The Experience of Learning Atmosphere in the Learning Commons

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Abstract
Even within highly planned environments such as university libraries and information commons, we should take seriously the need to understand how space is experienced and how this shapes learning as an embodied process. This preliminary results paper explores students’ experience of informal learning spaces, through the lens of sensory studies. It is based on data from walk with interviews and focus groups, in a British University. The results of the initial round of data collection and analysis show how study atmospheres are experienced in sensory and emotional terms, especially how particular qualities of light, visibility and sound are felt in the course of different types of informal learning. The next stage of the research will develop a better understanding of how different learning atmospheres are socially constructed based on observation and further walk with interviews.

Keywords: space; learning commons; embodiment; informal learning; sensory studies


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1 The Learning Commons

In the last decade libraries have been reinventing themselves, moving from a model of information consumption though book lending to become places where learning can happen. Libraries are changing, but also increasingly are themselves embedded in multi-purpose learning commons buildings, recognising the need all across the “campus learning landscape” (Dugdale, 2009) for spaces for informal learning, “student learning outside of designated class time” (Matthews et al. 2011:107). Scott Bennett’s (2005, 2006, 2011) conceptualisation of the library transformed as the learning commons was driven by his stress on the social aspects of learning, be that working alongside others, group work or discussions with others beyond the student’s course. The domesticated library is social, supporting a broad range of learning activities. But Gayton (2008) has been widely cited for asserting the continuing need for quiet in the library. “Communal activity in academic libraries is a solitary activity: studious, contemplative and quiet” (Gayton, 2008:60). In this model, the presence of others is important, but less through interaction, more through co-presence and as a source of inspiration to study. The contrasting views suggest a professional dilemma for how to design learning space.

The issue seemingly revolves around noise. In fact, controlling noise levels has always been a preoccupation of the profession. The very origins of library design lie in the invention of silent reading in the middle ages (Saenger, 1982). In the history of the public library, maintaining silence was part of its civilising mission (Mattern, 2007). It was an act of social power. This is doubtless partly why the image of the shushing librarian is such an embarrassment: it constructs the librarian not only a kill joy but also a mediator of class based social control. Nevertheless, noise has remained a key issue, in academic libraries too. Librarians have had to become skilled in managing noise levels: through architecture, furnishing and policies (Yellinek and Bresler, 2013). Yet it is evident from the work of Sequeiros (2011) that readers themselves actively participate in constructing a “reading atmosphere” in libraries. The reading atmosphere is not simply silence: it is a complex to describe combination of sense experience and feelings shaped by underlying spatial organisation, power structures, social rules and interaction. The same issue around how
an environment for study is socially constructed applies in the academic context. Although occurring in actively planned spaces, we should take seriously how students experience the learning commons in sensory terms, and how “learning atmospheres”, to adapt Sequeiros’ phrase, are socially constructed.

Recognition of the importance to learning of sensory experience in space is in tune with an increasing interest in the body in learning (O’Loughlin, 2006; Bresler, 2004). Although often linked to learning practical skills or the specific needs of subjects such as performing arts or sports, it is evident that basic learning tasks like writing (Clughaen, 2014) and reading (Mangen, 2014; McLaughlin, 2015) are in fact in a profound way embodied. A similar interest has also begun to make ground in such areas as information literacy and information behaviour, through the work of authors such as Lloyd (2009, 2010, 2014), Lueng (2014, 2015), Ollson (2016) and Cox et al. (forthcoming). In this work on the role of the body in learning and information behaviour, practice theory, phenomenology and embodied cognition are often important reference points. A further inspiration could be sensory studies. Sensory studies draws on sensory anthropology and the history of the senses (Howes and Classen, 2014). They are concerned with the cultural construction of meaning attached to the senses, and often there are power implications of the sensory order in a society. A key thesis in sensory studies is the hierarchy in how the senses are viewed and that the privileging of sight (ocularcentrism) and hearing is a particular trait of western culture. Mattern (2007) and Sequeiros (2011) are among the few authors to draw on this tradition in information science.

This Preliminary results paper, reports the early results of a study of the experience of informal learning in a British University, informed by sensory studies.

