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Author(s)	Chin Ee Loh
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Mapping Everyday Practices of Reading through Visual Juxtaposition

For the Special Issue: Visualising the City

5,000 to 8,000 words

Abstract

Dominant views of reading in educational contexts tend to portray reading as a solitary event, often conducted in silence and over a sustained period of time, popularized in images of reading across different contexts and times. Yet, social perspectives of reading suggest that there are multiple ways to enact reading even within the urban adolescent schooling contexts. This article shows how visual data can reveal new ways of understanding the varied everyday micro-practices of reading that are enacted across different schools. It further argues that visual juxtaposition as critical analytic method can provide new understandings of visual data and generate insights through deliberate comparison. Using the dataset from an ethnographic study of reading in Singapore secondary schools, this paper examines the varied ways that juxtaposition can be applied to the analysis of two forms of visual data, namely documentary photography and time-lapse data to show how concepts of reading, social relations and space are expanded through this form of analysis.

Keywords: reading, documentary photography, time-lapse photography, urban schools, visual juxtaposition

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Introduction

Dominant views of reading in educational contexts tend to portray reading as a solitary event, often conducted in silence and over a sustained period of time, popularized in images of reading across different contexts and times. Yet, to see reading as a social practice is to recognize that what counts as reading is ideologically shaped, and to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of reading that count differently in different contexts. Writing about everyday practices of consumption, Michel de Certeau (1984) notes that city dwellers consume everyday life through *tactical* ways of operation that subvert dominant narratives of urban space and living. Official discourses are strategies that assume “a proper place in the prescribed order of things” whereas ‘a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance’ (p. xix). Strategies are moves that are situated in “proper” places and often linked to institutional structures. On the other hand, tactics are disassociated from institutions and describe the improvisational aspect of practice. School-approved ways of reading are often singular (sustained, quiet reading) in contrast to the many flexible reading practices that adolescents may adopt that subvert official perception of what reading should look like.

This article examines how the use of visual images in school contexts of reading can raise awareness of these multiple ways of reading that are often glanced over in educational discourses of reading. While there has been a proliferation of the use of visual methods for research generally (Banks 2007; Harper 2012; Heng 2017; Pink 2012; Rose 2016), engagement within educational contexts has been limited due to tricky issues of access and ethics in research involving children and young adolescents. However, visual methods can yield rich insights otherwise unobtainable through typical observation and interview methods in urban educational research, providing rich visual data for illustration and analysis

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(Chappell, Chappell, and Margolis 2011; Nichols and Loh 2019; Prosser and Loxley 2007).

For example, photographs can literally yield new ways of “seeing” by providing a visual record of what would otherwise have been a transient experience, and these visual records can be analyzed differently from other forms of data such as written observations and interviews. The repeated photography that are examined in this study (in the form of time-lapse data), provides minute-by-minute documentation of shifts in behaviours, allowing the researchers to track shifts in student behavior over a period of time. Furthermore, I argue that the deliberate use of visual juxtaposition (Metcalf 2015) offers a critical analytic method that foregrounds contrast as vital for generating new understandings.

This article draws from the dataset of the *Building a Reading Culture* (BRC) study, which examined the reading and school library culture of six secondary schools in the urban city-state of Singapore, to illustrate how visual juxtaposition can be fruitfully employed to map and glean insights about students’ everyday practices of reading. Singapore is the urban city par excellence with 5.6 million people living on an island with the land area of 721.5km, just a little smaller than New York City and half the size of the city of London. Within this urban space, a key concern of the nation is to improve students’ reading and learning for equitable learning. As an educational researcher concerned with literacy as a social practice (Collins and Blot 2003; Luke and Freebody 1997), I am deeply interested in understanding how students live and enact their everyday practices of reading within the schooling context, particularly within the space of school libraries, a space often associated with reading.

The article begins with an overview of reading and visual juxtaposition as method.

