IDEAL LEARNING SPACES: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Thesis Prepared for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2015

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Classrooms, libraries, student unions, and university campuses shape students’ learning experiences. These physical learning spaces set the stage for college student engagement and academic performance. Most of the research about the role of physical spaces in learning lacks the student perspective. The goal of this study was to offer a student-centered vision of ideal learning spaces. Students are the learners for whom learning spaces are designed, and this thesis examines the way students of one summer class at Oklahoma Baptist University conceptualized and interacted with their learning spaces. Data collection included surveys of the students, a focus group with members of the class, participant observation in the classroom, and interviews with students and the professor. Students viewed physical spaces as the backdrop for human action and chose spaces that supported their learning styles and goals. Students described supportive spaces as warm, purposefully crafted spaces, and full of other people who were seriously pursuing the same goals. This thesis explores the ways students conceptualized and interacted with learning spaces as a network of support for their learning and provides recommendations for the design of learning spaces that facilitate this support.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes: I came to you without a firm foundation (and quite frankly, afraid of my own shadow), and you gave me not only legs to stand on but also a clear path to walk. You have been exactly what I needed.

To my fellow students, and especially Molly Shade: thank you for reminding me, at exactly the right moments, that dedication and work are important things, but not the only things. Thank you for your friendship.

To my parents: you not only raised me—invested time, love, and wisdom in me—and sent me off to college, you let me move home so I could keep pursuing my dreams. Without you I am lost.

To Professor Tim McCollum: you told me to go to UNT and now here we are. Thanks for telling me I could do it.

And last but most certainly not least, to Dr. Glenn Sanders: thank you for your investment in me. I credit your encouragement as the essential inspiration for this project.
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GC: Geiger Center, the OBU Student Union

OBU: Oklahoma Baptist University

SSC: Student Success Center
CHAPTER 1
DESCRIPTION OF APPLIED THESIS PROJECT

Introduction

In an age of digital technologies, the design of physical higher education environments and the existence of online higher education environments are guided by the ideals of efficiency and connection characteristic of such technologies. In the context of physical higher education environments, these ideals of efficiency and connection and their attendant technologies have often been applied to classroom and campus design under the assumption that they inherently fit and further the aims of higher education. This study strove to approach the issue of classroom design, and campus design writ large, without the assumption that digital technologies are the answer to every problem or the next step on every path. It brought an inductive anthropological perspective to bear on the issue of ideal learning environments to create a student-centered framework for thinking about and designing learning spaces.

Description of the Client

My client was the Milburn Student Success Center of Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU). OBU is a private, Christian, liberal arts university of just over 2,000 students. Because it is my alma mater, and my research interests lie in higher education, my search for a client began there. Through the course of correspondence with the Office of Student Life and the chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee, and after several conversations with my mentor Dr. Brown, we agreed that one of Dr. Brown’s summer courses could serve as the subject of my study. I was then directed to the Student Success Center (SSC) as a possible client. Monica
Mullins, the director of the SSC, met with me and we agreed that the focus of the research would be physical learning spaces and that Dr. Brown’s class would serve as the research population. With enthusiasm from the client, the partnership was cemented. The final network of client relationships was that I worked with Dr. Brown’s summer Western Civilization class and reported my findings to Ms. Mullins, who shared the findings with her colleagues in other offices. I cannot emphasize enough how much insight and encouragement I received from both Dr. Brown and Ms. Mullins. It was a beautiful partnership.

Several months before the project began, Ms. Mullins lent me *Student Success in College*, by Kuh et al., an integral book in her understanding of what constitutes student success (2005). After reading the book it became clear that there was tension between the research I proposed and the view of student success Kuh et al. proffered. *Student Success* assumed that buildings, physical spaces, would not change and thus focused on programming as the key to student success. I realized the SSC was operating under this assumption, at least to a degree, despite their genuine interest in a study of the physical spaces as learning environments. In light of this, part of my responsibility was to present my findings in a way that appreciated this rationale and its priorities. OBU and its SSC proved very much like other institutes of higher education in this assumption that programmatic change should be the first line of action to support students’ educational endeavors, as buildings would not change.

**Description of the Service**

The SSC is an academic support service free to all OBU students. The center provides regular tutoring sections for specific classes, one-on-one peer tutoring, writing support across
disciplines, and aid in preparing for and conducting research. The SSC was established in 2008, and in that academic year they scheduled 2,578 sessions across the aforementioned services. Only 5 years after that strong beginning, they scheduled 10,567 sessions in one academic year. An underlying hope of the SSC is to remove the stigma associated with asking for academic help, and as their growth rate has outpaced that of the student body it appears they are achieving their goal. Pertinent to this project, the growth of the SSC has led, just this academic year, to the expansion of their space by roughly 30%.

Description of Project

The Ideal Learning Spaces: The Student Perspective project was an exploratory ethnographic study of one class at OBU over the course of one summer semester. The project focused on developing a sound, cohesive, student-centered framework for understanding the relationship between physical spaces and learning in higher education. The research questions that guided the project were:

1. How do students interact with the physical spaces of their learning environment?
2. What do those interactions indicate about how students conceptualize those spaces?

These research questions were based on the practical needs and interests of the client, but were nonetheless informed by theory from a variety of disciplines. Theory and practice are cyclically and even integrally related to one another in the conduct of applied anthropology. For instance, this project used the theoretical framework of hidden curriculum to provide an introductory lens that narrowed the focus of the project to the role of the physical environment in learning. But it was the practice of participant observation in the classroom that made the framework useful.
Theory provided the outline and practice provided the specific data to which the theory could give meaningful shape. I strove to conduct this project in a way that brought both together in the dance of theoretically informed practice.

The fundamental goal of this research was to provide the SSC, and any other interested constituencies across the university, a framework for understanding the students’ perspectives about the places where they learn. As this was an exploratory study, it was also conducted in the hope that insights gained here would jumpstart research or practical efforts for student-centered design of learning environments at OBU.
CHAPTER 2
CONTEXT OF WORK

Anthropology, the study of human beings and human groups across space and time, has a number of immediate connections to the concept and process of education. In the American anthropological tradition, the great unit of anthropological study is culture, whether studied as an entity in and of itself or as the fluid and dynamic milieu of a social group. Much of this project focused on symbols and students’ symbolic construction of their experience in a physical space; thus, the definition of culture proffered by Clifford Geertz was useful. He said:

Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz 1973)

It is this network of meaning making, which people navigate every day, that anthropology has a particular knack for elucidating. The existence of culture and the process by which it is perpetuated and propelled into the future is grounded in a variety of local models of transmitting and receiving knowledge. These models lay out how cultural knowledge (knowledge about how to be a person, how to make meaning, and how to interpret meaning) is to be given by those who have it and received by those who do not (Wolcott 1982). This transmission exists in every social group; it is the formal and informal processes of education. But the model for transmission is where we see the world’s diversity. The study of education in its diverse forms is integral to understanding culture from an anthropological perspective.

The anthropology of education is the study of this culture process—the process of transmitting applicable knowledge for the maintenance of a cultural group. However, in the
context of the United States, where this project was conducted, education is overwhelmingly equated with formal education or schooling (Spindler and Spindler 1997). Thus the anthropology of education can be more specifically understood as the study of the formal processes of education and the ways in which these processes are embedded in and in dynamic interaction with the culture in which they exist. This can be pictured as the cycle in Figure 1: content and patterns of cultural transmission have shaped current forms of formal education, which in turn continue to shape patterns of cultural transmission and to process cultural content during transmission (Bourdieu 1979; Ogbu 2000).

From primary school to higher education, the built environment literally structures the cultural transmission that occurs in the schooling process. In the United States we most often equate education with schooling, and in turn we evoke the schoolhouse—the red, belfry-ed caricature common to many primary school children. The built environment plays the same important role in institutes of higher education, where the relationship between physical spaces and the process of education is even more closely knit because the physical space is homes, dining facilities, recreational facilities, work places, and a place for formal education all in one (Boyer 1987).

In the research literature about the relationship between physical spaces and education, the ontological and functional nature of physical space is cast as influencing or guiding behavior or activity (Baum and Valins 1977; Davidson and Hawe 2012; Hunley and Schaller 2014;
Izadpanah and Günçe 2014; Kirkeby 2009; McCater and Woolner 2011; Rapoport 1982; Strange and Banning 2001; and Wilson and Randall 2012). On the most basic level, rooms of varying sizes allow varying numbers of people to congregate in the same place and to behave therein in particular ways, as supported by Edward T. Hall and Goffman’s models of human use of spaces. These models are reflections of the culture of people using the space (Alexander 1979; Goffman 1956; Hall 1966). Even in case studies that did not set out to explore the ontological or functional nature of spaces, the construction of the findings of each study assumed that spaces performed this role (McCarter and Woolner 2011; Wilson and Randall 2012).

Overall, scholars/researchers concerned with education agree that the role of physical spaces in learning is to facilitate or even encourage learning, but there are number of different ways spaces can fulfill this role: increasing engagement, providing resources for learning, facilitating particular pedagogical methodologies, and providing the material context for meaning-building (Basso 1996; Fisher et al. 2004; Hunley and Schaler 2014; Izadpanah and Günçe 2014; Jamieson 2000; Kirkeby 2009; Kuh et al. 2005; Wilson and Randall 2012).

The first way spaces fulfill their role as facilitators of learning—increasing engagement—falls into 3 primary categories. There is engagement between students and students, students and teachers, and students and course material. Davidson and Hawe (2012), and Wilson and Randall (2012), discuss the importance of physical spaces that encourage small group peer interaction in increasing student engagement. An interesting line is drawn here between student-to-student engagement and student-to-material engagement, but the essential point is that space plays an important supporting role in facilitating both. Similarly, Hunley and Schaller emphasize the role of spaces in encouraging students to engage with course material,
but add that students are more likely to engage in environments “that encourage interaction with other students and faculty” (2014: 28) and remind students that they have ownership in their learning. An increase in all 3 engagement dyads is encouraged by spaces that make students feel at home and that allow them to have a stake in their own learning (Izadpanah and Günçe 2014).

