

Pleasurable Cities

The Pleasurable Cities project is an investigation into how everyday technologies might be used to create a dialogue between young people about their local community spaces. The project explores the pros and cons of technology-enhanced systems (utilising located media and mobile phones) to enable young people to share their ideas with peers and policy makers and to affect change to the environments in which they, live, play, work and learn.



Team
Futurelab



Outline

Pleasurable Cities is an exciting investigation into the way in which new technologies can provide young people with a voice within their local communities, have a say in the changes to their local environments, display ownership and use of social spaces and become 'active citizens' within their localities.

The project's concept is born from a diverse context which takes into consideration issues of empowerment, community participation and political engagement, learner voice, inter-generational communication and young people in local democracy. However, at the core is the link between visual signs (represented by real-world place markers) and virtual conversations (through mobile phone texting or internet activities) that combine to provide new methods for young people to express their use of space and their expectations and desires for its development as well as open up new channels of communication between people that wouldn't necessarily get an opportunity to talk to each other face to face.

The visual signals are there to highlight real-world problems, kick-start debate and act as a physical representation of any digital annotations concerning the issue. They also indicate and communicate the level of interest or strength of feeling in an issue.

An example: Kia walks to college everyday via a disused piece of land that's often used as a dumping ground. She's often re-imagined the space as a garden with a fountain, or as a children's playground, or with a skate ramp - but never known how to go about getting it changed. One day there is a poster on the lamp-post stating that 'surely this space can be better than a dumping ground' and asking 'how would you improve it?' She responds by sending a text message with her suggestions and receives an immediate text back which shows her how many other people have joined the debate, what sorts of things are being said and she is invited to further contribute. At certain stages in the conversation the visual sign (the poster on the lamp-post) may be updated to reflect the current status or direction of the discussion.

A public facing website would collate all of the conversations, comments and feedback and link them to an interactive map - visualising the location and depth of conversation. The website provides access to all of the feedback for review and reflection as well as offering opportunities for further discussion and for moving a debate forward - ultimately arriving at a well evidenced argument for change.

Learning Research Objectives

Through the Pleasurable Cities project, we are aiming to support young people in actively and critically engaging with their built environment and urban policy-making through the design of new (ways of using) digital tools. More specifically, we are asking:

1. How we can provide opportunities for students to have a voice in the change and transformation of their learning and living spaces?
2. How might new technologies provide new routes for communication between learners and local 'decision makers'?
3. What methods and interactions work in terms of linking physical space and virtual communication?
4. What new methods are afforded by digital technologies for learners to be involved in local council/government activities? And do these new methods widen participation?
5. How do we design systems that enable dialogue between individuals as well enabling the collection of individuals' comments?



Research and Development Process

The Futurelab team spent two months working with a newly formed student council at a Local Opportunity Centre in Bristol. The student council was made up of a group of young people aged 15-16 years-old whose role was to collect and collate feedback and affect change for all of the users of the learning centre.

Through a series of workshops, discussions, paper prototyping, photography and design activities we worked with the group to:

- identify issues, themes and locations within the learning centre that were ripe for development



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- explore the usefulness of different approaches and technologies
- discuss the design and functionality of a system that would enable all users of the learning centre to get involved in a dialogue about their learning spaces.

Through our work with the student council we found significant barriers to the project. Further focus groups at Bath University and secondary schools in Bristol evidenced the same issues and due to tensions between the aims of the project and the reality of the situation we made a decision to draw the project to a close. The most prohibitive barrier was that of cost or 'no credit' but there was also a severe lack of motivation to get involved in such a project. 'How would they know that anyone is going to take the blindest bit of notice of their opinions?' It was also clear from our sample that there is still a lack of access to technology for disadvantaged groups, and that for communication within an institution there was often a preference for low or no-tech communication solutions. Another significant barrier was concern around the possibility that personal phone numbers could be shared without owners' consent.

These findings (and others) will be published in a discussion paper later in 2006. The discussion paper provides a good starting point to understanding the challenges and issues that must be overcome in order to fully integrate the use of personally owned technologies in an active citizenship scenario and will provide the basis for further work in this area.

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