. Using Participatory Mapping techniques and sharing the results in this way led to a discussion about the unseen experiences and the very different perceptions of school 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.



Student responses to the floorplan. Red stickers show where in the building students work on engagement activities with other students from their year, green stickers show engagement activities with teachers.

Post-it notes, from left to right, read: 'Feels like I'm at home', 'English. Work well with students from my year', 'Work well with teachers and help each other too'

It also highlighted what the school could do to build a sense of familiarity and belonging for parents and community members, as well students and teachers. This resulted in several tangible changes within the school. The senior leadership team invited parents and community members on an open access tour of the school during teaching time to experience a normal school day. Teachers, students, parents and community members identified the need to jointly conduct a 'welcoming walk through' audit in school, to look at the school through the eyes of insiders and outsiders and to develop a plan to identify where and how school spaces could be made more welcoming for parents and community members.



Where else could Participatory Mapping be used?

Participatory Mapping is particularly useful for understanding how different groups experience a place, building or service in different ways. One example where Participatory Mapping would be well suited is in research aiming to understand the perspectives and use of university campus space by local residents. Activities could be carried out to map: the university campus spaces that local residents have visited formally such as the museum, gallery, other spaces where they have attended organised events; the spaces they feel they are allowed or not allowed to use; and where they would like to go and why, for example. The researcher might prompt participants by asking: What's inside this building? Who have you met there? What have you done in these spaces? What would you like to do? Responses could then be compared with other groups, such as university students and staff.

Another example where this approach could be effective is in research addressing food sourcing and consumption in low income areas or 'food deserts'. Activities could be undertaken to identify different types of food available on the map (e.g. fresh fruit and veg, bread, daily groceries, fast food), where these foods are located, the time taken to get there and costs of travel, as well as mapping the different emotions or experiences that people attach to different types of food. Responses could be compared with maps created by residents in high income areas, with a view to identifying possible solutions such as planning changes or new business ideas. Participatory mapping can be used to explore similar dynamics in many areas of material resource use (consumption, production) in institutions, cities and regions: water, sanitation, waste, energy, transport and more.

Top tips

1. Think about the map as a space to explore, to be explored, to ask questions and enable people to share their experiences.
2. It's important to have an established and trusted relationship with the group before you start the mapping activity, so that participants feel comfortable to say what they really think.
3. Remember to encourage discussions while people are interacting with the map.
4. Remember to take photos of your maps as you go. Blue tac and post it notes can fall off easily, and your map often won't look the same by the time you get it home!

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Further reading

Participatory Mapping web resources:

- Mapping the City
- Mapping for Change: Community Maps

Online articles and blogs about participatory mapping and digital placemaking:

- Mapping young lives: what are the spaces and places that young people use in coastal towns?
- How Digital Placemaking Supports Young People to Shape their Neighbourhoods

Academic journal article:

- Mapping the City: participatory mapping with young people

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