Secondly, spaces facilitate learning by providing the requisite resources for learning. These resources may be in the form of human resources, physical objects, or relevant material stimuli. Human resources are often discussed in terms of holistic interpersonal and emotional support (Boyer 1987; Davidson and Hawe 2012; and Hunley and Schaller 2014). In the higher education context specifically, the campus is a home away from home for students, which houses faculty, counseling staff, Resident Assistants, and even fitness counselors, who all contribute to student wellness and ability to pursue their academic endeavors (Boyer 1987). The physical objects provided in learning spaces are those pertinent to the completion of learning activities and tasks, be they age-appropriate toys in primary school classrooms or subject-specific computer applications in higher education classrooms (Izadpanah and Günçe 2014; Wilson and Randall 2012). Relevant material stimuli for learning are the nonverbal cues that learning spaces provide to users—students, teachers, or others—about what kind of behavior is appropriate in that space. These cues structure expectations and provide appropriate mental frameworks for learning (Basso 1996; Fisher et al. 2014; González 2002; Kirkeby 2009; McCarter and Woolner 2011; Rapoport 1982). Regarding American schooling, Sutton discusses material stimuli as being tied up with economic interests and modernization theory, making the relevant stimuli things like strict class schedules and bells to enforce them (Sutton 2000). Learning spaces contain and provide this range of emotional, mental, and physical resources for learning.
Thirdly, spaces encourage learning by facilitating particular pedagogical methodologies (Hunley and Schaller 2014). In Izadpanah and Günçe’s (2014) case study, a circle of seating was essential to particular parts of the pedagogical approach of the classroom: “The circular seating arrangement is the best option for review sessions, since it connects children to each other and increases their social competence while providing equal visual access to one another” (2014: 11). The pedagogical method represented in this case harkens back to the role of space in increasing student engagement; the management of a particular space can lead to students being more engaged with each other, their teacher, and their material, and that engagement is an important aim of pedagogies that emphasize the interpersonal nature of learning.

Lastly, spaces facilitate learning by providing the material context for meaning-building. The research literature focuses on the agency of users to build meaning into their built environment, but there are undercurrents of the agency of physical spaces in this process; physical spaces can limit or guide the possible meanings wherewith they can be imbued (Banning and Canard 1986; Basso 1996; Bosch 2014; Crookston 1974; Davidson and Hawe 2012; González 2002; Hall 1966; Kirkeby 2009; Nielson and Groes 2014; Passini 1996; and Rapoport 1982). Whether the world’s largest university for women, designed by architect Pat Bosch to be built in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or a largely Caucasian, middle-class university in the United States as explored in the work of Kenneth Gonzalez, spaces have the power to represent the values and beliefs of the institution to the students and to restricts the kinds of meaning students can make of their built environment (Bosch 2014; González 2002). In Bosch’s description of Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University, the division of public and private spaces on campus communicates to students that they should embrace a dichotomous
framework of behavior (i.e. they should wear hijabs for modesty in the public spaces but may remove them for more intimate or free interactions in the private spaces). In Gonzalez’s study of Chicano students at a largely Caucasian, middle class university, his participants saw the university’s values inscribed in its columns and emblazoned on its murals, and their message was quite clear: Chicanos are not a part of this world. Regardless of the messages verbally communicated to students, if they are in conflict with the nonverbal cues, nonverbal cues are taken to be more true (Mehrabian 1971). This role of spaces may also be employed for directly pedagogical purposes. In Basso’s work with the Western Apache of Cibecue in Arizona, there is an understanding that “the land is always stalking people, [that] the land makes people live right” (1996: 38). The Western Apache imbue their environment with didactic meaning and draw on that meaning in teaching moments by telling the story of that particular place (Basso 1996). Professors arguably have the same opportunity to evoke the meaning of a classroom and to root that meaning in the physical objects that will greet the students every day when they walk into class. A significant component of building meaning, for students, is being able to draw messages of hope and of the importance of their work from the learning spaces themselves. Physical learning spaces do provide the material context for meaning-building, but this means they also have the power to limit this process through the nonverbal cues inherent in the form and style of their design.

Having established that physical learning spaces have a role in structuring users’ ability to make meaning of those spaces, and that the extent to and the manner in which spaces limit meaning-building is rooted in the form and style of their design, I shift my attention to the sociocultural contexts that produce such spaces. In much of the research literature, the locus of
power for designing learning spaces can be identified through research methodology. To whom do the researchers choose to give a voice in their research? Whom do they leave out? To what extent are there social distinctions between those they include and those they exclude? The dichotomy that generally arises to answer these questions is the users of spaces versus groups or people who possess certain resources. Some researchers give voice to the users of spaces (Hunley and Schaller 2014; McCarter and Woolner 2011; and Wilson and Randall 2012), while others represent possessors of resources, whether money or social influence, as those who have the power to define spaces (Davidson and Hawe 2012). There are also several authors who engage both sides of the dichotomy (Izadpanah and Günçe 2014; Jamieson et al. 2000; and Strange and Banning 2001). It is important to note that users of learning spaces are both teachers and students, and in every case cited above, when students were given a voice, it was through surveys, while teachers were more likely to be interviewed. So in the cases of user-centered research, students were not given as nuanced or complete a voice as teachers. Jamieson et al. (2000), offer a common perspective: the users of a space are those who should have the power to define spaces, but it is administrators (possessors of social influence and distributors of money) who often have that power in reality.

This project, rooted in the tradition of the anthropology of education, asked questions about the relationship between physical spaces and the process of transmission through formal education—specifically: (1) how do students conceptualize learning spaces, and (2) how do they constitute those spaces in relation to themselves for effective learning? These questions exist at the intersection of the ontological and functional nature of spaces; the role of physical spaces in learning; and considerations of the power dynamics inherent in creating and defining spaces.
These research questions were developed for the purpose of meeting practical needs determined with my client. It was through this iterative, in situ process that I was able to develop a student-centered framework for the meaning and usage of physical spaces at Oklahoma Baptist University, which the Student Success Center and a humanities committee are using to frame their assessment of physical spaces and priorities in redesigns—specifically classroom redesigns.

Working with OBU on behalf of students, rather than simply for OBU and its students, was essential. It was in this context of praxis, of “principled practice by which theory and the concrete world are both constituted and brought into discursive relationship with one another,” that both practically and theoretically useful insights emerged (Comaroff 2010: 530). Placing the theoretical underpinnings and the practical realities of this project in conversation with one another from the beginning was the project’s strength. As I got to know my participants, collected data, walked through campus, and developed my findings, my theoretical lenses were present, but they were structured by a practical need. It was this marriage that allowed me to see the ways this project fills gaps in the literature on physical spaces, or the built environment, in higher education.

The forerunning paragraphs have explored the foundations of anthropology, the particular veins of anthropological research pertinent to studies of education, general constructs for understanding the built environment as related to education, and schooling in particular, and the roles that are attributed to spaces throughout the process of education. This project contributes to an understanding of the way students—an ill-represented constituency in pertinent research to date—experience and construct the roles of space in their learning, and it offers a jumping off point for the design and assessment of effective learning spaces in higher education.
CHAPTER 3
PROJECT DESIGN

Overview

This project was designed so that the data collection strategy would parallel the basic trajectory of my relationship with my participants: the more basic, less intrusive data were gathered through participant observation, a survey, and a focus group in the first half of the semester, and more in-depth or personal data were gathered through continued participant observation and interviews in the second half of the semester. The types of data collected gradually built on one another so that when it was time to analyze, the data were ready to tell a story. Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes, Ms. Mullins, and I collaboratively designed the project’s overarching structure, while I developed the particular data collection instruments that were assessed and validated by Dr. Nuñez-Janes (with input and feedback from Oklahoma Baptist University’s anthropology professor Timothy McCollum). I analyzed all data, and Dr. Nuñez-Janes offered feedback throughout the analysis phase.

I believe this design upheld Spindler and Spindler’s (1997) criteria for good ethnography: (1) follow the clues wherever they lead, (2) directly observe people, (3) be immersed, (4) conduct interviews, and ultimately (5) interpret the native reality into the vernacular of the reader. More specifically, regarding the classroom ethnography essential to this project, I believe this design aptly followed Spindler and Spindler’s (1997) methodology: (1) observer behavior, (2) interview people native to the context be they students, teachers, administrators, etc., and (3) ask the same questions of different people until coherent patterns begin to emerge. This
methodology was accompanied by the same focus on actions and interactions in the school context that Spindler and Spindler (1997) identify as essential to classroom ethnography. As the authors put it, “The dialogue of everyday classroom interaction…is what we try to record and eventually interpret” (1997: 51-52). Though the design of this project falls, to a degree, into the category of microethnography that Ogbu (1981) decries as overly narrow in focus, the nature of the data and the incorporation of the broader milieu of the university into the analysis allow for application beyond the immediate data collection context and thus counteract Ogbu’s argument.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited out of Dr. Brown’s summer Western Civilization class, which ran from May 26 – July 19, 2014. Western Civilization is a 6 credit hour course—3 hours in history and 3 in English—that fulfills part of OBU’s core requirements. This required course provided a context familiar enough across the OBU student body that participants’ experiences and opinions could be reasonably generalizable to that population. The course is typically taught during the Fall semester and students are most likely to take it during their sophomore year. Participants in this study, however, ranged from one about to enter his sophomore year to one entering what he hoped would be his last semester (I say “entering” because the class took place during the summer). The majority of the class had either failed a previous attempt at the course or had received a grade unsatisfactory to them. On the other hand, there were students in the class seeking to stay ahead of the curve. Ty, for instance, was a football player and took the advice of teammates who warned him of the workload of the class and took it in the summer. As the Student Success Center’s goal for this study was to uncover ways to serve students more
effectively—to help students succeed—students who have failed in the past are certainly students whose voices should be heard. Hearing from students who have the most to gain from ideal learning spaces is an excellent place to begin a student-centered vision of those spaces.