2 Method

Phase 1 of the study reported here was based on a number of forms of data: four focus groups (with a total of 21 participants); interviews with five members of library staff for context; and in addition “walk with interviews” with eleven students. Walk with interviews are a type of go along interview, where the interviewee accompanies the interviewee on a walk through a physical and social environment, and asks them to talk about their associations and experiences with that space (Kusenbach, 2003). They fit into a widening range of walking based interview types (Evans and Jones, 2011) and sensory methods (Pink, 2015). The method seems a natural one to employ in a study of learning spaces. In general it has a number of merits and weaknesses (Dube et al. 2014; Carpiano 2009; Jones et al. 2008). One benefit of the method is that it inherently demonstrates an interest in the participants’ perspective and builds rapport. The approach helps uncover more in-depth everyday experience and is likely to elicit non-rehearsed responses. During the walk serendipitous encounters and seeing places spark relevant trains of thought and memories. While certain limits of the method are recognised in the literature, most of these, such as around safety and the interference of the weather with walking, did not apply in our context. There are risks to confidentiality in recording the interviews, so in this study we relied on very detailed note taking, and writing up a very full account of the walk immediately afterwards. Participants in the study were students at all levels of study drawn from a number of social science departments (information school, education, sociology, economics, journalism and management school). The research was approved by the University’s ethics process. Data was analysed thematically, but informed by a theoretical interest in the body.

The study was undertaken at the University of Sheffield, a research intensive university in northern England. The university’s investment in building reflect wider trends in how multiple types of learning space are being created across today’s campuses as learning landscapes. The main book stock is housed in Western Bank Library, a modernist building opened in 1959. But in 2007 Sheffield opened the Information Commons (IC) furnished to encourage many ways of studying and with 24/7 access (Lewis, 2010). Then in 2015, as a further extension to this model, The Diamond, was opened at a cost of £81 million. As home to the engineering faculty it has specialist teaching facilities and 19 laboratories. It also includes a 24/7 library,
IT services and open learning spaces made available to students from all departments. It is conceived as a further development of the IC’s philosophy of “student-led learning”.

3 Findings
The research uncovered that as in other institutions, informal learning spaces are important destinations, with students setting off to study there for long hours, often work alongside others (e.g. May and Swabey, 2015). They had favourite places to study:

“Having tried different places, I found ‘the spot’. It was in a corner, close to a window, so it was naturally light. It was a big table with a computer and I could easily place my laptop and books next to me. Also, it had a desk light which allowed me to turn off and on. A few times during breaks, I turned the light off to rest my eyes from having looked at the monitor for so long. If I was unable to turn the light off, I would have been forced to move away from the table and rest elsewhere. I liked to see other students working. I could see some students working individually, in a group, using the computer, personal laptops, sitting at the table, on comfy chairs, sitting on the floor between book shelves. The spot was close to book shelves and it had a library touch. I felt I could see others easily, yet I could not be seen so much.”

Participants had a strong feel for the sensory geography of the available informal learning spaces. While none of the elements they talked about was a surprise in itself, what was revealed (partly by the walk with method) was an awareness of these study places as a rich and diverse sensory landscape. Very specific regimes of light and visibility seemed to be desired. Light was important, especially natural light. The usual reason given was that it was aesthetically pleasing and gave one a connection to the time of day – rather than because it was better for reading.

“What I like about the Diamond is how it brings in the outside, the large windows...it proves that it makes people feel more happy, being in touch with the outside rather than being in a secluded room with four walls and no windows... it invites the outside in and I think it does increase my focus”

Participants had learned to appreciate quite subtle differences of light between different places:

“The light can be quite aggressive in the Diamond... Natural light is good, sometimes it can be really overbearing white light and it is just a bit like dazzling...Western Bank is an interesting point because like the reading room in the Western Bank, in the day time there is a lot of natural light that comes in from the window which is great, but at night the light is really like dismal, artificial, yellowy light and in the basement there is no indication whether it is two in the morning or two in the afternoon. So I think natural light is good, and sort of a soft but not overpowering light”

Windows let in light but also offered views. Some thought it was a distraction, but for many a view outside helped relieve the sense of pressure and claustrophobia; and was also an inspiration.

“I can see outside and do not feel suffocated. I can day dream”.

“I prefer to sit at the window end, because sometimes if I am so tired, you can just turn around and look outside. It feels much better. For that moment, you will be thinking, it gives you a gap from that tiring minutes (sic) or hours”.

The view inside was also important. One of the most important attractions of the informal learning spaces was that there were other people working there. Seeing others working helped students concentrate on work themselves: so the view inside was possibly more important than the view outside.
“I like the pressure of the silent study room. I like that when you take your phone out, you feel like everyone is watching you, I like that pressure.”

