Hidden Curriculum

Annette Krauss, Text

Hidden Curriculum looks at the unintended and unrecognized forms of knowledge, values and beliefs that are part of learning processes and daily life within high schools.

The ‘hidden curriculum’ can be seen to exist alongside every learning process both inside and outside of school. Many students use tricks and tactics to cope with the requirements they face within their education. They often discover that their assigned schoolwork comes into conflict with their hobbies, particularly in their spare time, and as a consequence selectively neglect parts of the formal education. Often unnoticed, these activities constitute a large part of the students’ engagement during class yet go unrecognized as forms of knowledge. Examples of this include a variety of cheating methods and strategies that students develop in order to access their own interests during their lessons, such as listening to music. ‘Hidden Curriculum’ focuses on the kinds of actions that are developed by the students that go beyond existing norms, showing creative ways of navigating institutional structures and subverting enforced cultural values and attitudes.

The project will be realized through a series of workshops with two groups of students (aged 15-16) from two schools in Utrecht. The workshops will set a framework in which the students will investigate their own actions and forms of behaviour and transfer the knowledge gained from their investigations towards other ends, such as the production of printed material, video and public actions. Activating situations that may go beyond common sense or secure behaviour, they will reflect on the legitimacy of a specific social context, taking a critical stance towards their own actions in order to act independently, think creatively, and to deal with the complexity of their own actions.
The workshops take place during school time in a variety of settings that include their classrooms, the school building, Casco's space, and other sites within the city. These settings give the students varying degrees of publicness and privacy to deal with. The school environment is a highly coded environment, but also one that they are accustomed to and have established habits within. At the workshops held at Casco, the students are offered a more free and unfamiliar environment that establishes a distance to the school. Inherent in the project is a sense of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility. The students decide what can be accessed and what remains for a selected audience, i.e. out of reach of their teachers, parents and other figures of authority.

At Casco the students will work within a workspace developed specifically for the project by Celine Condorelli, as part of her ongoing research into support structures. Here the concept is to use existing structures and adapt them to their own use or benefit through subtle distortion or adjustment. The space is cloaked by large set of curtains that spiral into the centre of the room, creating the possibility of two separate spaces, one more private and the other more open. The curtains can be assembled in layers of transparent and opaque material – ranging from coloured translucent plastic, to hessian and wool – and enable different levels of openness and privacy that allow the students to decide how public certain moments and parts of the project can be. The space is furnished with a set of tables and cupboards that are comprised of joined together parts of other existing furniture, which can be kept together or separated. These adaptable elements offer the students multiple possibilities to change their environment.

When venturing out into the city, the group will observe everyday life in the public sphere and will try and test it out by slightly changing the ‘curriculum’. For example, what would happen if one waits for the bus standing up side down? What could the actual distances between people in public indicate? What happens if one changes one’s own distance to other people? The challenge is to identify their own particular field research that can be tested out.

Through looking at how the students negotiate and resist the formal structures that they are confronted with in the school environment, as well as transferring these investigations into the public realm, the project forms a model of how institutional structures are negotiated in other areas of life, observing how people deal with rules and internalise them, as well as subconsciously resist them. How do norms and values control our know-how and practices in everyday life? How do these contribute towards the development of human relations within social contexts? What is the meaning of imposed categories of thought that are embedded in the very modes of particular actions?

Report
What follows is an account of the project so far, which will be updated as the project progresses.

1. Collecting chairs
Each student was asked to donate a chair from their home as a way of demonstrating their commitment to the project and as a sign of their participation. The chairs are collected from their homes and assembled in the space at Casco, the individual choices of the students
creating an odd array of different kinds of seating.

2. In the classroom – chair exercise
The students were asked to interact with a chair in a way that goes against their usual uses of the object.

3. In the school – building exercise
The chair exercise is expanded in scale to encompass the building. The students set off to investigate the school building, finding ways to approach it that are different to the way in which they habitually navigate it. The students look for inbetween or non-spaces, seeking the gaps within the building that are not used, inconvenient, uncomfortable, forbidden and hidden spaces. They physically enter into them and document their findings.

4. Transferring into actions
What would the equivalent of these inbetween or non-spaces be as an action? The students are invited to reflect upon what they have done and relate that to their own actions. They are shown parts of an archive of interviews in which students from other schools share the secrets of their hidden actions. As many of these video clips were taken in Germany, the video sets off a discussion about differences in school structures, in particular between what is allowed or not within particular contexts. Even within the Netherlands, the differences between the two schools and their approaches to rules and structures are remarkable. The archive is taken as a starting point for a brainstorming session in which the students develop their own ideas of how to transfer these tricks into other actions. The intention of this is for the students to find their own particular field of interest that raises questions surrounding the broader topic of the investigation: the hidden curriculum.