The sample was not precisely representative of the OBU student body, but several demographic trends were born out. The female to male ratio across campus is 3 to 2, and in this project it was 5 to 2 (Oklahoma Baptist University: Student Life 2013). The student body is primarily Caucasian, and in this project 5 out of 7 students identified as Caucasian (no race or ethnicity data were found for OBU, this data is based on 4 years as a students at OBU and the campus observations conducted for this project). The only missing demographic, based on my observation, was African American students.\(^1\) I attended the class from the first day and recruited all participants in person. There were 7 students in the class and one professor, all consented to participate. The student participants were informed of participant anonymity, each data collection tool, the timeline of the project, and the intended uses of the project’s findings before they agreed to participate. No extra credit was offered for participation in the study, but Dr. Brown encouraged the students to participate. As anonymity was part of the agreement with the research participants, all names used to reference them are pseudonyms. Brief biographical sketches of the study participants who brought this student-centered vision to fruition may be found in Appendix A.

\(^1\) One African American male student (Neal) joined the class on the second day and attended for approximately 2 weeks before deciding to drop the course. According to the student with whom he had the most interaction (and with whom he is on the university football team) Neal dropped the course because he wanted to be able to enjoy his summer. I realize how unfortunately poignant it is that an African American male should end up as a literal footnote about higher education.
Data Collection

As briefly outlined above, the foundation of data collection was participant observation. I attended class with my participants 3 out of their 5 meetings a week and sat at a table in the back left corner of the classroom. The classroom layout and seating arranged are shown in Figure 2. I chatted with students before and after class or during the break, and occasionally joined in the class discussion if called upon by Dr. Brown. I also participated in campus culture more broadly by using the library, getting coffee and sending mail in the student union, and spending time in a variety of faculty offices. Participant observation gave me material to compare against students’ own accounts of their interactions with the classroom space; I was able to triangulate between what the literature told me I would see, what I actually saw, and what students told me about what I was seeing. It provided an invaluable body of data that undergirded the rest of the data in the project. In all, I conducted over 60 hours of participant observation.

The 7-question survey was created in and distributed through Survey Monkey and was designed to gather demographic data and get an introductory sense of students’ familiarity with and interest in topics of physical learning space and their learning environment and to introduced them to topics that would be covered in the study. The survey was designed to take between 1 and 3 minutes, and 4 of the participants responded.

Figure 2. Classroom Layout
For the Majority of the Course
The focus group was conducted with 3 of the student participants: Sam, Amy, and Bryan. This data collection tool was intended as an opportunity for participants to build on survey data and engage in synergistic brainstorming before I conducted interviews with them. The focus group lasted one hour and was comprised of questions about students’ conception of learning spaces as well as a tactile activity. For the tactile activity, the students were given Play-doh and asked to construct or represent an ideal learning space. Each participants then described what they crafted and in what ways it represented an ideal learning space for them. The 3 Play-doh creations are shown below in Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed in order that it could be analyzed alongside the survey and interview data.

![Figure 3. Amy’S Play-doh Sculpture of Her Computer, a Chair, a Book, and a Cookie](image)

![Figure 4. Bryan’S Play-doh Sculpture of a Book and a Model Hippocampus](image)

![Figure 5. Sam’S Play-doh Sculpture of Her Mind Working Electrically as She Contemplated the Wonders of a New Area of Study](image)

In the weeks after the focus group, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 of the 7 student participants and with Dr. Brown. Interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed. Students were interviewed at a variety of coffee shops and restaurants as well in our classroom,
while Dr. Brown was interviewed in his office. Interviews varied in length from thirteen minutes to over one hour, and with the exception of Dr. Brown’s interview (that took 2) each interview was conducted in one sitting.

Finally, one student sent me several pictures of her home study environment, and I took pictures of different pieces of art across campus, and particularly in the library where the class was held. Though there was no systematic collection of photographic data, the pictures I collected did help contextualize the data about on-campus learning spaces in the broader range of learning spaces the students employed and helped couch the data about this particular class in the broader culture of the university. Figure 6 is a photo of one of the campus statues, found about 70 yards from the entrance of OBU’s library facing the thoroughfare sidewalk that runs from the Geiger Center to Shawnee Hall (Figure 7), the academic building where many core courses and most courses in the humanities are held.

![Figure 6. Statue of Dr. James Ralph Scales, President of Obu](image1)

![Figure 7. The Front Entrance to Shawnee Hall](image2)
Analysis

This analysis process sought to embody Spindler and Spindler’s guidelines for classroom ethnography by building patterns across the data in service of an ultimately cohesive picture of how these students thought about and interacted with their learning spaces (1997). All field notes from participant observation, the focus group transcript, and the interview transcripts were inductively coded over the course of 2 readings of all data. Several codes relating to the features of the classroom and other physical spaces the students occupied were established during participant observation, and the remaining codes were identified in sifting through the data. Broader themes between the codes were identified over the course of 2 furthering readings of the coded data and were honed by frequent return to those data. Photos served as a backdrop, and offered extra material to draw from in conjunction with the systematically collected data. Preliminary analysis started during the same week the focus group was conducted and continued for the next 5 weeks. It was this analysis upon which the preliminary deliverables were based. After the initial analysis was presented at OBU, a more fine-tuned analysis, which connected the broad themes back to the discreet data, continued in the next several months. All analysis was conducted by hand either on paper or on a computer using both iWorks Pages and Microsoft Word.

Incentives

The only cost associated with this project was the compensation of student participants. As part of the thesis project agreement, the Student Success Center agreed to give each student participant (8 students in total) a gift from the university bookstore. I suggested that the
equivalent value of the items should be between 10 and 20 dollars, and the t-shirts students were
given were listed at $13.99 plus tax.

**Timeline**

Table 1. *Project Timeline*

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Total Time: 12 weeks

This timeline was included in the project proposal as an outline for when each component of data collection, analysis, and deliverables would be completed. I shifted the date of the focus group and interviews back several weeks from the original timeline in order to accommodate participants’ schedules, and this in turn pushed back the period set aside for analysis. After discussion with the director of the Student Success Center, I also extended the time period for writing up the deliverables (a project presentation and companion written report) in order to better suit the schedules of faculty and staff who were being invited to the presentation.
Description of Deliverables

2 deliverables were created for the Student Success Center at the end of the project: (1) a presentation to the SSC director and several other staff and students, and (2) a written report given to the SSC director and Dr. Brown. The presentation covered the core points of project design, conduct, and essential findings. The 5 people who attended the presentation in addition to Ms. Mullins were: Dr. Brown, an English professor, a member of the career development office, a senior English education major, and Sam, one of the student participants. After the presentation there was a round of lively questions, which included one especially rich discussion on the applicability of the findings across contexts, particularly different sizes of school and classes. The written report followed the outline of the presentation and gave a more detailed account of the essential findings. The slideshow that accompanied the presentation was also given to both Ms. Mullins and Dr. Brown. Finally, Ms. Mullins shared the written report with the Associate Vice President of Enrollment Management and the applicable points of the project findings with the SSC’s senior staff.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Gap These Findings Help Fill

These findings opened a window into the perspective of the learners—the users of these learning spaces—rather than providing an assessment schema or any form of definitive or deterministic design agenda. This study underscored the importance of understanding the student perspective on learning spaces by reminding that the emic perspective is in fact different from the etic, and it is not always readily interpretable for the latter. The assumptions of administrators or faculty about learning spaces, not to mention the assumptions of researchers, are by no means guaranteed to be the same as the assumptions of students. To the extent that the literature has tended to ignore the learner’s perspective on learning spaces, the findings of this study have emerged to fill part of this gap. While architectural and educational experts have contributed to the discussion on how physical learning spaces, or as they may referred to collectively, learning environments, should be designed in higher education, there is a significant lack of the thoughts and opinions of the students using these spaces.

How the Findings Fill the Gap

The expressed goal of this study was to help the Student Success Center make the most of its space and time by providing them with the student perspective on what constitutes an ideal learning space. Beyond simply asking students what their ideal learning space was, though each student was asked this at the end of their interview, this student-centered study was structured to
reach that specific insight by first constructing an emic framework for learning spaces. The central research question was crafted toward that end. As a reminder, the research question was: How do students conceptualize their learning spaces? The findings of this study answer that question in 2 parts: (1) students interacted with learning spaces through their learning experience, and (2) their interactions with learning spaces were rooted in and were indicative of students’ ideas about spaces as related to aesthetics, the people in the spaces, the amount of distraction, and the expectations students brought to different learning spaces. These categories are also a hierarchy of interaction. Students considered the aesthetics, etc. of learning spaces as secondary to their focus on the learning experience. In other words, aesthetics, distractions, and expectations, were not given priority in students’ thinking about learning spaces; these issues were backgrounded until they came in contact with students’ learning objectives.

One final note on the student perspective in this study is that this perspective was given context by an interview with the professor of the course, Dr. Brown, and 2 and half months of regular campus-wide observations. While not strictly the voice of students, these components contributed to the project’s focus on students. For instance, the professor’s interview provided a view from above, if you will. He offered a combination of etic professorial perspective and emic classroom perspectives; his etic perspective situated the experience of students in general within a longer history of both spaces at Oklahoma Baptist University and the structure of the university model writ large, and his emic perspective provided another vantage on the specific classroom experience of the study participants. The observations of campus and campus life offered visual context for the students’ experiences with spaces as well as a framework for understanding the relation of any one space on campus to another. Students often did not express their experiences
with spaces in the kinds of contextual ways just described, so these contextual data were crucial to setting the stage for the student voice to be interpretable and meaningful.

