

Churches as School Learning Spaces – Perspectives on Didactics of Sacred Spaces

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Abstract

The didactics of sacred spaces is an integrative approach within school-based religious education. It emphasizes churches as didactic learning environments that connect cognitive understanding with sensory and performative engagement. Through multisensory, participatory, and reflective methods, learners encounter the symbolic, aesthetic, and theological dimensions of sacred spaces without being missionized. It outlines principles such as slowing down, sensory experience, appropriation, and movement, underscoring the pedagogical value of learning in real church spaces. Ultimately, church space didactics fosters deeper religious literacy and sustainable, reflective learning.

Keywords

church space didactics; experiential learning; multisensory experience; education; performative learning; religious education; sacred spaces

1. Introduction

Churches are major tourist attractions in many cities. Hardly any visitors to Rome will skip St. Peter's Basilica, and few would pass by the Sagrada Família in Barcelona. The churches are part of our cultural heritage. They are appreciated as highlights during vacations, while at the same time, the number of people attending Sunday services is declining in many countries (for example, in Germany: cf. Statista 2025). Despite this trend, churches remain the central place of Christian faith, where congregations gather to celebrate liturgy.

Against this background, this article shows that visits to sacred spaces play a central role in the school context, but church space pedagogy concepts designed for church tours cannot simply be adopted wholesale. The first section outlines the necessity of a didactics of sacred spaces, discussing both the opportunities and limitations of learning *about* church buildings. It highlights the need for multiperspective learning *in* the church space in order to give all students, regardless of their background, equal opportunities to engage with the sacred environment. The aim is to provide access for those closely connected to the church, as well as for those who are distant from it or unbaptised, inviting them in without overwhelming them. To achieve this, the didactics of sacred space require a performative approach, which is briefly presented. A short overview of key principles for educational work in church spaces complements these considerations before the article concludes with a short summary.

2. The Necessity of a Didactics of sacred spaces

Church space pedagogy initially emerged in extracurricular settings for voluntary visitors, often adults. Didactics of sacred spaces, on the other hand, aims at school learning: It prepares the church space as a learning location within the context of religious education and integrates it into the didactic structure of school learning processes.

In the school context, exploring church spaces usually takes place within the framework of a curriculum topic (e.g., church history, liturgy, symbols, sacraments). The goal is to deepen understanding in the classroom under the specific conditions of the church as a learning location. The focus is on thematically relevant aspects, not on a complete art-historical or touristic exploration. Churches are thus integrated into the curriculum as places of religious practice, individual piety, and cultural history. A church space didactics approach is therefore integrative: it links the intrinsic value of church space with the goals of religious education. It makes it clear that religion can also be experienced in and at very real places.

Church space didactics is rooted in denominational religious education but can also be implemented in a cross-denominational setting. Both homogeneous and heterogeneous learning groups are found in religious education classes, including students who are non-denominational or of other faiths. Therefore, a didactic concept is needed that does justice to different religious perspectives. The theological understanding of church space as a “sign and symbol of transcendent reality” (SC 122; cf. Rahner & Vorgrimler, 87; translation R.S.) must be taken into account in school pedagogy; rituals cannot simply be performed arbitrarily.

Church explorations must be carefully prepared: scheduling, travel arrangements, materials, and rules of conduct are just as important as coordinating with on-site personnel. Off-limits areas must be clearly established in advance. A central, thematically focused thread is essential for structuring the excursion and linking it to the lesson. A visit detached from the rest of the curriculum is counterproductive.

3. Opportunities and Limitations of Teaching about Church Spaces

The distance many learners have from religious experience makes it difficult to understand church spaces, which are often perceived as foreign because their own religion is no longer practiced. Therefore, church spaces can hardly be taught solely through cognitive means in the classroom. While virtual 3D tours offer visualization, they do not replace the sensory experience of space, sound, smell, and atmosphere. In a real church space, religion can be experienced as a lived practice; it is the emotional and social dimensions of exploration that are added.

