

Anatomical Society Winter Meeting 2018
Anatomies in the Virtual Realm, 17-19 December, York University

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The Spectacle of Dissection: Investigating the Visuospatial Features of Anatomical Teaching in UK Medical Schools

This study examines how the visuospatial features of dissection facilities have shaped anatomy teaching in Cambridge and other UK medical schools. Just as medical topography surveys a region to uncover physical features influencing health and disease, an investigation of anatomical teaching spaces should reveal recurrent themes. Anatomical theatres are modelled on an amphitheatre which elevates the observer to a position with a virtual bird's-eye view of the unfolding drama. The analogy of theatrical performance can thus be used to uncover the relationships between the topography of a room and methods of anatomical teaching, highlighting the similarities between a dramatic play and dissection lesson. Our research methods were drawn from the critical medical humanities, cultural anthropology and sociology. The performative structure of a dissection lesson was analysed through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with students and demonstrators, and qualitative thematic content analysis. Participant observation was informed by seeing anatomy 'acted out' first-hand during teaching sessions in Cambridge, University College London, Imperial College London, King's College London and Manchester University. Guided interviews with different 'actors' provided an in-depth understanding of their experience, opinions and feelings. Care was taken to disentangle the interaction between demonstrators, students, donors, props and 'matters of care'. Our findings showed that the conceptual design of visuospatial features in dissection rooms is key to maximising student engagement with dissection. While the clinical anatomist, the 'director', plays a leading role in shaping the screenplay, the donor is retained as the centre of attention. The spatial proximity between different 'characters' and 'props' through designated teaching zones allows for multiple role changes but concentrates the focus on the donor. The use of digital devices with 3D-rendered images created new teaching 'scenes' which juxtapose bodies in the analogue and virtual realms. These were employed especially effectively in teaching sessions involving clinical and applied anatomy.