3 Settings: Classroom, GC, and Library

This study focused on 3 physical locations: the classroom, the student union or Geiger Center (GC), and the library or Mabee Learning Center. These were the primary learning spaces with which students engaged in this study and the primary sources they drew on for their opinions and experiences. I will discuss the essential characteristics of each before I get into the students’ interactions with and conceptualizations of these learning spaces.

Classroom

At the top of 3 flights of stairs and around a corner in the Mabee Learning Center is OBU’s SSC. The classroom where my participating class met and participant observation took place (as referenced in Figure 2) was located in the SSC. Every weekday morning at 10, for 11 hot or rainy summer weeks, students, a professor, and I, a researcher, climbed the labyrinthine stairs to the brightly lit classroom. Entering the classroom never ceased to be a bit surprising to the senses. After the first 2 library floors with white plaster walls, a soaring ceiling, dull fluorescent lights, and the distinct smell of book dust on the air, the dimly lit hallway of the third floor was almost cozy. But 10 paces into the third floor was the entrance to the SSC and the classroom. Entering the classroom, which had been renovated no more than 5 years earlier, was like entering a new aesthetic world. The barely textured white walls of the library were replaced with bright sage green walls that had a smoothly undulating texture. The far-off fluorescents
were replaced with a much brighter and more directed light. The late 1970s – early 1980s academic vibe was replaced by something more akin to middle-class American suburbia in the late 2000s, with air conditioning to match. On more than one of the rainy days, every student brought an outer layer with them to shield against both the wet of the outdoors and the cold of the indoors. The SSC and the classroom in it had succeeded in separating themselves from the space of the library writ large. The small corner that had been carved out for their use was visually set apart as well.

On the first day of the course, Bryan tried to come into the classroom through a quasi-emergency door in the side of the classroom (located on the left side of the image in Figure 8) and Lisa arrived an hour late—both apologized and claimed the complications of finding the room. The only students who spoke to each other that first day were Tori and Sam, sitting at the second row table on the right-hand side of the room. All tables and chairs were on wheels. The tables were a combination of black plastic, black metal, and wood varnish, while the chairs dispensed with the excitement of wood varnish and stuck to black plastic and metal. The wood varnish of the tabletops was reflected in the real wood of the trim around the middle of the walls, the mobile lectern, and the permanent lectern. The black plastic of the tables and chairs was mirrored in the clock on the back wall, the exit sign above the door into the library stacks, the trash can, the projector, and the wire router mounted to the wall. The 2 large whiteboards at the
front of the room boasted the only variation in this aesthetic. Figure 8 shows the layout of the classroom on the first day, though it would change on the second.

The first day of the course was an introduction to its importance in OBU’s curriculum writ large and for the students themselves, not only as scholars but as people. The culture of the Western Civilization course (commonly called CIV), a 6-hour combined history and literature course, is rooted in rhetoric about the class making you “more fully human.” The lore surrounding the class is chock full of horror stories about immense reading loads, epic tales of wise and occasionally wizened professors in their horseshoe-shaped classrooms, and memories about lives changed by horizons broadened. It was into this culture that students were initiated during the first day of class, with questions about the meaning of life and the purpose of any human pursuit all solidly rooted in the university’s Christian tradition.

However, that first day, with chairs in straight lines and a summer class missing the standard horseshoe classroom of CIV lore, did not see the same kind of engagement by students or collegial atmosphere as did later classes where the material was arguably less immediately applicable to students’ lives. Later discussions about the rise of mercantilism and towns would elicit more student responses or questions than did that first day’s introduction. This shift toward engagement and collegiality\(^2\) was

\(^2\) The operational definition of collegiality for this project has been: student–student engagement in tandem with student–professor engagement in the context of a class.
certainly due in part to time, but another more dramatic and visible shift took place in the classroom on day 2: the professor moved 3 of the tables into the classic horseshoe for which the CIV classrooms are famous (Figure 9). His explanation for the shift was that the horseshoe made it easier for him to engage equally with each student and it promoted the atmosphere of close engagement he wanted the class to have. As Figure 9 demonstrates, students were forced to sit closer to one another because of the horseshoe. For example, on the second day of class Trey walked in and sat at the long table in the back of the classroom, but the Dr. Brown asked him to move up to the front. Students’ seating patterns in the 2 classroom arrangements confirmed Hall’s basic principles of proxemics: the 4 to 12 foot realm of social space was maintained until the confines of the space forced closer proximity (Hall 1966). Students noted this triad of interaction between 2 or more students and the components of their physical environments. Molly said, “sitting with someone next to you, there’s definitely a different feeling about space than sitting by yourself. Like sometimes when I get [to class], the guy next to me moves his stuff over just to make sure there’s room for me” (M, 10). Table space was an important component of students’ interaction with the classroom. It provided room for personalization with notebooks, computers, pertinent class materials, or cups of coffee and juice, and their location in the horseshoe provided students with their literal vantage point on the classroom experience. Bryan and Trey regularly took notes on their laptops and Tori took notes on her tablet; each device tended to take up about half of the student’s usable table space. Trey, Molly, and Amy also placed their cell phones within reach so they could nonchalantly check them during class, either on their desks, in their laps, or in one of the top pockets of their backpacks. Tori, Amy, Molly, Bryan, and Trey populated their table space with was textbook at the beginning of the course, but by the end
text books tended only to be taken out in light of specific questions students had. Every class period I attended at least one person brought a drink or a snack and set that up on their portion of the table. The students made their spaces distinctly their own by filling them with items conducive to their studies in the classroom.

The components and arrangement of physical space also provided, as displayed by Figure 9, a face-to-face set up that promoted a collegial atmosphere by engaging students with one another as much as with the professor. The fact that such an arrangement of the classroom inclined students toward collegiality may well be a result of the culture and broader milieu of the university. As a religious institution that considers encouragement in spiritual growth one of its primary responsibilities to its students, OBU is a campus community where biblical virtues such as selflessness and love for one’s neighbor are both encouraged and praised. These virtues are not only the rhetoric of large formal gatherings like chapel services but are explored and encouraged across campus in the classroom, on intramural sports teams, and in campus clubs and groups. The professors themselves also tend to embody these virtues, strengthening the authenticity of the broader rhetoric. It is perhaps this authenticity of virtue that manifested itself in these students’ collegial response to Dr. Brown’s change in classroom arrangement. One likely narrative is that the students possessed the requisite virtues or personal characteristics (those enumerated above) to be collegial with one another, but the classroom, as it was arranged on the second day of class, made it more clear that they were expected to exercise those particular virtues in this particular setting.

Based on previous informal experiences as a student and employee at OBU, the university is a quintessential representation of the “cohesiveness and cooperation” Alexander
Astin found to be indicative of liberal arts colleges (1968: 318). In other words, the kind of student behavior I have associated with this class, and its classroom specifically, was neither unexpected nor out of place within the culture of the university. For Amy, the CIV classroom stood out against the backdrop of all the other “typical classrooms” because of its horseshoe seating (A, 6), and for Bryan, non-CIV classroom layouts were pretty much what he expected. He said, “most of them are lecture halls basically; just rows of seats” (B, 1). For the students of this study, face-the-front classrooms were still typical, and classrooms that promoted collegial engagement, by making it more clear that a collegial level of interaction between all parties was expected, were a welcome novelty. Even students like Molly, who admitted to disliking school work, said they benefitted from the professor–student and student–student interaction that took place in this classroom, and which was aided by its physical layout.

GC (Student Union)

OBU’s student union, the Geiger Center, or GC, is geographically central to campus. All roads may lead to Rome, but all sidewalks lead to the GC. It is a nexus of all classifications of student, faculty from different departments, and staff from across the university. The GC houses the cafeteria, the offices for the Dean of Students, the Director of Residential Life and Student Activities, and the Student Government Association on the second floor. It houses the more informal coffee and food counters, the copy center, the mailroom, the university bookstore, and 2 large seating areas on the first. The 2 seating areas are: a 60’ by 30’ carpeted area with couches, chairs, and TVs; and a 240 square foot tiled area of tables and chairs. Student interactions with this space reflected the composite nature of a student union. It is used for both social gatherings
and scholastic gatherings, and students negotiated this complexity of the purpose of the space quite deftly. The GC feels like OBU’s living room. It is versatile and you can get together there for many things, but it is best suited to sitting around with people, usually a group of friends. Depending on the time of day, the first floor may smell more like coffee and eggs or more like fried food and coffee. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner come and go, but coffee is forever. Several times every semester concerts or lectures are given in the carpeted area, which adds to this living room feel, because the GC is a gathering place but it is not the distinctly academic space of the library or the distinctly religious space of the chapel. The chairs and couches in the carpeted area are kept very up-to-date. The current rendition is vibrant in color, has interesting circular ottomans to go with each alcove of couches, and even has a few additional bar-h8 tables with colorful tall plastic chairs to match. The GC also embodies the fish bowl stereotype of many small social groups. The entire East wall of the first floor is one giant window, allowing passersby to see who is sitting with whom, who is sitting by themselves, or who is eating what, and allowing those seated inside to see who is walking whom to class, who is testing out their new hammock, or who has enough free time to play frisbee. (Though the east-facing window does make the closest row of tables an unattractive option during the first half of the day in hot months by essentially turning them into a greenhouse). The central campus location of the GC plays an important role in it social function, because most of the main campus sidewalks can be seen from inside. Participants in this study spoke differently of their use of the GC during this course than the description I have given. This was due primarily to the cafeteria, coffee shop, and food counters all being closed over the summer, and secondarily to the fact that very few
students were on campus over the summer so the GC was not performing the social function it did in the Fall and Spring.

Ultimately, the students interacted with the GC in a way that confirmed its value as a chameleon of sorts. It is a valuable learning space specifically because it is not the library, because it is “a little more happy than the library” (A, 3) while still being in the same category in size and in its nature as a meeting place. The GC is an informal space. There are no individual study rooms or designated quiet floors, but the building is always open. There are no books on shelves, but there are outlets near a number of the tables and couches. The GC has indicators about what kind of activity is supposed to happen there and students in this study interacted with it in accordance with those indicators—allowing the GC and library to compliment one another and provide for a broader range of students’ spatial needs.

