

Exploring the Role of Space for School Dropouts in the Free School

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Abstract

This poster describes the preliminary findings from my initial fieldwork in school dropouts in the free school in Japan centred on a notable theme on three domains associated with their information behavior: the role of physical space in the free school, school dropouts' information behavior, and their contextual meaning of space and their learning activities. In doing so, the researcher conducted a qualitative exploratory research mainly focusing on a hands-on fieldwork in the free school by observing school dropouts' interaction in the room on a daily basis. So far the researcher has found that a spatio-temporal factor is associated with some school dropouts' learning activity. This poster elaborates on the mechanism of school dropouts' learning process associated with spatial movements in sequential order. This will help researchers, librarians, and school educators understand the characteristics of school dropouts' learning activity and their contextual meaning of “learning”, “playing” and “consuming”.

Keywords: school dropouts; free school; spatio-temporal factors; everyday life information seeking; exploratory research

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1 Introduction

Japan is one of the countries where an increasing number of children are dropping out of school before gaining official academic qualification. A recent statistic demonstrates that more than 170,000 students aged 6 through 18 already dropped out of elementary and secondary schools. Many school dropouts in Japan have a tendency to fall into long-term social withdrawal, resulting in losing “space” to access to learning environment outside school classes. There is, therefore, an urgent need for saving space as a center for school dropouts' learning and communication.

One of the important spaces for early school dropouts is an educational facility known as “free school” that typically offers a much less structured learning environment than mainstream schools. Traditionally, free schools have been considered as the place where children can feel comfortable with other peers in the study of psychology. In recent years, however, a new approach focusing on the use of space as the possible factor of social interaction has appeared in the study of architecture (Kakino, 2008, Kakino, 2010; Shibata & Ikuta, 2015). Kakino, for example, conducted direct observation to identify how staff select each location to interact with children and found that staff choice of the location in the free school was influenced by various factors including staff activity, children's social activity, situation at the time, and the characteristic of physical space. Although such macro-view of analysis from phenomenological standpoint suggests the significance of the role of space/location in terms of facilitating school dropouts' social interaction, it is still unclear how space/location shapes their learning activity, where their learning activity takes place, and how each learning activity and its location connects to each other throughout whole learning process.

To explore the role of space for school dropouts in the free school, I recently gained the opportunity to access the free school to focus on the relationship between physical space and their learning activity. In analytical stage of this research, I will use the *serious leisure perspective (SLP)* as a theoretical framework of leisure (Stebbins, 2009), which will help me understand the relationship between people's learning activity

and space. This poster describes the preliminary findings centred on the notable theme composed of three research domains: physical space in the free school, school dropouts' learning activity as one form of information behavior, and contextual meaning of both space and the learning activity all three emerging from my initial fieldwork in the free school in Japan. The findings of this study should contribute to our understanding of information behavior as related to learning among early school dropouts.

2 Problem Statement

In the study of Library and information science (LIS), especially in the area of everyday life information seeking (ELIS), very few studies exist on the role of space and people's information behavior related to learning activity. Indeed, as some researchers point out, this area of study is still developing, meaning that there are still many less-known research objects that have to be explored and clarified regarding both the role of space (Savolainen, 2006) and the demographic objects (Case, 2012). First, in the case of subject of the individual use of space, although relatively extensive researches already exist (Lee, 2003; Crabtree & Rodden, 2004; Fisher & Naumer, 2006; Fisher, Landry & Naumer, 2007), it is very difficult to link their outcomes with the role of space as the learning environment. Second, in the case of subject of school dropouts, although there are several studies about information behavior of at-risk youths in recent few years (Agosto & Hassell, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Buchanan & Tuckerman, 2016), rather little attention has been paid to that of school dropouts.