Thereafter, two illustrations of using visual juxtaposition are provided as examples of how visual juxtaposition can reveal new ways of thinking about reading in urban educational

contexts. Finally, I conclude by stressing the value of visual juxtaposition as a critical analytic tool.

Dominant Narratives of Reading in Schooling Contexts

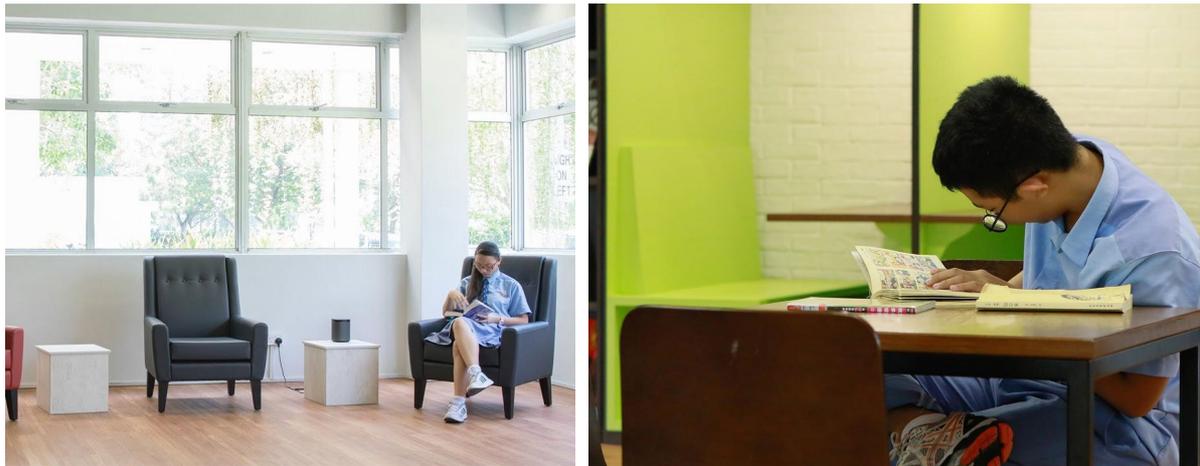


Figure 1. Images Complying with Dominant Narratives of Reading: Solitary and Silent Reading

The images in Figure 1 exemplify dominant concepts of reading, with a single student engaged in sustained silent reading in a comfortable armchair in the library. Company is insignificant, and it seems that the individual's need to enter the world of the book is more important than the space in which it the book is read. Photographs documenting dominant (school-approved) view of reading was often repeated in the visual data collected in the BRC study and is indeed one common way that students often engaged in reading.

This dominant perception of what counts as reading also emerged from our interviews. The following interview excerpt from vice-principal of one of the schools captures the official view of ideal reading.

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I mean the library is one of the many places that I would read. We can read at the bus stop, on the bus, anywhere as long as you have space. But I like to read at the cafeteria because I love white noise so library is not for me. So to me the library is one of the many places where students read.

For this vice-principal, the ideal reading posture is one of solitude and complete absorption where space is of little consequence. One 14-year-old girl in another school shared about the need to “completely go into the mood for reading” in order to finish her reading at one sitting, preferably on the bed. The two interview excerpts illustrate the common understanding of what a reader should look like - absorbed in sustained reading of a single book, often in solitude (Long 1992; Nichols and Loh 2019). This dominant view of reading is so widely accepted that in the recording of a publicity video (see video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKKUQB91YII>) for the project, the researcher noted that the videographer constantly tried to arrange students in solitary reading positions for his shots, until he was shown the photographs to visualise other possible ways of enacting reading.

The view of reading as a singular activity is captured in autonomous or universal perspectives of literacy, which conceives of literacy as “a uniform set of techniques and uses of language, with identifiable stages of development and clear, predictable consequences for culture and cognition” (Collins and Blot 2003: 4). The idea that the acquisition of a singular literacy enables individual, national and institutional development is prevalent in the language of literacy campaigns and official documents and is often seen as the sole model of literacy in education. However, in comparison to the linear and singular focus of autonomous models of literacy (Goody 1977; Ong 1982), the “ideological” (Collins and Blot 2003; Street 1984) model of literacy emphasizes that literacy or literacies are multiple, ideologically-saturated

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and situated (Collins and Blot 2003). To understand what literacy was in a particular context and how it was valued, it is necessary to see it as a social practice that has value only in its context of use. Any research with an emphasis on the social must necessarily focus on the everyday practices of literacies, as this article does.