_Library_

*Figure 10. The View from the Main Entrance of the Library*

One learning space where students’ expectations for college were largely met was the library. From media representations and stories, the library, as a category of space, was where people expected to do work, and all project participants studied in the library at some point
during the project. OBU’s library is a 4-story brick building that looks out on the green, well-treed lawn of the Quad, as seen in Figure 10. The library has a variety of study carrels (Figure 11), study tables (Figure 12), and group study rooms (Figure 13 and Figure 14).

To the right, as you enter the library, there is a corner of couches, indoor plants, and a TV, which combine to give the impression of a doctor’s office waiting room. Between this sitting area and a
wall featuring the library’s video collection is a circular bank of computer dedicated to quick printing. To the left as you walk into the building is the main service desk, which is always staffed with at least one student worker and usually a full-time librarian. This entry section of the library had a louder, more informal atmosphere than other floors. Even the remainder of the first floor, which is up a quarter flight of stairs from the entry and broken into a computer bank, the reference stacks, the periodicals stacks and some seating, and the government documents section, is more quiet than the entryway. Moving up, each floor becomes quieter. The second floor houses stacks, carrels, and special collections, and the third floor is made up of stacks, private study rooms that seat 4, and public study tables that are also set up to seat 4.

*Figure 15. The Staircase Between the First and Second Floor in 1946*

The basement houses the media service desk, media collection, media viewing rooms, curriculum library, and Youth and YA stacks. As I mentioned in the description of the classroom, the entire library has old white walls, but there are a number of photographs, paintings, and other pieces of art that liven up the white drab. Around the staircase between the first and second floor
there are a number of paintings and photographs including this one of the library when it first
opened in 1946 (Figure 15). That staircase, though sadly not the iron handrails, remains.

Students tended to favor the spaces in the library that to some degree could be
personalized, such as nooks by windows where chairs could be maneuvered for comfort, large
tables that could be strewn with all manner of pertinent study materials, and study rooms where
students could play music without headphones and could move chairs around as needed without
disrupting any of the other people using the space. But the variety of spaces the library provided
was in itself a benefit. Sam told a story about her first semester at OBU and how important the
variety was to studies:

I think within the first semester I tried to explore everything in the library. So it was like
the basement and then all 3 floors and then going in through like the periodicals and
stuff...first it was just because I have a really short attention span, so it was, you know,
finding things to do, but also trying to find places to study that would be more beneficial
to me. And I was reading about short attention spans in books at the library, about how I
could deal with that. And it was saying like maybe switch up your habits or your study
places… So I was trying to do that, and then I was slowly making my way through all of
the rooms, finding which ones I like best. (S, 2)

Having established the nature and essential properties of the spaces on which this study
focused, I will move on to the manner and character of students’ interactions with these spaces.

Interaction Theme 1: Features and Possibilities of Spaces

Students in this study demonstrated a preference for personalization in the ways they
interacted with the features and of their learning spaces and the possibilities those features
allowed. There are many features through which people interact with the physical spaces they
occupy and many possibilities that those features allow. In the OBU library, for example, there
were features like outlets that allowed for the possibility of using an electronic device for an extended period of time. The extended periods of computer use also allowed for prolonged access to the Internet and all the resources and media available there. In the SSC classroom there were twenty chairs that allowed for the possibility of up to twenty people sitting in the classroom, and the chairs were on wheels, allowing for the possibility of many easily created seating arrangements. Every student preferred a spacious work surface, because it allowed them to populate the space with everything they might need for their scholastic pursuit. For Bryan it was, “text book on one side [and] notebook on the other, coffee in front” (B, 5). For Mary it was notes and a book and a study guide and if she “had just that little square of space it wouldn’t have all fit” (M, 3). Even Amy, who said she often chose to work on her bed, did so because “that’s where [she could] lay out everything and have everything” (FG, 12).

These students chose to work in places where there was enough surface area to be able to spread out and easily access all the materials pertinent to their task. They followed the pattern of making a generic or unscripted space into a meaningful place by imbuing it with personally and socially significant items like notes, textbooks, and cups of coffee (Tuan 1977). In addition to the students making places for themselves out of unscripted spaces, they also used places already designated with social meaning to their benefit. In the case of noise, Sam preferred to work in the library in places where there were “other people in the other study rooms and they’re talking, [because] that’s kind of comforting” (S, 4). Bryan, on the other hand, said:

You could go maybe up to the third floor [of the library] where there aren’t a lot of people or maybe over to the archive room or something and it would be quiet enough that it wouldn’t be necessary to try to block out noise. (B, 3)
Using socially designated quiet areas (there are no official quiet floor signs throughout the library) or socially designated group work areas allowed students to position themselves in places where the social meaning aligned with their study goals and preferences.

Students had the same preference for personalized places when it came to the features of the classroom. Every student in the study appreciated how small the class was, but their opinion was not just about the number of students. It was about the way in which Dr. Brown had made the space of the classroom into the place where they met for CIV. Lindsey summed it up well:

So [Dr. E’s class is] a lot like this where she’s speaking to you, but you are a large part of the conversation, you know…but that’s really the only similarity. I think that this set up…is the class where…the communication between everyone, the interaction has been so…I don’t know, it’s expected and it’s constant. Like it’s not just in the beginning or in the end, it’s just throughout. (L, 6)

Lisa saw a similarity in tone between Dr. Brown’s CIV class and Dr. E’s Advanced News Writing class, but she noted that the way Dr. Brown had set up our classroom facilitated a student-to-student dialogue and a student-to-professor dialogue that her other class lacked. Also, based on observation and Dr. Brown’s note that he changed the set up of the classroom to the horseshoe because it would allow him to “do the CIV thing” and get students’ attention by getting up in their faces a bit, the arrangements of the tables allowed for nonverbal cues to be exchanged. I saw this take place on several occasions; Professor Brown could tell when a student had a question and was able to engage them in the flow of the class in that precise moment when their question had emerged.

In shifting the tables on the second day of class to make the classic horseshoe of the CIV classroom, Dr. Brown set the stage for the classroom to become a place where communal learning happened. Students engaged with this particular use of the features of the SSC
classroom every day when they came to class and all came to appreciate the role it played in
constituting their collegial classroom dynamic. Both students and the professor navigated the
possibilities inherent in the features of their learning spaces to craft meaningful places in which
to do the work of learning.

Interaction Theme 2: Relationship Between Physical Spaces and Learning

All the students in this study drew connections between their physical learning spaces
and the learning that happened there. Each student described their learning processes and goals
differently, but they all identified places that provided more or less support for those processes
and goals and tended to choose the spaces that were more supportive.

The process of learning for these students varied widely. Bryan and Molly emphasized
memorizing facts and making connections between them (B, 8; M, 6). Sam focused on making
personal connections to the course content because she knew she learned best when she really
loved the subject (S, 5; FG 16). For Amy and Trey, spending time with the material and going
over it multiple times was the key process (T, 5; FG, 5). And Lisa focused on taking notes in
class that aligned with any interest she had in the topic because she needed “to be intrigued to
learn” (L, 9; L, 8). And the goal associated with those processes varied from receiving an “A” to
indicate a deeper understanding of the material (FG, 15), to just having the ideas (FG, 11), to
being able to adequately perform the task of the test (T, 6), to being able to “speak freely” about
a subject (L, 9).

Even among such a small sample of students, there was no one definition of learning that
could be set up as the ideal goal that good learning spaces should support. At this point, Dr.
Brown’s perspective provided a useful frame to interpret the student perspective. His graduate experience at Brown University started him on a several-decade journey of considering the importance of spaces—physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional—in learning. And in a moment that captured much of the heart of his perspective, Dr. Brown said, “a lot of the goal of good space is helping you feel smart so that you act more smartly” (D, 15). The students agreed. Lisa said:

I think in an environment where it is studious you almost force yourself to get into that mindset even if you’re not in the mood to be in that mindset. (L, 9)

Sam echoed the sentiment saying:

The library and the classroom are specifically structured to enhance learning, so…I just sort of bum off of them, like, ‘you’re gonna help me learn’. (S, 11)

And Bryan focused on one element of a good study space that helped him act more smartly.

Sitting at a desk creates the expectation that you’ll be doing something productive. When you’re sitting as a writing surface I guess it just kinda feels like you’re going to get something accomplished. (B, 5)

Regardless of all the different things it meant to these students to learn, to be scholarly, spaces that put them in the mindset for that kind of work and aesthetically, ideologically, and infrastructurally supported those processes and goals were used to help students work through those processes and reach those goals.

It is important to note that every student had an ideal place in which to do schoolwork, and they were all well within the realm of possibility. Trey described his ideal learning space like this:

I would like to be at a desk preferably, laptop, nice-sized table where I have all my study materials out, I would prefer like dim lighting, not dark enough to put you to sleep, but
not bright enough to where you’re like so zoned in you can’t think about anything else. (T, 5)

While Sam said she learns well when she’s at home, in her room, talking out loud, engaging with
the text, and “dancing around in [her] room” (FG, 5). These examples of accessible ideal
places for learning showed that, for these students, part of shaping ideal learning spaces
was getting them to ask themselves these questions about their processes and goals.

Every student in this study had some insights into the places where they best
accomplished their scholastic tasks. All it took to bring those to the surface was the
moment of intentional reflection on their own habits, predispositions, and preferences
that the interview allowed.

With this framework of the way students’ interacted with their learning spaces in mind,
we will explore what those interactions tell us about the way students conceptualized their
learning spaces.

