Mobile Bristol
‘A New Sense of Place?’ project

New technologies often bring with them new challenges and opportunities. Children as a group are highly adaptive and receptive to new technologies, but are rarely involved in their design and development. This is where the Mobile Bristol ‘A New Sense of Place?’ project is so unusual. Right from the outset it was concerned with bringing children on board with the trial and use of wireless devices to create soundscapes (landscape of sound) in an outdoor environment. This was crucial to the project to ensure that the technology that developed as a result of the research is inclusive, useful, usable and fun.

The school that we chose to work with was Ashton Gate Primary School in Bristol. The children were aged between nine and ten and belonged to a class of 36 individuals. Their main experience of mobile technology was through mobile phones, and they were keen to get their hands on the PDAs (personal digital assistants). Before they could do this, however, we were interested in finding out more about the way they perceive their local environment. To do this we set up a series of workshops, each looking at slightly different aspects of the children’s geographical perceptions. We wanted to explore geographical understandings through all the senses, and look at children’s sense of place in small areas such as Old Chapel Park opposite their school, as well as in the wider neighbourhood.

In the mapping workshops based on Old Chapel Park we aimed to explore the children’s take on geography through as many forms of cognition as possible. We wanted to see what things they remembered most clearly about the park. We also asked them to draw the park as though they were flying over it in a hot-air balloon. In other workshops we asked the children to do drawings of the activities and events that occurred in the park, and following a blindfolded walk, got the children to mention textures and noises that they noticed when their sense of sight was masked by a blindfold. This workshop was especially popular with the children, and was talked about for many weeks afterwards.

All this was in preparation for the main purpose of the workshops, which was to introduce the idea of wireless soundscapes to the children. This was done by setting up a sample soundscape in Old Chapel Park, using noises such as thunderclaps, music tracks and dogs barking. Once the children had walked around with the mobile PDAs (see fig 1), listening to the noises, they were given the opportunity to create their own soundscapes using the client software that had been set up in their school IT suite. The finished soundscapes were aimed at their parents and friends, and were to be presented on an open day at the end of the workshops.

Once the children were familiar with soundscapes and soundscape technology, we carried out a big-map exercise, which involved spreading large-scale maps of the children’s local neighbourhood onto the floor (see fig 2). We used Ordnance Survey’s most detailed mapping (OS MasterMap®) for this exercise. Working in pairs or threes the children were asked to stick annotated labels onto the map to show places they liked and disliked, real-world noises they associated with particular places, and sounds they would like to place into their local area using wireless soundscape technology.

The results from the big-map exercise were analysed using a geographical information system (GIS), and were very revealing, telling us what types of places the children would use soundscape technology in, and whether the associations they had with these places were good or bad, and based on memories, sounds, textures, smell, social lives or events. For example, the river was unpopular with one person because it was muddy, and a factory was seen as a bad place because it was so smelly.

The technology workshops and mapping exercises all demonstrated aspects of children’s geographies and sense of place. It showed how individual perceptions of places formed an overall pattern of the way that children engage with their local landscapes. There are certain places like the park that are important to them, while others, such as the old people’s homes, hold no interest at all, unless their grandparent(s) happened to live there. It also demonstrated the differences between individuals in what they noticed and how they thought about their world. For some children, friend’s houses were the most important locations in the landscape. For others, it was the local football ground (see fig 3).
While the Ordnance Survey mapping was perfect for the detailed task of mapping personal geographies, the workshops demonstrated to us the elements of the geographical environment that are important to children, but are not represented in OS MasterMap, such as football pitches or climbers. It also revealed to us how important sound could be in helping people to form a sense of place, and how sound could enrich the geographical information for an area in evocative and varied ways.

In general, we found that the children were already very map literate and, although the maps we gave them to work with did not have street names on, they were easily able to identify their houses and their friend’s houses, as well as work out the street names for themselves. Their enthusiasm for maps was evident when we displayed a series of maps representing the effect of zooming into their local area from outer space. By the time we displayed the detailed map of their local area, they were ready to pounce on the map, wanting to talk about the places that were significant to themselves.

However, the workshops were most beneficial in furthering the geographical education the children already received from the school and their parents, as the project had the effect of making the children feel involved in defining their individual sense of place. It also gave them the chance to contribute to the development of a new form of geography that has been enabled by wireless technologies. Once this technology is widespread, people will be able to leave personalised music, sound effects, thoughts and feelings in particular locations for others to hear. This technology has the potential effect of re-engaging children and others to their local spaces, and enabling self-authoring of their particular geographies. Through hearing other people’s soundscapes, this could result in a greater appreciation of how others see or feel about the world.

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