In the same way that dominant discourse of literacy may impose a singular view of literacy, dominant notions of reading may lead to limited views of what counts as reading, particularly within schooling contexts. In Elizabeth Long's (1992) study of women reading groups, she explores the hegemonic nature of images in postcards and paintings depicting reading as a solitary affair. She notes, however, that reading is very much a collective matter, and that social infrastructures are required to enable and support particular ways of reading within each community. Similarly, Nichols & Loh (2019) have highlighted that dominant perceptions of adolescent reading as a solitary activity have been etched into iconic clip art representations of reading and thus inscribed into official views of what counts as reading, arguing that the use of photographs taken in naturalistic settings can disrupt dominant discourses by providing images that show other ways of reading. Adolescent reading practices are in fact multiple, varied and complex and adolescents often have diverse reasons and motivations for reading, even within a single urban school or community (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris 2008). Recognising the multiplicity and complexity of adolescent reading practices opens up the possibilities for what counts as reading within specific educational contexts, expanding ways of engaging, motivating and evaluating student reading.

Using Visual Juxtaposition in Educational Research

Dominant views of reading do not necessarily reflect the everyday practices of reading lived and enacted by students, which are often unnoticed in official narratives of what counts as reading. However, visual images allow for what Caroline Knowles (2018) calls “more disciplined observation” of everyday practices, in contrast to the tendency to view the world in “scanning mode” (p. 9). Photographs, particularly, are a form of technology that can connect people and ideas across time and space, though different viewers may come to each image with their singular interpretation (Sontag 1973), and the image be a powerful tool when for advocating change (Pink 2012; Rose 2016). Susan Sontag (1973) notes that “photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow” (p. 17) and indeed, the stillness of the image is what allows for reflective interaction, shifting the urban educational researchers’ perspective from superficial sight to knowing sight. The photograph as data can be read at various levels – at one level, it is a visual description of a scene (telling what is) and at another level, it can be interpreted to generate new meaning that might not immediately be obvious at first sight.

In her seminal overview of visual methodologies, Gillian Rose (2016) suggests that there are three criteria for a critical visual methodology. A critical visual methodology should take seriously the central place of images in research, consider the images in context and be reflexive in its approach. Visual juxtaposition which foregrounds deliberate comparison as an analytic method makes central the critical and reflexive to uncover insight through the sorting and comparison process. While comparison is implicit in most visual research, the deliberate use of juxtaposition as method remains relatively under-utilized. Amy Scott Metcalfe (2015) highlights the value of juxtaposition:

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Inquiry through contrast, facilitated by side-by-side positioning of *two images, or images and text* ... creates opportunities for qualitative analysis that are not as readily apparent when individual images are considered (p. 152, emphasis mine)

Juxtaposition thus opens up semiotic possibilities through comparison as a deliberate analytic move. Juxtaposition disrupts familiarity by creating “opportunities for qualitative analysis not as readily apparent when individual images are considered” (Metcalf 2015: 166). In the case of the BRC study, having a large corpus of data allowed for multiple opportunities to re-analyse a single image, and to compare them against other images. Comparisons can be done across the same place over time (past/present), of different places (here/there) and of dissonant images (this/that). In comparison to quantitative methods of content analysis (Bock, Isermann, and Knieper 2011), the aim is not so much to count and tabulate but to generate interpretative possibilities, new ways of looking and thinking. Writing about case study research, Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) note that “comparing and contrasting are essential analytic moves” (p. 7) that reveal new ways of thinking about the data. Similarly, juxtaposition of images as a method forces comparison for greater analytic rigour and possibilities.