Conceptualization Theme 1: Physical Spaces are the Background

Students regarded the physical environment as a background to social interaction,
particularly their learning processes and goals as discussed in the previous section. Only Bryan
expounded what I would call a detached analysis of his learning spaces. Talking about our
classroom he said, “green seems to be a soothing color that promotes calmness and focus…
whereas just a plain white room can be a little bit too utilitarian (B, 6). The other students used
phrases like: “I really tables rather than desks” (M, 5), and “the desk chairs and the computer
chairs almost can rush you sometimes…[because] it’s not a comfortable environment
necessarily” (L, 9), and “one [classroom] I definitely did not like, mainly because…it would always stink” (A, 2). This emphasis on the way spaces met students’ preferences rather than just raw explanation of what the spaces were like was a bit of a surprise for me. It seemed removed from the kinds of descriptive or analytical responses I intended that interview question to elicit. They only seemed concerned with the aesthetic details of their environments in so far as those details infringed upon their physical comfort or the task they were planning to accomplish in that space (take notes, have a line of sight to the teacher, etc.). It turns out I should not have been surprised. This pattern was in line with Rapoport’s assessment of environmental evaluation as “more a matter of overall affective response than of a detailed analysis of specific aspects” (1977: 60). It was not until analyzing the data that I realized this question bore assumptions rooted in my frame of mind rather than in previous studies of the human-environment relationship or in responsiveness to the way students were actually talking about learning spaces. The student-centered point of view of this project demonstrated that students did not experience their physical learning environment in the way I was asking them to talk about it. The ethnographic process unearthed my biases and led to a more accurate representation of the participants’ way of thinking about their environment.

In my fieldnotes I expressed the possibility that the aesthetic details of tables and chairs in the classroom might be perceived by students simply as impressions—that while I may have interpreted their utility and sturdiness as an invitation for the student to stay as long as they would like, such an interpretation was not an essential result of the interaction of the students

3 The question as listed in the Interview Protocol was: In what kinds of places have you ended up doing your studying and learning?
with the table and chairs. These interactions were thus the largest window I had into deciphering what students were thinking about their physical environment, because they only spoke briefly about their specific use of classroom space in their interviews. The great example of the way students back grounded their environment was that no student in either the focus group or the interviews made mention of outlets, but they all discussed the use of computers or other electronics while studying. They were aware of human-artifact interaction, but the infrastructural or spatial requirements that aided that interaction (outlets) were never discussed. Much like stages in a play, created to serve as the background for human activity, the physical spaces of students’ learning environments offer background or staging for what students tend to conceptualize as the main event of any space: people.

Conceptualization Theme 2: People Make Places

When asked, all students affirmed that their experience of a space was influenced by the people who were there. Of classroom space, Amy said,

I think it really depends on the people. Because…one semester you’ll be in this classroom and everybody was like very talkative and we had fun and stuff, where next semester you can be in that classroom and it’s the total opposite; like everybody’s just quiet even though the space is still the same. So I think it really depends on the people. (A, 7-8)

The students’ conceptualization of their built environment was tied up with the human elements, the broader human-environment relationships, associated with that particular space. In this way, as discussed above, generic learning spaces were made into meaningful learning places in light of the specific human interactions that happened there. In this study, the hierarchical relationship between professors and students was an essential framework for understanding students’
experience of classroom interactions. Students spent the majority of their time in class gazing at
Dr. Brown and the PowerPoint presentations he used (FN, 4, 13, 14). The professor—student
hierarchy was also discussed in several interviews. For instance, Bryan said, “[professors] create
the atmosphere more than…any individual student does” (B, 6).

Students tended to describe the class and its classroom in the same way they tended to
describe the professor. Dr. Brown wore khakis, button-up shirts, small circular spectacles, and a
wrist watch, he carried a small notebook in his breast pocket, brought a mug of tea to class nearly
every day, and consistently asked questions of students through the course of lectures. Similarly,
students described the class as “inviting” (A, 11) and as a place where you won’t be “thrown out
into the open water” but will still be asked “specific questions” (B, 1-2): equal parts inviting
conversation and intellectual rigor]. In the words of Molly, “If it was a teacher who was less
open to talking in class…[the class] would have a less welcoming feel” (M, 10). The professor
played an essential role in crafting the meaningful place of the classroom; who he was shaped
what kind of place the classroom was.

Students also discussed the influence of fellow students on their conceptualization of the
classroom space. Amy discussed the importance of knowing other students in the class before a
semester begins (A, 11). Lisa thought it was important to be able to connect with other students,
and she saw this happen when students could “see each other” across the classroom and have a
“conversation” (L, 7). The interpersonal dynamics of a classroom were directly related to the
hospitality that students associated with that place. Bryan put it nicely:

[Our classroom is] comfortable, welcoming as you said. The layout that Dr. Sanders
chose with…the horseshoe…seems to be a good layout. Get everyone in again. It feels
like a little learning microcosm or something. (B, 6)
The human interactions that happened in the classroom, whether between students or between a student and a professor, were a crucial component of the kind of classroom students experienced throughout the course. They helped take a square green space and turn it into a hospitable learning place.

Conceptualization Theme 3: Aesthetics and Ambiance

The background element and the contributions of people to students’ conceptualization of physical spaces have provided the scaffolding on which we may now hang the finer points of how the students conceptualized their learning spaces. The aesthetic of a space and the ambiance with which that aesthetic was imbued were an important category within which students parsed different kinds of spaces and discussed the usefulness of different spaces and their respective aesthetics. Much of this discussion came in response to a question about what each student’s ideal learning space would be like, though some were also drawn from opinions they expressed when asked about the variety of classrooms they had during their college experience. In the context of these questions, students talked about the importance of a nice, clean, colorful, soft, inviting aesthetic. Bryan said,

But just from walking into the classroom [where we met for this class], green seems to be a soothing color that promotes calmness and focus…whereas just a plain white room can be a little bit too utilitarian. And that’s usually what we have. (B, 6)
Students noted that spaces that evoked other utilitarian spaces were detrimental to a study environment. In one of my favorite interview moments, Sam said of an ideal study space,

   It would have carpet on the ground, because tile makes me think of restaurants or like Wal-Mart and that’s just, that mindset is not gonna help me study. (S, 10)

Students expressed a desire to do meaningful schoolwork. Even if they did not particularly like school, these students exhibited a desire for their studies to matter, to be beyond utility. Toward this end, spaces that affirmed that students’ work was important were helpful spaces. Spaces that made students question the importance or value of their work, or that seemed to emphasize the sheer utility of their work, were discouraging. On the other hand, spaces students identified as physically and/or aesthetically distinct from the flow of their everyday lives, and especially any spaces they had made special by students carving out specific time there for a specific task, were seen as beneficial learning spaces. Molly spoke energetically about setting aside time to study in the library with friends:

   I like to sit with other people who are studying and it’s weird because we’re hanging out but we’re also all doing our homework…we’ll talk for a bit and then we’ll just go back to studying, but it’s more productive. (M, 3-4)

And Sam discussed her favorite nook of the library that she has mentally set aside for more leisurely study activities:

   I like to pull the chair back and just like lean it, just push it against the wall facing the window so that I can essentially just like curl up in front of the window while staring out but also while studying and listening to music. (S, 3-4)

Bryan shifted the focus to his home study place and talked about the aesthetic and ambiance of a space that he had crafted specifically for study and to support his study habits. He has an office

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4 Study is here being used in as general as a sense as possible and is meant to include all the work traditionally associated with formal schooling: reading or listening to or watching class materials, writing, studying for quizzes and exams, etc.
with “2 big monitors on one side, and then the reading and writing area and then behind [him] is a piano keyboard…for when [he’s] doing some down time. The specially crafted aesthetic and set aside nature of this space is helpful in his learning process:

I’ve got 2 screens because it helps when you’re doing research to have the word processor open on one side and the website oftentimes on the other for a resource…So that creates the expectation. And…increased productivity is the idea. (B, 5)

These quotes display the support that students felt from a range of spaces with different aesthetics and ambiance in making their scholastic endeavor a meaningful one. Bryan nicely summed up the benefit of purposefully created spaces. He said:

When they designed this third floor [of the library] and they renovated it, I’m sure they had it mind creating a more ideal space for the classroom experience…So that makes sense. I just like the green walls. And it has fairly nice little wooden trim that goes around too… It looks nice. (B, 6)

The way a space looked, as well as the way it felt shaped students’ feelings about and interactions with their learning spaces, and one important key to a beneficial human-environment relationship was a nice, soft, inviting aesthetic imbued with a ambiance of importance and intention.

Conceptualization Theme 4: Distraction and Privacy

Distraction is another way the students conceptualized physical spaces. Among the many learning spaces identified by students—formal or informal, private or public—there were both physical and conceptual elements that contributed to how distracting a space was, and students categorized spaces on a scale of more or less distracting. Lisa and Amy talked about home responsibilities (cleaning, taking care of a pet) as impinging on home study space, but slightly
differently. Lisa said it was more distracting if she was away from home studying to have to think about getting back to let her dog out, and Amy said that if she was home she would clean first and put off studying until later in the evening. Either way, non-school responsibilities interacted with school responsibilities differently in different spaces, and students found certain spaces more conducive to studying the more a space allowed them not to be distracted by those other responsibilities. Students’ different personalities played into the perceived distraction as well. 2 examples of different ends of the distraction spectrum were Bryan and Molly. Bryan said,

I don’t even consider most public places candidates for learning spaces for me, just because I have an attention problem, and so I wouldn’t get a whole lot done, most of the time, without someone keeping me on task. (FG, 3)

On the other hand, Molly said,

A lot of times it’s just the peer pressure [of working in groups] that keeps me from getting distracted. Like, if I’m with other people and they’re all studying, I’m less likely to decide I need to take a break that goes on for hours, [laughs] which happens way too often when I study by myself. (M, 8)

The other side of the distraction coin is a desire for privacy. Each student mentioned in their interview the importance of privacy in certain study settings spanning from reading to writing papers. But this was balanced against the value of collaborative time and spaces, even for Bryan who described himself as “very introverted” (B, 4). The most interesting note on the point of privacy is that it was not always equated with seeking escape from distraction. And even Trey, who mentioned private spaces as part of escaping or preventing distraction, did not emphasize that escape as the core virtue of private space. Students identified spaces as both elements of distraction in themselves and bulwarks against distraction, and students’ decision about whether
Conceptualization Theme 5: Students’ Expectations of Physical Spaces

The expectations students had for different spaces drove the way they thought about each space. Students had broad expectations such as, OBU is the “best 4 years of your life” (M, 1); they receive these from movies and their families. Students had expectations about specific buildings. The library for instance, which was identified as “primarily a study place” (M, 4), was expected to offer order and organization to students. Sam even said, “I just sort of bum off of [the library], like, ‘you’re going to help me learn’” (S, 11).

