

Ajankohtaiset

## Past presencing and heritage-making in school

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The origin of this project was an interest in how the past is experienced in the present and my intention with this project is to give due credit to the situations and things that trigger such connection.

To investigate how the past is experienced personally requires witnessing or stimulating situations that produce such experience. For example, personal memories can be activated by flickering photo albums; or if one asks a passer-by in a public memorial site about their experience, one may tell you that they have visited to mourn a personal loss, while another will be just walking the dog. While these unrelated anecdotes are far situated from school, which is in the title of this project, I have turned such situations into research in the past, and they help in clarifying the personal origin of this project. The main objective of this thesis has been to examine how a connection between past and present is triggered in the everyday lives of young people, and what is it that provides them an anchor with which to engage.

What helped me turn this interest into a research subject were a series of lessons learned along the way that enabled my questions, the possible implications of the answers I found and that have shaped my own path as researcher. This path started learning from teachers how they got youth engaged with the past, and ended up witnessing with students what it means to be at the centre of historical phenomena.

### ***Digiloikka* a period of transitions, connections, and imperatives**

I learned the first lesson in the setting I chose for this project. Schools seemed a good place to start because Finland's public school system and impressive PISA scores are known and admired internationally, but ultimately because they offer observable situations when youth confront and discuss historical phenomena. Upon arriving in Finland I soon came to detect that the digital transition offered an imperative opportunity to observe because while it inspired much talk about innovation and experimentation, it also caused frustration and insecurities.



This *digiloikka* as is known in Finland, is one of those phenomena in our time that has impacted our everyday lives. It was everywhere I looked and it intrigued me to examine how digital media and technology are used in contexts where young people learn about historical social and cultural phenomena. I soon realised that inquiring and documenting digital practices in schools was not going to supply a comprehensive answer to my question. But it was instrumental to make visible the practices that young people engage in that do trigger a personal connection and I hope that in making this research public knowledge, it inspires teacher and research communities to make these connections more explicit to students.

Despite an equitable school system, schools became an arena where research has evidenced divides; among teachers' personal attitudes, students' digital skills; and inequalities in school infrastructures. Despite these divides the research community shared the opinion that to prepare youth for our media and data producing and consuming societies, digital media and technologies offered an opportunity to connect<sup>1</sup>. "Connected learning" has become a concept in the last decade to describe situations that enable youth to tie personal interest to curricular achievement. While this was a new label for an old idea, the contexts that informed this concept had at its core ways young people engage socially and creatively online. This led to the narrow assumption that the main way to facilitate youth a connection, is by being online or producing media content.

Much about this assumption has been rectified since then, and I was particularly inspired by some ethnographies made in school by researchers who, as myself, had a background in media studies<sup>2</sup>. These critical voices raised among other education scholars and continue to remind us today (Kumpulainen et al. 2022) not to confuse the means with the objective, because at the heart of this discussion was not to introduce youth's peer-driven or online practices in school, but to bring coherence and continuity between how they learn in schools and how they live (and learn) elsewhere. This was a divide that motivated the teachers who engaged in this project, and it implied not necessarily to supply students with tablets, but to include their voices, interests, opinions, and worlds in curricular situations. To close this divide requires of teachers an improvisational attitude that became the most important facilitator of my research. It steered my questions towards these encounters and as result this thesis offers a catalogue of ideas on how to start closing this divide.

Inevitably, these moments involved digital media and practices because search engines and social media have already nurtured the information habits and forms of expression of the youngest generations, and having a documenting device constantly at hand is integral part of life, whether we like it, try to delay it, or to revert it (Pellinen 2024). But I found multiple other ways in which youth are offered an opportunity to connect in school, for example, when a teacher asks the class if there is a particular place or time in history they would like to include in the plans for the course.

1 To name a few important works that have contributed to this consensus: Gee (2006), Lankshear and Knobel (2006), Ito et al. (2009), Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2008).

2 School ethnographies have particularly addressed realistically that the digital does not necessarily solve divides nor guarantees connections: Kupiainen (2013), Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) and Thomson et al. (2018)



## Tools to describe what goes on in classrooms

In addition to pursuing the idea of providing students room to participate, a second factor was decisive to make this a project about connections. As mentioned earlier, I started inviting teachers to recall ideas and classroom activities they spontaneously related to “cultural heritage”. I chose this term as a working tool, I was familiar with it and by contrast to “the past” or “history”, it offered continuity to the present-day and the chance to include personal interpretations, and approaches to the past across curricular subjects.