Another application of visual juxtaposition in this study is the use of repeat photography, in the form of time-lapse photography. A repeat photograph is

a photograph specifically made to duplicate selected aspects of another, pre-existing photograph. The new image typically repeats the spatial location of the original, showing the viewer the same scene once again and inviting comparison. But other features of an existing photograph, the lighting, or the events depicted, may also be the subject of attempted duplication. (Klett 2011: 114)

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Repeat photographs are useful for visualizing change, whether in the short term (e.g., over a day) or long term (e.g., over decades). The repetition allows for detailed comparisons of how the scene or subject has changed over a few minutes or a few decades. Time-lapse photography is a form of repeat photography where multiple photographs of the same location or subject are generated over a period of time. Historically, the development of time-lapse photography allowed time to be slowed down for closer examination. For example, the well-known time-lapse of “The Horse in Motion” sequence by Eadward Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey and Leland Stanford, slowed down movement to prove that a horse’s four feet did leave the ground at the same time when running. Time-lapse photograph thus allowed for the identification of patterns “in social situations that are longer in duration than those apparent under the constraints of our natural perception of time” (Persohn 2015). For the present study, it was felt that the slice of time presented by the time-lapse data was far less overwhelming to the senses than the moving images of video-recordings, thus facilitating close study of individual images.

Methods

The research was conducted over the course of a year in 2017, with researchers spending 15 to 17 days in each of the six secondary schools, though we focus in this article largely on the visual data from one school, Quest Secondary, in this article. Quest Secondary School provided an interesting case study as it renovated its library space and book collection just before the research started, with the objective of creating a space that would encourage independent and self-motivated reading. The medium of photography lent itself to studying the micro-practices of reading, which would have been otherwise unobtainable via other research tools. In addition to the visual images, survey, observation and interview data were

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also collected and the multiple sources of data collection allowed for the creation of a “thick description” (Gilbert Ryle in Geertz 1973) of reading in the contexts being studied.

A camera in the hands of the photographer is not a neutral tool but shapes the world being seen through the different choices made (Heng 2017; Pauwels 2012; Pink 2012; Sontag 1973). In this case, the technical work of taking the photographs and setting up the Go Pro camera was done by a research assistant who was also a freelance journal photographer, but in constant discussion with all team members. The photographs and time-lapse data obtained were analyzed while research was in progress and decisions made collectively about the images to be captured. Although the images are limited in providing only one-time snapshots of a moment, field notes from observations in the school library and interview data added depth to the interpretation of the images.

All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Institutional Review Board permissions were obtained from the university and permission was obtained from the school to use the photographs for research purposes. A notice was placed outside each school library informing students of the use of photography for research purposes.

Documentary Photography

For documentary photography, the research brief for photographs was to collect as many images of reading as possible. In total, more than 7,200 photographs were taken. The initial aim of documentary photography was to record the mundane and the exceptional in daily operations, and to use the documentary data as visual evidence for observations and advocacy work. However, the detailed analysis of the micro-practices made visible through the photographs allowed us as researchers to further analyze our understandings of reading,

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learning and space, to examine how “abstract and contested concepts become embedded in relational, temporal and spatial dimensions” (Prosser and Loxley 2007: 57) through the images.

For the photographic data, “constant comparison” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was employed to identify categories in the photographic data that were relevant to the central concept of “reading”. In the open coding stage, the BRC team selected images that seemed relevant to reading and compared them with each other and against our initial understandings of reading. Subsequently, during the axial coding stage, the team placed multiple images together in new ways after coding, to make connections between the different categories. Thereafter, final categories that seemed to exemplify the key concepts that had emerged from the coding were selected. This was a recursive process where the team compared images within schools and across schools.