In classrooms, students’ expectations were often predicated upon the physical arrangement of the tables, chairs, or desks in the space. The horseshoe shape of the classroom in this study indicated to Bryan and Lisa that communication between students was expected and was expected to be consistent. Students even had expectations about the individual affordances within a space (B, 5; L, 6). Things like desks had, in the minds of students, histories of use embedded with particular expectations or work.

Just sitting at a desk creates the expectation that you’ll be doing something productive. When you’re sitting at a writing surface I guess it just kinda feels like you’re going to get something accomplished…most every area of your life where desks are involved you’re doing something…So I guess it’s just ingrained in our minds from a young age. That that’s what they’re for. (B, 5)

Students had expectations about what different spaces should afford them and what ‘kind’ of spaces they were supposed to be. Whether these expectations came from personal experience or media representations of college, expectations served as the bar against which all spaces were
measured. Spaces that met students expectations were often identified as good learning spaces, but in some cases, like that of class size and seating layout, several students identified that the break with their expectations made the classroom an even better learning space (S, 3).

The themes of students’ interaction with and conceptualization of their learning spaces have now been described. The following are the implications of each theme for designing higher education learning spaces and recommendations about how they might best be fitted together to bolster and support students in their learning journey.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

Students’ interaction with and conceptualization of learning spaces have implications for Oklahoma Baptist University’s approach to spaces on campus as well as professors’ approaches to the construction and conduct of their specific classes.

As I laid out in my presentation to the SSC director at the end of the project, based on these findings, it is more important to prioritize spaces where there is no professor or guide to evoke the purpose and meaning of the space beyond its physical dimensions and aesthetic. One recommendation for adapting OBU’s campus to these findings is to (1) start with the library, a space already identified by the students as intentionally designed and set aside for learning; then (2) move on to the GC, a space identified as central for most students and thus important in the construction of campus ambiance; and then (3) focus on campus housing, which students indicated has an impact on their understanding and appreciation of themselves as scholars; and finally (4) classrooms, which are the locus of much of the teaching and learning work, and in which professors can evoke the hospitality, collegiality, and intention of the space.

Library

To begin with, we have established that students interacted with spaces through affordances, and that, in broad terms, they chose spaces for their hospitality and the extent to which they supported their academic task. The implications of these findings for the library are that: (1) every space should be user-centered, which means that tables should all be big enough
for students to spread out their work, tables and chairs should be at least marginally mobile, and
every place a person could sit should have access to an outlet; (2) all chairs should be
comfortable enough for stays of several hours; (3) a spectrum of private and public work spaces
should maintained to offer students a choice and a degree of control over their study environment;
(4) despite the seemingly efficient move of modern collegiate library to all-digital collections, the
aesthetic of books and its attendant implications of scholarship should not be disregarded; and (5)
the walls should be repainted a light, warm color to get rid of a utilitarian white that forcibly
reminds students of other, less academic warehouse-sized buildings.

GC

The GC is the perfect setting in which to discuss the implications of the social
expectations of spaces for designing an entire campus. If there is a desire for a college campus to
be an environment holistically dedicated to the mission of educating students, there should be
spaces across campus that accommodate studying from the different perspectives of students who
likely have vastly different sets of non-school responsibilities and personalities. The GC should
be the second priority for re-design, for though it not a strictly scholastic space in the minds of
students, academic tasks are completed there, and more than that, the GC sets the stage for the
rest of the campus experience. Since students think about learning spaces as backdrops, all
backdrops are important in creating the overall impression of the campus on students. As the
nexus of campus life, the GC should be re-designed to: (1) accommodate large groups, which
means tables and chairs should be more easily mobile; and (2) to be more inviting. Being more
inviting includes paying attention to the light, colorful aesthetic of the couch and TV area and
carrying it through the table and chairs area, and above all keeping the student art gallery along the wall of the southern entrance. Among other things, the gallery aids tremendously in encouraging students in the belief that they are a part of something by being at OBU, something bigger than themselves and something beautiful.

Campus Housing

Though not discussed at great length by all participants, home study spaces and their characteristics were mentioned by a number of students, and as campus housing is the home study space under OBU’s purview, it must be included in an overall redesign plan. Homes are naturally associated with hospitality in the human imagination, so much could be done to implement the finding that students respond well to hospitable environments that encourage them in the importance of their work. Though recommendations such as dark wood or more regal furniture, particularly in common rooms, may sound either drab or stuffy, OBU's campus should have a space that feels intentionally set aside for the hard work of university life. As the home for students who live on campus (and high percentage of OBU’s student do), what better place to make special than residence halls and apartment buildings? The fundamental practical guideline for making campus housing special places is to avoid the white walls and linoleum floors that are harbingers of utility. Based on these findings, drawing on the kinds of histories and expectations students have of the university learning environment may be the best starting place for creating meaningful or encouraging scholastic spaces. A simple question to students about their expectations for campus housing and the campus experience writ large would aid in design efforts.
Classrooms

The students in this study conceptualized spaces as more or less hospitable based on the human interactions that happened in those spaces. Based on the professor–student hierarchy of influence established earlier, the professor has a great deal of responsibility for creating an atmosphere of hospitality; however, the 7 student class of this study is not every class, or even any class at most institutions. This is where classroom design and strategic work by the professor become crucial parts of a beneficial classroom space. A face-to-face classroom setup, like the horseshoe of this study, is an essential aid in hospitality. As these students affirmed, the face-to-face setup encourages students that they have a stake in their class time. This mindset allows for a democratization of hospitality among all the members of a class — student and professor — so the professor does not have to shoulder the responsibility alone. This kind of atmosphere has the capacity to imbue a particular classroom space with mental and emotional cues that can channel students’ efforts for more engaged learning. Classrooms can literally set the stage for students to be as engaged in a class as possible. And students who seem to care little for the subject of study or for academic pursuits in general displayed patterns of very peripheral observations of the spaces they occupy which means it is even more important for those students to have spaces, their meanings and intentions, introduced to them.

Finally, there will of course be monetary implications from these recommendations, but what better nexus for administrative, faculty, and student development interests than crafting spaces that encourage students in the importance of their work. From an administrative perspective, giving students spaces that make their work feel important increases the appeal of the university; from a faculty perspective, it raises the level at which students feel they are expected
to perform in class; and from a student development perspective, spaces that makes students feel important are spaces where students are more likely to get involved holistically. My hope is that these findings, their implications, and the resultant recommendations would be used by OBU to build a strong wall of support for their students as they pursue the difficult, worthy, and beautiful work of their education.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND PERSONAL REFLECTION ON APPLIED THESIS

Introduction

I am now a researcher; it is official. I have designed and conducted a research project, and have set out its details and conclusions. The road was about as long as I had imagined it would be, but far more winding. I hope that these final reflections will offer some insight into the process of anthropological research, the manner and efficacy of our training in the University of North Texas Anthropology Department, and the beautiful contribution of applied anthropology to the discipline and its ever-blooming body of knowledge.

Project Design

Reflecting on the process of designing a project, I see I learned that it is, to a certain degree, disadvantageous to have to solidify your methods before you start fieldwork, because people interact differently with one another depending on personalities, interests, the environment of interaction, any previous relationship, and other impinging factors. Thus, it makes little sense to establish an exact protocol before you have established the nature and interaction of these factors. However, in light of the overwhelming benefit proffered by IRB protocol, the responsibility for understanding those factors before they are even encountered falls to the researcher. Based on this, I think one of the most valuable characteristics I could build into a data collection plan is a balance of rigidity and flexibility. A project too rigidly designed may back me into a corner and keep me from collecting data that emerge as important in the course of a project; however, too flexible a project would be useless in guiding my work while in the messy midst of fieldwork (not to mention that approval of project design requires the submission of
a basic data collection plan to the IRB). So my conclusion is that the most beneficial project
design would provide me a road map for getting from the beginning of the project to the end with
a framework for collecting pertinent data along the way, but would be flexible enough to be
adapted to the actual context and factors of that specific project.

Regarding the purpose of asking particular questions or pursuing particular lines of
inquiry throughout the research process, I found that in the instance of my focus group, where I
had students respond to an ultimately tactile question through the tactile means of play-doh, it
was interesting and ultimately very practical to align the kind of information you want with the
precise manner in which you ask the question. In this case, I wanted to be able to see the way
students were thinking about the topic of their learning spaces in the same way the students were
seeing those spaces; the play-doh provided both a novel and practical solution.

Conducting Research

While the mantra of “research takes time” has been built into the master’s program at
UNT, there is no substitute for experience. It was only after I conducted my interviews that I
understood the kind of time it takes to contact participants, finally receive a response, set up a
meeting time, reschedule because of other commitments, and finally meet for the interview. And
even before interviews, the frustration I felt in awaiting the final approval of my IRB (which did
not arrive until the second week of the project) worried me to the point of impairing my ability to
focus on the project. This was one of my most important lessons learned. It is always a better idea
to give yourself as much time as you can and more than you think you will need.
Perhaps to expand on Socrates’ declaration about the unexamined life, another part of the mantra of conducting research should be: the unexamined question is not worth asking. Though I mentioned this as an insight about project design, it no doubt rang throughout the course of the project. This insight should be expanded, of course, to include the theoretical framework that leads to any particular question. One of my great fears going into this project was that I had an inadequately developed theoretical framework, and while in hindsight I had more to draw on than I realized at the time (hidden curriculum, cultural production/social reproduction theories, etc.), I also see that a more finely tuned theoretical lens would have allowed every day of participant observation, every interview, every photo-taking stroll around campus to be more precisely productive in contributing to a holistic and integrated picture of the culture in which my specific class existed. On the other hand, I also now see the benefit of a theoretical framework that is vague or pushed to the background, as it allows the eye and mind of the observer to roam wide and take in all it can without discriminating at that very initial stage of observation. Throughout the project I believe balance proved an essential characteristic of both project design and conduct.

