

AUTONOMOUS MAPPING

Autonomous Mapping

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Abstract

This paper is the companion to a presentation of the same name for the 2016 Conference on Arts-based Research and Artistic Research held at Aalto University in Finland. This paper looks at ideas of mapping and how it relates to individual notions of autonomy in the context of education. Resulting from a study conducted in the spring semester of 2015 at Aalto, mapping the influences and factors that contributed to the culture of the classroom and education in schools visited in Finland. The products of that research were collaged based physical maps to serve as discussion starters/orientation. The findings largely became a discussion of Autonomy, its roots, value and place in education and culture. This paper examines the new thinking and implications resulting from the return to my US classroom. Examining the possibilities and limitations on what autonomy means in the American classrooms.

## Autonomous Mapping

This paper and corresponding presentation look at ideas of mapping and how it relates to individual notions of autonomy in the context of education. Resulting from a study conducted in the spring semester of 2015 at Aalto, mapping the influences and factors that contributed to the culture of the classroom and education in schools visited in Finland. The products of this research were collaged based physical maps to serve as discussion starters/orientation. The findings largely became a discussion of Autonomy, its roots, value and place in education and culture. On returning to the US and my own classroom, I often found myself very lost, bouncing these ideas around my classroom- I have the wrong map. Recently I have returned to the research practice I employed in Finland, to now look at what autonomy means in my American classroom. The web based version of this research can be found here:

<https://prezi.com/aq2j3etdq9tg/mapping-classroom-culture-in-finland/>

And here

<https://prezi.com/omkv3zdvhjrw/navigating-the-classroom/>

This presentation will coincide with and discuss the contents of a culminating exhibition on this arts based research study at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland USA.

### **Structural Autonomy**

Autonomy In regards to education can be thought of as a social process that redistributes the power and shifts the role of participants related to the construction of knowledge in the learning process (Thanasoulas, 2000). Autonomous learning is a constructive process that

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involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events' (Candy, 1991: 271).

After spending 4 months learning about and observing in the education system in Finland the most striking attribute is the prevalence of unwavering autonomy, for both teachers and students. This structural autonomy goes well beyond flexible class schedules, frequent breaks and alternative working spaces that have been so prominent in the recent popular literature that examines Finland's education system. There is more of it than I can go into in this article but here is a reference list of articles that examine the dynamics of this system.<sup>1</sup> In Finland autonomy starts very young and is woven into the social fabric of daily life and work expectations. Long before a student enters formal schooling the system of education has begun providing children and parents opportunities to learn life skills through play. The playparks of Finland (there are 73 in Helsinki alone) give a safe place for children to play in the afternoons, to promote community cohesion and to support parenthood (Crown, 2007). The system of trust starts on these playground, not so much in order to level the playing field but in order to construct it. In comparison, American Education has an often uncomfortable relationship with autonomy. It's definition in a broad American context gets co-mingled with complex ideas about individual freedom and chaos (London, 1999). We want it, decry its absence but often fail to foster its development. As art teachers we are often some of the most autonomous educators in a school and autonomous learners tend to cluster in the arts courses. Rarely is that viewed as an attribute and we find this autonomy to be troublesome in the advocacy for our field. How can we rethink autonomy as a powerful tool in engaging students to be creative, invested learners? I've seen it in art classrooms of the US, often hidden. The kid that works in

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the supply room not because his behavior is bad but because that's where the magic happens. Ideas about territory and permission need to be shifted in order to embrace autonomy in a system that eyes it with suspicion.

When American teachers focus on building, searching and extracting autonomy out of students in the classroom it is often of little avail. It largely is fostered way beyond the building walls. An embrace or rejection of autonomy as a learning attribute is built but the structural design of education, school, or the classroom (Thanasoulas, 2000). It may also mean that students are leaving it at the door because their way of being autonomous does not match with the classroom or cultural dynamics of school. Autonomy in a school hinges on the views that surround unstructured time for both teachers and students. How a student or a teacher uses and defines that time impacts autonomy and its relationship to student learning (Thanasoulas, 2000).

### **My Time vs Your Time: What does Autonomy mean in the classroom?**

To whom does the time in classroom belong? In the scene from the American film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* where, a student, Spicoli orders a pizza to Mr. Hand's, the teacher's, history class (Refugee films, 2004). This dialogue sums up what I suspect to be US teacher's perspective on the ownership of class time and worst case scenario fears about autonomy. View the scene here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J8\\_fWphE0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J8_fWphE0)

*[Spicoli has just had a pizza delivered to the classroom]*

*Mr. Hand:* Am I hallucinating here? Just what in the hell do you think you're doing?