Time-Lapse Photography

For the time-lapse images, the team set up three to five Go Pro cameras in each library for a period of five days every term. In total, at least 120 hours of data was collected from each school and 720 hours of data was collected from all six schools. The cameras were set to capture one image every minute. This was good for capturing broad student movements but could not capture minute actions such as browsing, which were often completed in less than a minute. Initial observations of each library were conducted to determine where to place the Go Pro cameras. In Term 1, the team set the cameras to capture broader frames to get a sense of the various activities and movements in the library. Later, following analysis of the first set of data and returning to the original research intent of focusing on students’ independent

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reading, research and collaborative behaviours, the team changed some of the initial vantage points and went for more focused cropped frames for some sections of the library.

The time-lapse data was particularly useful for understanding the relationship between space and social relations as it provided the team with a large data-set of similar spaces in different libraries for comparison across time and across different spaces. The team used two methods to analyze the data. Frame-by-frame analysis allowed the slowing down of action for analysis. The fast-forwarded images, when viewed in playback mode, showed the changes that occurred within particular spaces throughout the day. These two methods allowed us to observe and contrast how specific spaces were used for reading and learning by students. As there were multiple cameras in each library, the team was also able to document the change relationally to understand how different spaces were used over the same period. Moreover, the large volume of images across similar kinds of spaces in different schools allowed us to pull out specific time-lapses for comparisons. Significant scenes in the time-lapse data were selected and coded for their descriptive potential.

A sample of the descriptive log used for analysis is provided in Table 1. The time-lapse data is supplemented with field notes taken by the researchers on the days of recording.

Clip Name: Reading Corner	
Duration: 6hrs 11 mins (1049 – 1720)	Date: 07 Feb 2017
Area: Westview School Library Reading Corner	
Context: Full day time-lapse data at Westview Secondary School Library. Area documented is rear of library, including the main sofa clusters.	
Timecode: 10:49hrs	Observed Behaviour: Camera started at 1049hrs, after being repositioned. Two boys can be seen seated at the corner sofas. They appear to be reading. The duo stay in the area reading/browsing for around 15 minutes before exiting the library.
11:04hrs	The two boys reading at the corner exit the library. The space remains empty for the next 12 minutes.
11:16hrs	Two students (boys) enter the frame and settle themselves down at the centre sofas. They are Upper Secondary students. They appear to be carrying a book and an orange file respectively. For the next six minutes these two boys enter in and out of the frame, perhaps in the process of settling down.

Table 1. Sample descriptive log of time-lapse data (analysis by Wan Zhong Hao)

Figure 2 shows two photographs taken from the time-lapse in the Quest school library between 10:04 to 11:49 am in the morning, during the recess period. The juxtaposition of the same scene showed similar and different usage of space. Fast-forwarding the entire sequence of the time-lapse showed the presence of both solitary and social reading, as well as sustained and short reading sessions where students were browsing. Repeated scenes across the 15 days in the library showed that this space was generally well-used for browsing and individual sustained silent reading.

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The sequence of two images you see towards the left hand side is part of a time-lapse captured in January 2017, from 10:04 hrs to 11:49 hrs, between Quest's lower and upper secondary recesses.

From top to bottom



1. **Book Browsing:** The two boys towards the far left corner in Image 1 are simply browsing the books they have on hand. They leave the observation frame after 2 minutes at 10:22. The boy closer to the right hand side of the frame stays within frame for over 16 minutes, from 10:16 to 10:31, engaging in sustained reading.
2. **Sustained Reading:** The boy in the final frames stays in the observed area for 44 minutes, entering at 10:52 and exiting at 11:36, reading *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger over a few days.

Figure 2. Time-lapse of reading corner at Quest Secondary School Library

The time-lapse data in the study were analyzed at school level and across school levels, often by examining spaces that were meant for similar kinds of activities. The juxtaposition of various time-lapse data allowed us to understand how space shaped social relations across different schooling contexts.

The next section provides illustrations of how visual juxtaposition was used to map and expand our understandings of reading within this study. The aim is not so much to be comprehensive as to illustrate the possibilities of deliberately foregrounding visual juxtaposition in the analysis of visual data.