3 Research Questions

The purpose of this initial research project is twofold; 1) to grasp a holistic view of the way in which school dropouts use space as the learning environment, and 2) to identify any observable and motivational clues within school dropouts' information behavior that indicates the relationship between space and their learning activities. These two purpose of this research can be summarized in the following three research questions;

- How do school dropouts behave in the room, in other words, how do they use space?
- What learning activity takes place on a daily basis in the space of the free school?
- Why do they stay at the free school instead of a class room in the school?

4 Approach and Methods

To answer the research questions, I conducted an exploratory research (Stebbins, 2001) using some qualitative research techniques including hands-on fieldwork and participant observation in the free school. Given the difficulty of finding school dropouts in person, I was introduced to several free schools by my colleague in the faculty of psychology first and then intentionally selected one free school run by a manager who has seen very cooperative toward longitudinal fieldwork in the free school.

The study was conducted over eight months since last mid-October and involved participation by nine school dropouts aged 6 through 15 and two staff. All participants in this study were students in the same free school in Komae city located in the urban area of Tokyo Metropolis. Five were male; four were female; one staff was male; and one staff was female. I have been entering this free school once or twice a week to collect qualitative field data. The collected data deemed appropriate for this study are as followed;

- field notes: describing school dropouts' observable social interactions (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011)
- flow diagram: marking an exact location where observable social interactions take place on a floor map with participants' traffic lines every 10 or 20 minutes. It takes 3 hours (Hartel & Thomson, 2011)

With regard to data analyzing, I read several times my fieldnotes closely as a data set, then wrote initial memos, and finally tagged them with appropriate concepts and keywords during the coding process (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). I also combined seven sheets of floor map description into one sheet and added traffic lines identified by different colors (Malone, 1983; Crabtree & Rodden, 2004; Hartel, 2010).

5 Conclusion: (Preliminary Finding)

Although this qualitative exploratory research is still in its initial stages in both data gathering and analyzing processes, a noteworthy theme on school dropouts' information behavior in the physical space is nevertheless emerging from my work: there is a learning process associated with spatial movements in sequential order.

The flow diagram in the room shows that some students participated in several sequential activities that occurred in different spatial entities, which is best exemplified by the case of student K whose hobby is drawing a manga (Japanese cartoon). Five activities are identified in student K's movement along the time axis; 1) consulting with a staff member about her manga in order to get some advice or assessment, 2) showing a manga to other students to get their opinions, 3) reading a manga alone to reflect on the advice, assessments, and opinions that she got from previous activities, 4) browsing the manga collection in the shelves and searching for a particular manga book that meets her requirement for gaining some new drawing techniques, and 5) drawing manga with concentration made possible in a quiet place and at quiet time. These five activities seem to belong in a particular project that can be labeled as "drawing manga" where each activity takes place in a different space and in sequential order. I argue that this series of activities can be called a self-directed "learning process" (Stebbins, 2015, pp.43-44) at least from a leisure perspective. What this observable movement between spaces in drawing a manga activity suggests is that several spatial entities reciprocally connecting to each other in the learning process in the free school.

Whereas some students learn something through the learning process in the free school, other students are staying in the same space for a long time doing a solitary activity, such as reading a comic book or playing an online game using a smart device. In fact, a solitary activity of staying in a particular space for a long time and not connecting to other spaces is frequently seen by some school dropouts in the free school as not learning something. Rather they are simply "consuming" something. My work shows that the difference between learning and consuming is that a learning activity is associated with not only spatio-temporal factors but also motivational factors (e.g. want to improve skills for drawing manga), and social factors (e.g. want to obtain their assessments, opinions, ideas about my manga). A consuming activity lacks these factors. The contextual meaning of "learning" and "playing" (or "consuming") for school dropouts is still unclear, which in turn makes it very "challenging to capture the dynamic nature of information seeking" (Savolainen, 2006, p.10). Nevertheless, the preliminary finding of this work shows that there is the need to further explore the association between school dropouts' information behavior, especially their information activities relating to learning experience and the role of spatial movements in sequential order in the free school.

6 References

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