Narrative, visual, and audiovisual media are valuable additions, creating cognitive anchors and preparing students for the church visit. Analogies to secular spaces – such as stadiums, concert halls, or train stations – can also help to explore the anthropological dimension of sacred places (cf. Brüll & Ittmann & Maschwitz & Stoppig, 13–6). These places also have behavioural norms, rehearsed rituals, and avenues of meaning. Such analogies acknowledge the human striving for meaning and community, but at the same time raise critical questions about the

Church: Why do many people experience a more intense sense of community there than in churches?

The didactic preparation should foster empathy for sacred spaces. Instead of moral appeals (“Now be quiet!”), biographical reflections are helpful, in which students describe their own “sacred places” (cf. Grünwaldt, 48–51). Rituals of transition increase mindfulness upon entering the church. Young people with little or no experience of church life, in particular, need real-life experiences to understand holiness. Digital or school worship experiences are insufficient, as they lack the connection between action and reflection. What is needed is a multisensory and reflective approach to the unfamiliar homeland of the Church.

Purely learning facts is insufficient. Only through action-oriented and performative forms of learning can the symbolic and emotional dimensions of religion be experienced (cf. Kaupp 2019, 391). Church spaces must therefore not only be observed, but experienced as places of liturgical action – in accordance with the Second Vatican Council’s call for “full, conscious, and active participation” (SC14; cf. Rahner & Vorgrimler, 57). The task of didactics is to respectfully guide learners toward a participant perspective without overwhelming them. At the same time, space must remain to allow for distancing oneself from these forms. Non-Christian students should, in any case, primarily assume the role of observer.

4. Multiperspective Learning in Church Spaces

Church explorations should connect perception, interpretation, and understanding (cf. Rupp 2016; Neumann & Rösener). Experiential perception is a prerequisite for cognitive understanding. The excursion must evoke the sanctity of the space, for example, through threshold and closing rituals, but humour and lightness should also have their place. A healthy balance must be found here: neither reverential paralysis nor wild trampling through the church space is desirable. Observational and exploratory exercises – e.g., on acoustics, spatial proportions, or the effects of light – foster wonder at the architectural and symbolic dimensions of the church space. Through these exercises, students can gain an understanding of what it means to encounter God in a sacred space.

Individual approaches are particularly important, as learners bring diverse religious backgrounds. Multisensory perception (hearing, sight, smell, bodily sensation) enables subjective experiences that can be quite unsettling, such as when the skeleton of a martyr is displayed in a church. Open-ended tasks awaken curiosity and prevent students from being overwhelmed by predetermined answers. Teachers must be able to explain familiar religious symbols while simultaneously addressing ambivalences – for example, between art and piety, wealth and humility, or between theology and popular belief.

Church space didactics aims beyond immediate experience to foster sustainable religious learning. Students should become familiar with the basic elements of a house of worship and connect them with their own experiences. On-site experiences anchor cognitive content more effectively than purely material-based work when they are coupled and interconnected with sensory experiences. Combinations of individual exploration, performative elements (prayer,

song, movement), and reflection are particularly effective. Altar servers or choir members can contribute their experiential knowledge, while those of other faiths or no faith can, with their open-mindedness, stimulate reflection with surprising questions and perspectives. Such projects follow a multi-stage, church-space-based didactic model of preparation and introduction, arrival and engagement, exploration and experience, conclusion and letting go, and reflection and contextualization (cf. Mendl & Sitzberger 2023, 37ff.).

5. Performative Learning in Church Spaces

Performative religious education combines experience and reflection (cf. Mendl 2016; 2017; 2021). It aims to make religious practices understandable within the context of state-run religious education without lapsing into catechesis, which seems inappropriate in the school setting.

Objections to performative learning relate to the dangers of re-catechetization, clericalization, or an inadmissible liturgization of instruction. This criticism is refuted when performative phases are always linked with cognitive and reflective guidance. Learners decide for themselves whether they act as participants or observers. This freedom ensures a balance between religious experience and distance. Therefore, this should be consistently reinforced within the exploration, and students should become aware of whether this is a sacred space for them or not. Do I want to participate in the prayer or merely observe from the outside?