Extending Understandings of Everyday Practices of Reading

Juxtaposition of Documentary Photography: From a Singular View of Reading to Multiple Readings



Figure 3. Expanded Ways of Reading

Repeated viewings of the photographic data and constant juxtaposition of different images helped the team to see differently, to understand reading as plural, sociable and material. In comparison to the images from Figure 1 shown earlier, it can be seen that the images in Figure 3 pointed to more expansive views of reading and contributed to our understanding of how reading was enacted in the daily routines of school, particularly within the school library.

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The image in the top left shows a group of girls interacting over a picture book, pointing to the materiality and sociability of reading. The girls lean forward, touching the book and interacting with the various features and with each other. The attention is divided, at least for one girl, who is also simultaneously reading her own print book. But for the moment, they are united, their gaze drawn to the features in the book. In the next image, a group of boys are reading Marvel comics around a table. The image demonstrates that reading can be social but silent. Here again, note the sociability but enacted in silence around the solidarity of reading comics. The postures of engagement are different from the girls in the first figure as they each seem to retreat in their own world, the gaze focused on the contents of their individual book. The bottom left figure shows a girl reading a novel on her phone, expanding our vision of reading to online reading. The materiality of the smartphone and the access to resources beyond the physical for reading is highlighted. The image reminds us that fingers too are involved in the act of scrolling, as they are in the turning of pages. That reading is not just mental engagement with words on a page but physical involvement with the material of books. The last image on the bottom right shows students browsing at the bookshelves, emphasizing that the selection of books is an important process of reading.

The images here bring to light the social structures that underlie reading and the multiple ways of operating within the space of the school library by highlighting the plurality of reading practices in one school library. The images demonstrate that sociability in reading for adolescents may be as important as solitary reading and emphasize the need to motivate different adolescents differently (Ivey and Johnston 2013; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer and Morris 2008; Nichols and Loh 2019). The necessity of collective groups that support reading practices and the importance of the community (Fuller and Sedo 2013) is made visible in the images that show behaviours and actions contrary to hegemonic understandings of reading.

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The images bring to the attention of the viewer the social infrastructure (Long 1992) other than school-sanctioned structures of curriculum and reading programmes that shape the ways students respond to books and to each other in the presence of books. Moreover, the images highlight the materiality of reading (Sorensen 2009) by bringing to the researchers' awareness the presence of different kinds of books, tables, chairs, shelves, mobile phones that support and shape adolescent reading. The affordances, both physical and online (Lindberg and Lyytinen 2013) make possible certain ways of reading.

The images thus have to be read in the schooling contexts to understand the implication of each image. Juxtaposition occurring within one school and across schools can provide different insight about what counts as reading and where, when, what and how students read. The act of juxtaposition forces reflection and disrupts assumptions about space by providing contrasting images that allow viewers to question the norms.

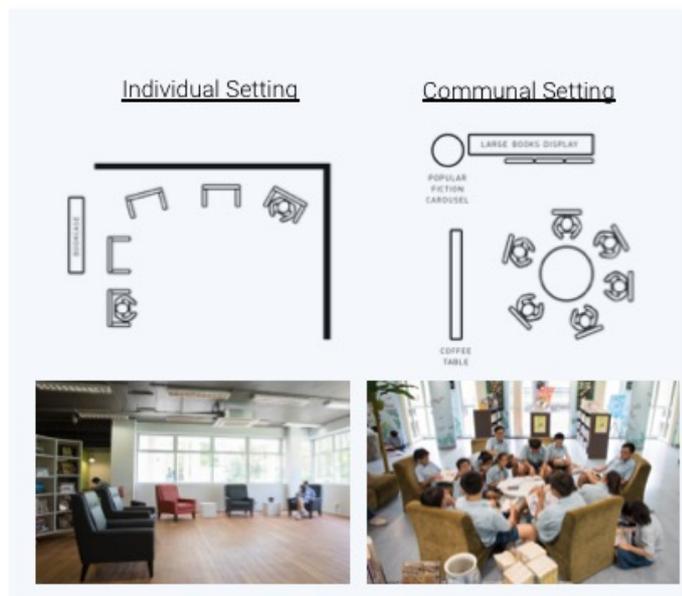
Understanding Patterns and Deviations through Time-Lapse Photography: Students' Everyday Use of Library Spaces