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Jeff Spicoli: Learning about Cuba, and having some food.

Mr. Hand: Mr. Spicoli, You're on dangerous ground here. You're causing a major disturbance on my time.

Jeff Spicoli: I've been thinking about this, Mr. Hand. If I'm here and you're here, doesn't that make it our time? Certainly, there's nothing wrong with a little feast on our time.

Mr. Hand: [*takes away box of pizza from Spicoli*] You're absolutely right, Mr. Spicoli. It is our time. Yours, mine and everyone else's in this room. But it is my class.

[*calls up a couple of students*]

Mr. Hand: Mr. Spicoli has been kind enough to bring us a snack. Be my guest. Help yourselves. Get a Good one.

I've heard over and over as I've observed US teachers, and I'm pretty sure I've said it as well. To the distracted, disruptive or just disengaged student- "You are on my time, so get back to work" After my time observing students in Finland I will never say it again. This statement and kind of thinking is hanging on from the firmly entrenched tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century authoritarian instruction aimed at preparing one for factory work, to abide by the boss. Spicoli clearly is disrupting the social order and there is little that is productive about his intentions.

Samu\* an 11<sup>th</sup> grader in the Finnish English class I have been working with had this to say about Finnish students' intrinsic drive to be educated:

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“We start out with a lot of trust from our parents and expectation too, we get ourselves to and from school starting in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade you are really on your own making your own decisions about how you are going to manage school, you pick your own classes and you are free to mess it up- but it’s your mess-up...You always know that. It’s my education, it’s my time I need to be the control of it. If you don’t do the work you quickly realize you won’t understand or pass the course, no one is going to learn it for you and you can’t just keep repeating. By the time you are in lukio [high school in Finland] or whatever you are doing you want to get on with your life, you want out from under your parent’s home. You realize you have to get serious to get through school. There is a lot of stigma if you are 20 years old and still living at home. You are 18, you graduate, you start your life. You just can’t do that without an education.”

As I have traveled around Finland and neighboring Nordic countries one comment while perhaps cynical and heavily laden with nationalistic quarrels is that the reason behind Finland’s autonomous system and flexibility is the lack of reliance on multiple forms of testing. A statement that has been made to me several times is that, “The teachers are free to experiment, no one knows when they fail.” That is not to say there are no tests, assessment is constantly happening but it is the kind of assessment that is tied directly to instructing and curriculum not commonly from an outside entity or for results to be shared beyond the classroom. I observed that Teachers have the autonomy to let students face failures as well as provide opportunities for repair. Redirection and revision are constant from both the teacher and the student. Education is practice more than performance. This translates, in my observations, to few graded activities and more direct feedback from the Finnish teacher. The class activities are

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considered practice and informal assessments. They want to encourage students to study for their own learning and take risks. The onus of learning belongs to the student, not the teacher. I have heard this same goal echoed by my American colleagues yet we continue to fail in providing any system or structural support towards this goal. When I asked Finnish students about the ungraded work they said more grades would just make it more stressful, not more valuable. The system in Finland is and has been such that through providing multiple avenues towards success there is no funnel that dumps low achievers all into one category, or worse yet casts them aside (Ouakrim-Soivio, n. Rinkinen, A. & Karjalainen T., 2015). It is getting strained and tested by economics and social changes but this system works when supported by the societal structures. It runs counter to the US high reliance on testing data and to American society, so entranced in capitalist rewards based structures. As interest in this educational philosophical shift gains in the US, there needs to be systematic understanding that teacher autonomy permeates and transmits to student autonomy (Collette, 2015). Will we continue to educate for compliance using 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas and then react in shock when students are not prepared to be creative problem solvers in 21<sup>st</sup> century? Huge shifts of thought about how and why we educate will not only need to happen they need to be felt and internalized.

### **Conclusion**

I have now been back in my American classroom for several months sorting through many of the same evaluations, standards and assessments as my US colleagues. It can be overwhelming and disheartening, feeling as though it pulls away from instruction and my students. To try to support more autonomous learning in my classroom I have approached my teaching practice asking the following questions: What could you say less or more that would redistribute power



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in the classroom? Whose classroom do you want it to be? You may have been supporting autonomy, but hiding this practice away because it isn't always neat and tidy or is hard to explain. At face value it may not follow the structures that have been placed on American classrooms. The value of autonomy and conversely the effect of it's denial should be weighed considering it's impact on our careers, classrooms and students' lives. Autonomy can be a powerful tool in engaging students to be creative, invested learners in your classroom and it's not just for the good kids. What would it look like in your classroom?

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Footnotes

1. Reference List of Finnish Education Articles:

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