Rituals in the classroom exist within the tension between religious seriousness and didactic simulation. The crucial factor is the subjective meaning that learners ascribe to the actions. Teachers create the framework for seriously exploring religious forms of expression without claiming interpretive authority. Reflection enables distance and respect, even towards students who are not religious. Positive and negative religious freedom must be equally upheld. A balance must be struck between the sacred space and the seriousness of religion, as well as the autonomy and individual decisions of children and young people.

In denominational religious education, baptized students can be expected to engage with their own religion – but without any missionary pressure. Performative phases are offered, not obligatory. Those who are religiously distant or of other faiths must be offered an observational perspective.

A Performative Basic Model

Performative church space didactics embed experience in discourse and reflection, which is essential in the school setting. The goal is the understanding of religious practices, not their adoption by the students. Aesthetic, ritual, and emotional experiences should enable learners to understand religion as a cultural interpretation. A clear thematic framework, transparent preparation, and guided reflection are necessary.

Performative Church Space Didactics

Thematic Embedding and Introduction

- Curriculum context, thematic focus, cognitive anchors
- Framework of the excursion (time, space, behavior)
- Opportunities for participation: attendance or observation

Ritual, prayer, liturgy in the church space

- Invitation to participate, open forms → subjective attribution of meaning
- Interim reflections → opportunity for distancing

Reflection and Continuation

- Subjective positioning (experience + reflect = learn)
- Exchange about perception and meaning
- Topic-specific follow-up work

Riegel & Kindermann (2012a & 2012b) showed that church space pedagogy excursions significantly increase interest in the subject matter. Combinations of individual exploration, performative elements, and reflection phases are most effective. Children who visited church spaces multiple times learned significantly more than those who only engaged with the topic through media. Performative learning methods thus promote both motivation and cognitive gain. The learners understand these explorations as an opportunity to experience the place as a religious and spiritual space, especially when they have the chance to try out practices themselves and then reflect on them.

6. Principles of a Didactics of sacred Spaces

From the preceding considerations, four central principles of church space didactics emerge (cf. Riegel & Kindermann 2012b, 177):

Slowing Down

Exploring church spaces emphasizes a slower pace of perception. “It is not much knowledge that satisfies the soul, but savoring things from within” (Ignatius of Loyola, 7). In contrast to traditional lessons with worksheets and a wealth of material to be conveyed, a direct encounter is staged, which presents the space as an auratic, sacred space. Therefore, threshold rituals are particularly important because they mark the transition from everyday mode to the perception of the sacred.

Sensory Experience

In addition to sight and hearing, smell, touch, body awareness, and spatial perception should also be addressed. Haptic experiences, in particular, awaken attention and reverence: Is it

permissible to touch the altar? To sit in the choir stalls? Such questions open up learning processes about the meaning of the sacred. However, in such sensory experiences, the intellect must not be neglected in the sense of a misguided holistic approach. Cognitive and multisensory learning must complement and enrich each other.

Appropriation

Church space education does not aim at art historical instruction, but rather at personal interpretation and appropriation. Guiding questions are: What do I perceive? What does it mean? What relevance does it have for me? Individual approaches – such as one’s own favorite place – promote self-connection and understanding. The focus of church exploration should always follow a pre-defined and well-developed theme.

Movement

Learning in church space is thoroughly embodied. Through movement, space becomes tangible – walking, circling, listening. Physical and communal forms (e.g., procession, pilgrimage, liturgical gestures) connect perception, ritual, and reflection into an experience of church space that is not possible in the classroom – even with virtual tools.

7. Conclusion: The Enduring Value of the Exclusive

Exploring church spaces is not an everyday occurrence. School learning is embedded in a diverse network and in structural conditions. Leaving the school as a learning environment usually involves additional effort. This additional effort must be justified and accounted for to the students and to the school as a whole. The advantages of church space didactics are clear: it enables the development of diverse learning processes that cannot be implemented in the classroom but prove essential for religious learning. Therefore, it should continue to be given sufficient space in school curricula.

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