A key objective of the BRC was to understand the relationship between space and social relations in the context of the school libraries. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) explains how social relations are reproduced spatially even as space is shaped by social relations. How students read or learn within the space of the school library can thus be constrained or enabled by the space and the affordances within the space (Lindberg and Lyytinen 2013). Understanding the behavior setting or how particular spaces shape learning behaviours within the space (Cleveland 2017) can enable librarians, teachers and designers working in the library space to more purposefully design the space for learning.

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From the repeated viewings and analysis (see Figure 2), the BRC team was able to generate design patterns (Nair, Fielding, and Lackney 2009) that explained how the organization of space and furniture shaped particular kinds of social relations and behaviours within the library. These design patterns could be used by librarians and teachers to improve on their “geographical literacy” (Cleveland 2016) or the “environmental literacy” (Lackney 2008). The design pattern in Figure 4 was generated through comparisons of multiple time-lapses across different schools and shows two arrangements that are typically used in school libraries – a communal and individual setting. From the time-lapse, we understood that individual settings would encourage quiet sustained reading whereas communal settings were more likely to encourage discussion and interaction. The intent of the design patterns is not so much to dictate how the library should be arranged but to provide guides for thinking about library redesign. Thus, the time-lapse data across schools can be productively used to understand patterns in library spaces in relation to social behaviours and to generate insight about the official use of space.

Reading Spaces in the School Library



Reading can occur in two different settings.

Different settings inspire different kinds of behaviours.

Individual settings encourage sustained reading or independent browsing whereas "coffee table" settings or **communal settings** encourage socialising.

Consider where the noisy spaces and where the quiet spaces should be by zoning the library space appropriately.

Figure 4. Design pattern for designing reading spaces in the school library.

On the other hand, the time-lapse data could also be read to understand students' colonization of space to come to see how social relations may be shaped in unexpected ways, *tactically*.

Writing about the social space of the library, Shilling and Cousins (1990) note that understanding teachers' regulation and students' colonisation of library space, and the processes by which students associate or disassociate themselves from using the library can provide more effective insight into the work of school libraries. Colonisation refers to students' self-imposed use of space, contrary to the official perceptions of how the space should be used, in line with the norms of learning. Within the library, students may engage in behaviours (using the mobile phone, speaking loudly, occupying spaces between shelves rather than sitting on chairs) that are contrary to dominant assumptions about how that library

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space should be used. Elsewhere, I have also discussed how spaces of reading seek to discipline student reading but are colonized by students' desires to use the space in different ways than that originally intended (Loh, Heng, and Wan 2019).

Mak Cheng Hon, a student-researcher on the Undergraduate Research Experience on Campus (URECA) project at Nanyang Technological University, analyzed the time-lapse data of one school in the dataset to understand students' studying and collaborative behaviours within the school library (Mak and Loh, 2018). His findings showed that adolescent students colonized unregulated corners (between bookshelves and in library corners) for their own activities, which may or may not involve reading, or utilized official spaces for other forms of activity than that originally intended. He observed, through his study of the time-lapse data, how students multi-task, shifting their gazes between their mobile phones, friends and work. This continuous partial attention (CPA) behavior was spread out across the library, suggesting either distraction from the task of studying or multi-tasking as a key adolescent behavioral trait. Mak further observed students camouflaging their actual activities (e.g., gaming or surfing on laptops) by finding suitable seats out of the supervisory range of the librarian and adopting stances that resembled students at work. The repeated frame-by-frame analysis made visible these behaviours that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Furthermore, contrasted against time-lapse data from other schools where such camouflaging and CPA behaviours were less often observed, researchers can question how the policies and organization of space shape practices within particular spaces.