One very important and serious thing I learned about research participants is that they love donuts. All joking aside though, finding appropriate ways to reciprocate my participants’ help throughout the project really was invaluable. Another reflection upon the nature of the researcher–participant relationship is that the physical, mental, and emotional presence of the researcher is essential to the conduct of both efficient and effective research. I had one perfect example of this during the course of a standard day’s participant observation. Trey took the opportunity of my being in class to finalize our schedule for an interview that week. That day in
my journal I reflected that any of my doubts about the purpose or importance of continued participant observation in the same setting were laid to rest when that conversation demonstrated the great anthropological value of being there.

In cases of very small numbers of research participants, such as my project, I think a progression of data collection tools designed to introduce you to the individual people as much as to their opinions and views is very beneficial. I could tell that my data collection and analysis were both helped by a sense that I had that I understood my participants. While I know this could go too far and a researcher could unwisely believe they completely understood their participants, anything that gives the researcher confidence in interacting with their participants is useful to build into the project. In this project, the progression of data collection tools was (1) participant observation, (2) survey, (3) focus group, and (4) interview. Beginning with participant observation and continuing it throughout the project was an essential place to start so I had some confidence in how I should interact with each of my participants.

Lastly on the topic of conducting research, I found that any analysis I performed concomitant with data collection inevitably found its way into final analyses of data. This realization was important, because I now know I need to be more careful about any analysis I do in the moment during a project. Based on this project, it seems that in situ or on-the-ground analysis synthesizes itself with the data and become an essential part of the way you think about the data down the road.
Myself as Researcher

First, looking back on the journal I kept throughout the project I realized that I started conducting this project during a tumultuous personal time—happily and beautifully tumultuous but an upheaval nonetheless. I learned that I have a very staunch dedication to my personal life and that I have be wary in order that I prioritize my time in a way that gives my research its due of my mental energies.

Second, the time management required to conduct a research project by myself tested the limits of my ability to prioritize. Reading back through my journal I found that I had to micromanage myself; I had to tell myself exactly what I had to do to accomplish the tasks any given week required. But in this process I learned an essential help in research: lists.

Third, in hindsight I see I did not steadfastly engage what, at the beginning of the project, I called my central concerns. These concerns pertained to my theoretical lens incorporating both the easy micro-symbolic and the more difficult macro-material. I initially wanted to connect the particular materials in the learning spaces I was studying with the global market and then to couch my participants’ symbolic responses in that material web. Part of this lies with my tendency to draw the parameters of any study too wide to be reasonable, but I also feel that I could have done the hard work of integrating the largely symbolic perspective I took in the project with the materialist perspective I was initially eager to incorporate. Both of these tendencies must be appreciated and accounted for in future projects. I need to remain aware of my aggrandizing nature when designing projects and prepared to steel myself for the mental difficulty both before and during the process.
Though this could possibly have served as the thesis of this section, I must also include that I discovered how much research wearies me. I get impatient. I lose focus. A possible remedy is to have a tangible version of the project timeline posted wherever I am doing my work; a visual reminder of where I am in the process and where the work I am currently doing fits into the larger picture would help me maintain both fervor and focus.

Finally, I discovered that research requires a certain constitution: a balance of being organized and being easy-going. I learned that I’m great at the easy-going, happy-with-where-the-project-is-taking-you side of the equation, but I am lacking in the organizational skills required to be your own boss and monitor in the field. I need to be more fiery or pugnacious about my work, rather than just being content with the fact that the project is progressing more slowly than intended. Of course, I think I need to retain of level of my innate easy-going-ness, because qualitative research requires that flexibility, that acceptance of what is. But I also need to develop a greater seriousness when it comes to project timelines. I discovered that part of my disregard for project timelines is that I do not like to be an annoyance or to feel as though I’m impinging at all on the comfort of others, but research requires that you take up some of people’s time. And more than that, I needed to remind myself that participants agreed to participate and were being compensated for their participation. In practical terms, that means that I need not feel bad about sending out several reminder emails and reminding participants in person about filling out surveys or scheduling interviews.

Contributions: to Client and Discipline

As regards the contributions of my project to my client, I believe I provided an important new lens through which the director of the OBU Success Center (who has shared it with Career
Development personnel and the staff of the Enrollment office) and faculty can view the learning and general engagement of students at their university. I think an understanding of the way students conceptualize and interact with their learning spaces will add a beneficial nuance to the way these university constituencies develop and provide services to Oklahoma Baptist University students. In the case of the Success Center, this project offered frameworks for thinking about their different tutoring spaces so that the Center might get on the same page as students and utilize the spaces in ways that make sense and are inviting to students. In one particular instance of faculty interest, Dr. Brown and another colleague are taking the findings from this project into consideration as they redesign or refurbish the current CIV classrooms—I could hardly have hoped for a more fitting application!

This project also contributed to the discipline of anthropology by adding to the small body of knowledge on the interaction of students and physical spaces in higher education. While some research and writing has been done on the general topic, no studies were found during the course of this project that approached the issue in quite the same ethnographic way. Hunley and Schaller (2009) asked very similar questions, though as part of a project much broader in scope, but there was no indication that the research included in-depth interviews or time spent with students. The student-focused character of this project has made a similar contribution; though students have been participants in many studies at many different levels of education, there is a dearth of specifically and dedicatedly student-centered research on the topic. I am happy to have conducted a project that gave students a voice in the design of their education. More generally, this project contributed to the growing body of literature that proves the value of applied research in building a vibrant body of academic knowledge. The contributions this project has made to the
literature were possible precisely because practical interests of the client drove the research.

Applied anthropological research has another apologist in this project. This project was nothing if not proof that application is not the enemy of the academy but rather its energetic fellow and a picture of the great good to which academic knowledge can be put in the world.
APPENDIX A

PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS
Student Participants

Trey is a Caucasian Business Management major who plays for OBU’s football team and is from Oklahoma. He took the course during the summer because he had heard from teammates that the course was demanding and should not be taken in fall during football season, which is when it is traditionally offered.

Molly is a Caucasian Exercise Science major who swims for OBU’s varsity team. Molly was retaking the course after a less than satisfactory first attempt.

Tori is a Mexican/Native American Biochemistry major who is originally from Oklahoma. Tori was the only student in the course who was unable to meet for an interview, but her participation in class contributed to the fieldnotes for this project.

Sam is a Native American English major from Oklahoma. Sam was also retaking the course, and her participation specifically provided some pointed examples that physical spaces, and the particular kinds of environments they shape and foster, play a role in student success.

Amy is a Caucasian Early Childhood Education major who was retaking the course. Amy was the only student living on campus during the study.

Lisa is a nontraditional Caucasian student returning to school after having attended a large public university in Texas directly out of high school. She is majoring in Journalism, and credits career aspiration for prompting her to return to school. She is maintaining her full time job at an Oklahoma newspaper while she pursues her education.
Bryan is a fifth year Caucasian student majoring in Biochemistry. Bryan was retaking the course to improve his grade, not specifically because he had received a failing grade the first time around.

Professor Participant

Dr. Brown is a History professor and the chair of the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at OBU. He has received OBU’s Promising Teacher Award as well as the Meritorious Service Award. Dr. Brown has an interest in, and has published a number of pieces, on the relationship between Christian spiritual practices and the practices of the classroom.
APPENDIX B

STUDENT PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
- What were your expectations for your learning experience in college before you came to college? Can you tell a story or give an example of where you think those expectations came from?

- What kinds of places have you ended up doing your studying and learning?
  - Describe those spaces: colors, sounds, who you're there with, what time of day it is, general vibe
  - Why did you choose that space? If it's a classroom or other determined space, what did it contribute to your learning process?
  - Do you choose different places for different kinds of learning activities? Why?

- What kind of relationship is there, for you, between the kind of formal learning spaces you've mentioned and the more informal learning spaces that you've mentioned?

- Describe your ideal learning environment, not just the physical space, but also the ethos. What does it feel like? What constituted "learning" in that environment?

- Any other questions I should have asked you?
APPENDIX D

SURVEY QUESTIONS
1. What is your age?
   a. Below 18
   b. 18
   c. 19
   d. 20
   e. 21
   f. 22
   g. 23
   h. 24
   i. 25
   j. 26
   k. 27
   l. 28
   m. 29
   n. 30
   o. Over 30

2. What is your gender?
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. Prefer not to answer

3. What is your ethnicity (Select all that apply)
a. African American or Black
b. Asian
c. Hispanic or Latino
d. Native American
e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
f. White Non-Hispanic
g. Other
h. Prefer not the answer

4. What is your classification?
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior

5. Have you taken CIV 1 before?
   a. Yes
   b. No

6. How interested are you in the material you will be covering in this class?
   a. Not at all interested
   b. Not interested
   c. Neutral
   d. Interested
   e. Very Interested
7. What do you think of when you see the words “learning spaces”?
   
   a. Open-ended response
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
- Based on answers to last question from survey, ask participants to define their ideas of "learning spaces", give examples of those spaces from their experience.

- Provide students with materials (legos, pipe cleaners, play-dough, etc.) and ask them to construct an ideal learning space.

- Ask participants to describe/explain their construction, talk about what kind of learning would take place there, discuss why that space is an ideal learning space.
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