Through these conversations the past became more concrete. Although teachers mentioned historical phenomena such as the civil war, colonialism, national epos, art masterpieces, or historical people and their ideas, these were not the main subject of our conversation. We were talking about their students’ cultures because historical people, ideas and events were being narrated by students in videos, examined through memes, or teachers explained about them in connection with contemporary events. Their accounts distilled an imperative to motivate students and to make the past familiar, usable and connected to their immediate lives. Subsequently, while I began considering school assignments that occur everyday in class as tools through which students learn to apply theoretical and disciplinary concepts, I saw them more and more as opportunities for youth to create a personal connection with the past, or to express and generate knowledge about their own cultures and identities. This is where this project received its title, past presencing and heritage-making in school.

Used as lens through which to examine school practice, this means that instead of paying attention to what from the past is selected, or how it is interpreted by participants, attention is paid to what it is being constructed in that moment. Past presencing relates but does not quite fit the rigours of history, nor is limited to the personal realms of memory, nor it refers to the sites and institutions conventionally identified as custodians of cultural heritage. With this concept Sharon Macdonald (2012) and others who have used it adopt an ethnographic perspective that is interested in mundane doings and sayings, which whether intended or not, evoke the past in the present. It pays attention to the tacit rules that underly these situations, to the most contemporary appearance and use of things that attest of the past, to the emotional reactions, and affective practices involved.

Guided by these focal points, the everyday assignments that students conduct almost mechanically when they stand up to retell the past in front of the class became my main object of research. In the set of activities triggered by these assignments, the dialogue and group dynamics, the use of things – particularly texts and images found online arranged in PowerPoints that evidence what is significant and students’ sense of narrative logic, the learning management systems that often fail to document the class’s collective efforts – all contribute to the knowledge generated in these moments, even if most of it remains tacit and ephemeral. By observing and going behind assignments in interviews with teachers and students, I found the ingredients I needed to examine my questions, namely, how the past is put into practice in class, how the contexts of learning, digital and other things enable and constrain this experience, and how students participate, drawing from their own funds of knowledge to make sense of the events studied in class. These questions reveal elements that I think are important to pay attention to in school because they offer opportunities to turn intuition and vernacular expression into legitimate research practices that derive from historical investigation and interpretation.



## Unscripted and connecting moments: a gesture, a thing, and a reading

This thesis is constituted by three independent case studies in different schools, with different protagonists, ages, and existential contexts. Despite these differences, all focus on ordinary practices and familiar things, which encourages me to think they have applications for a multitude of scenarios. To address my conclusions, I have asked an illustrator to draw excerpts from my field diaries that provided me the most connecting moments, these show the practices that co-create the past in class, the things that enable and constrain this experience, and how students participate.



**Image 1.** Pilvi Iso-Markku. Waldseemüller, Martin. 1507. "Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii alioru[m]que lustrationes."

One key aspect of everyday assignments is their performative and embodied nature, in class many things are communicated but remain unspoken. Sometimes a gesture can make a difference. The drawing above represents the moment I gained consciousness of the agency retained by students in these moments. I was visiting a course named "the development of scientific thinking". This unit remained in the collective memory of the students at the end of the course as the "one about maps", students had to make presentations of the expeditions that changed the conception of the world and this scientific approach was emphasized by the teachers' decision to use historical maps. A pair introduced the "discovery" of America and with her air quotes this student was the only one from the group who dared give a personal evaluation of a chapter in history that she characterised as "Eurocentric". With her air quotes and mentioning the destiny that awaited indigenous peoples, she boldly reminded the class, that to consider this an age of "discoveries" is a matter of perspective.

The second connecting moment has a thing as protagonist. Newspapers are a popular source of historical investigation. It is no small feat for Finland to be among the first countries that offered access online to this national treasure trove (Metso 2001). Newspapers capture the attention of history and cultural scholars, hobbyists, and family researchers alike. Teachers are not unanimous about how to support their students in navigating the uncertainty that reigns and already generates information in the present but they are unanimous about the capacity of newspapers to connect their classes with the real world. One of the articles of this thesis makes a point that perhaps more than other source of school material, newspapers



Image 2: *Länsi-Savo*, 01.03.1962, no. 49, p. 4. National Library's Digital Collections.

stand the proof of time and that historical newspapers in their digital and massive appearance are an effective device that allow youth to remark and start to bridge the gap between the past and their contemporary vocabularies, information habits and personal interests... if only school students had the same access to this time machine as researchers.