Analyzing historical images of schooling, Chappell, Chappell, & Margolis (2011) note that the ideology of schooling was enacted through "embodied repetitive practice" visible in repeated images across historical time. While our study did not span decades, the tracing of

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the “rituals of the habitual” (p. 61) or the routines and expectations of the school were seen to be central to our understanding of how space shaped learning. Attending to space with a critical eye, we noted that the rituals of the habitual were shaped as much by the space of school (Markus 1993) and the materials within the space (Lindberg and Lyytinen 2013). The time-lapse data offered possibilities for tracing how particular spaces and materials were used in the space of the library across the day and across the year. The repetitions within each particular space and configuration invited consideration about the ideology that governed each space and the concept of the school library within the context of Singapore urban educational system.

Discussion and Conclusion

Generating new perspectives through visual analysis allowed us to compare the images across schools to better understand how these forms of reading were encouraged (or not) in different contexts and opened up room for dialogue about what counted as reading in urban schooling contexts. In this study, the study of everyday practices of reading expanded understandings of reading as multiple, social and varied, in contrast to the dominant and singular view of reading as sustained and silent. Even as educators grapple with how to motivate students towards engaged reading and ever higher levels of literacy, it might be worth examining basic assumptions about what is valued as reading within urban educational contexts.

Within Singapore, urban educational research has tended towards conservatism, using photography as complementary data rather than key data. In this study, we utilized documentary and time-lapse photography as key data with the potential to generate new understandings through visual juxtaposition. The documentary data affirmed dominant

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images of silent and solitary sustained reading but also expanded understandings of reading as plural, social and material. Knowles (2018) stresses the existence of creative tensions for visual researchers who have to engage in “social conventions of seeing in a particular (conventional) way” and to “search for new ways of seeing, ways that challenge and re-arrange social conventions”. Visual juxtaposition forced constant rethinking of the meaning ascribed to a single photograph, raising questions about how to read each image against a new image, inviting the researcher to reflect on the patterns and the deviations from these patterns.

The time-lapse data revealed patterns or conventions that shaped spaces for reading but also provided examples of how students both adhered to the disciplines of space and but also negotiated the use of space according to their own desires. The analysis of micro-patterns, of understanding the enactment of policy through everyday practice was enabled by the constant reference to the visual (Prosser and Loxley 2007), and deliberate attempts to juxtapose the visual data within and across schools. The minute rituals of the everyday is captured by frame-to-frame comparisons within a scene, and across scenes to generate new insights about schooling, spaces and behaviours. These frames do not only capture official, sanctioned behaviours but unofficial, informal use of space that reveal more about the adolescent student and their social relations to each other and to the space of schooling. Re-viewing each image offers new opportunities for engagement, analysis and insight.

The naturalistic context under which the photographs were taken contributed to the authenticity of the events and action captured in the images (Nichols and Loh 2019).

However, it should not be assumed that these images are completely representative for every image is shaped by the photographer’s framing of the shot and attention to particular details

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(Heng 2017; Pauwels 2012; Pink 2012; Sontag 1973). Moreover, there are different ways of viewing/ reading the images. All too often, it is assumed there is one way of seeing, which limits the potential interpretations and contributions of the data. A key limitation of this paper is in choosing to focus only on the visual, to the exclusion of other forms of data such as the field notes and interviews. Yet, the isolation of the visual in this data reveals more sharply the unique contribution of visual data to urban educational research.

Visual data provides new insights, and visual juxtaposition as a deliberate analytic method is a way to build reflexivity and insight into the process of analysis. The use of visual juxtaposition in urban educational research is one way to generate new understandings of a field. For this study, the focus on the visual has expanded the ways that everyday practices of reading are enacted within specific and across different contexts that might not have been possible through other forms of data. Despite greater difficulty with obtaining ethical clearance for working in schools with children and adults, turning to the visual may indeed provide a new way of seeing and learning.

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Author's Bio

Chin Ee Loh is an Assistant Professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. Her current research focuses on literacy practices, reading and school libraries. Her email is chinee.loh@nie.edu.sg.

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