The last defining event in this project was to find diaries crafted by students during two months of pandemic lockdown in Spring 2020. With them I made the bold move to remain fully in the present time. To do this and to remain true to my objective, I felt the responsibility to consider these materials, and their makers, for their historical contribution. Serendipitously, this was easy because I found them in diverse museums and archives. I used the diary entry above in conferences to explain how students participated in creating the actual substance that history is made of.

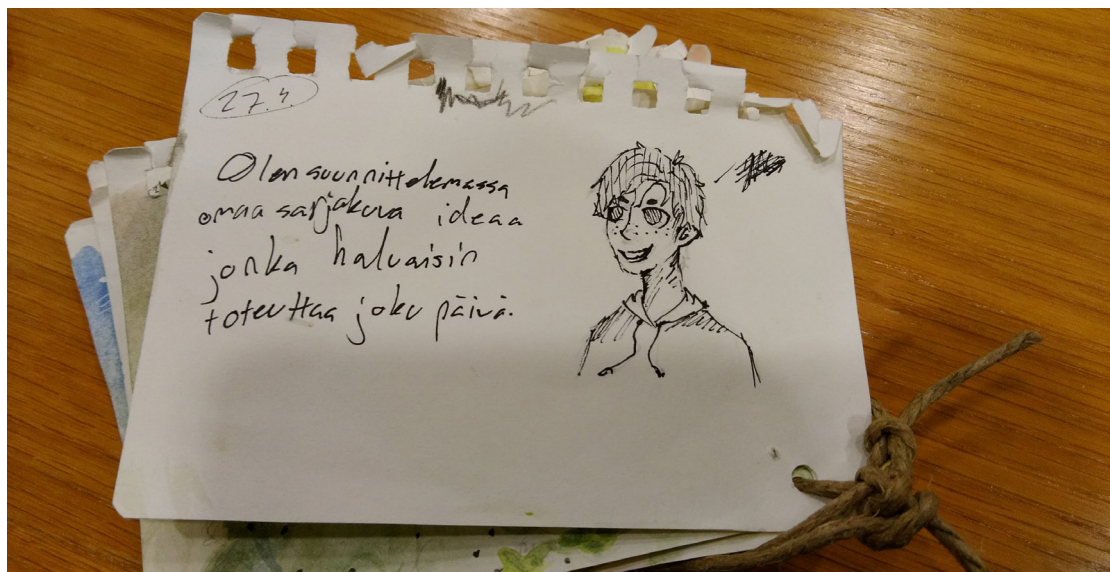


Image 3: LP, 27.4.2020, #Tallennatäähetki-aineisto, Kymenlaakso Museum archives.



In his drawing the narrator becomes visible not just because he draws himself but because we learn of his intentions: to generate ideas for his comic with his diary. This reveals a coherent plan that shows a will to succeed in the course with this two-month project. A cultural reference is revealed in the style, Anime, a passion that multiple pages of his diary evidence. Lastly, the pandemic, perhaps this is not obvious at first sight but is noticeable after reading a few diaries. In his statement, he is making a plan, which reflects a spirit attuned with the beginning of the pandemic and of many diaries: as chances to do many things were limited, we suddenly felt the urge to make many plans.

This image also allows to synthesize the perspective from which I interpreted what goes on in schools: from below and using media as allies to show that young people engage in multiple ways, and while some situations, topics or things might spark personal affinity, engagement in school cannot be reduced to this. If given the chance, they insert their interests and worlds but put their agency in practice in unexpected ways. Hence the urgency to zoom into these moments and make visible to students how these are legitimate beginnings to genuine research practices.

To close this lectio, I want to evoke a photograph I saw recently in an exhibition in the Helsinki City Museum. The photo was taken by Volker von Bonin in 1964 and shows what I came to perceive as an almost folkloric trait of teachers to offer students a chance to connect with the world by all means and media possible in school. Bonin shot a group of girls in a classroom, behind them, a wall crammed with magazine clippings of The Beatles. The pin wall that still today belongs to school classrooms is a symbol of this folklore. The fact that with each generation the passions that fill this wall change, only reinforces my claim that unless documented and collected, what happens in classes remains an intangible form of heritage-making.

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## Image Credits

Image 1 Pilvi Iso-Markku. Waldseemüller, Martin. 1507. "Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespucii alioru[m]que lustrationes." Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3200.ct000725/>.

Image 2: *Länsi-Savo*, 01.03.1962, no. 49, p. 4. National Library's Digital Collections. <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/sanomalehti/binding/1029474?page=4>

Image 3: LP, 27.4.2020, #Tallennatäähetki-aineisto, Kymenlaakso Museum archives.



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