Yet many students liked a degree of privacy. Favourite places often were a little secluded. The IC and Diamond were sometimes seen as too “open”.

“In a corner and there is nobody behind me”.

“If I am on my own, I have got to be anonymous.”

Thus, paradoxically, students liked to know others were working around them, yet not to be distracted too much by seeing them and also not be overlooked by others: to have a little privacy within a public area. Hence working spaces with some enclosure were popular.

“The grey booths are kind of like a horse with blinders on, you cannot see others and it is silent”

Some people felt a sense of anonymity from being in a space with people working in many types of way; others felt they wanted to be actually less visible. Thus participants had quite specific desires about what they should see and whether they could be seen. They were also very sensitive to a very particular sound landscape. There were many references to different types of quiet in the data.

Designated “silent space” is where there is no talking, but there could be lots of little irritating noises, such as eating or the sound of typing.

“That I cannot stand, I hate that in a library. Especially in the IC in the silent study, like I said when it is loud, that is what it is. I think it is people eating like a bag of crisps...and then there is the smell that creates, I do not think that that creates a good environment to work.”

One focus group participant said that when revising, he needed it to be quiet. IC silent areas were not really silent he said: “I don’t want to be distracted by even rustling of papers and just little noises...” for example, doors, printers- “people noises”. Instead he went to Western Bank library because the stacks there were “dead silent... it is like a dungeon.” Other participants felt that the need to be silent in Western Bank was intimidating or oppressive.

Another participant talked about the pressure cooker atmosphere in one quiet area. This seemed much more intense because the room was open, you could see others working with very serious expressions. This created a tense silence of intense concentration. In other spaces, there was a little more freedom to do different things, because one was one self partly invisible. In other places, you could see “people yawning, working around bare foot, laughing, whispering”. This was experienced as open and relaxing.

4 Discussion
Thus within informal learning spaces different sorts of learning atmospheres were created. These have very strong embodied, multi-sensory element. They are also emotionally charged: there is a sense of belonging, but also feelings of anxiety. It seems, therefore, that both Bennett and Gayton are right. Learning is social in terms of students wishing to study alongside companions and through group work. There also remains value in a quiet communal feeling in the library. But this is not the end of the story: there is also a form of intense, pressured silence that students seek out for certain tasks. Complex combinations of what is seen and heard (and other sensory experience) create different learning conditions. Informal learning is complex, and the concept needs to be unpacked. In doing so we need to explore how different regimes of sensory experience relate to learning, and how they are constructed. The learning atmosphere, to adapt Sequeiros’ (2011) phrase, seems to be shaped partly through the underlying architecture, and by furnishing, but also actively by the students occupying the space themselves. The importance of the multi-sensory aspect of this landscape, reminds us that the body is central to learning. Learning is not simply about quieting the body so that the mind can think, in some Cartesian dualism. Rather it appears that informal learning is embodied.
This aligns with studies of core learning activities such as reading and writing that reveal its embodied nature (Mangen, 2014; McLaughlin, 2015; Clughen, 2014). Although planned environments, we should take seriously the way that students individually and collectively construct the meaning of these spaces. Different forms of silence are produced intersubjectively (Pagis, 2010). The walk with method is one of a number of qualitative methods that can help create data to reveal these experiences. Yet there is scope to go much further in mapping different sight, sound and sensescapes around campus, and thinking about how the different senses are engaged in different types of informal learning task.

5 Next Steps

Two further phases are planned for the research. Phase 2 (October–December 2016) will be based on observation. The author is developing a protocol for recording observations of what can be sensed in the environments at six diverse places in the Diamond building at different times of day. Preliminary experiments with this have already revealed the wide range of sensory environments that exist within this one complex building. This phase is seen as a sensitising phase for the researcher themselves. Phase 3 (February – May 2017) will involve a return to the walk with interviews with students (and staff who manage the space) this time with more prompts relating to the sensory and emotional aspects of the experience. Analysis will be informed by wide reading in the literature including that related to library space, library wayfinding and the role of the senses in learning.

6 Contribution of the Research

The design of space for learning has become a central aspect of academic library work. As complex new types of space are created, we need to understand how students actively experience these as part of learning processes. There seems to be a strong link to embodied (and emotional) aspects of learning (and information behaviour/literacy). Sensory studies has had limited influence in information science to date, but it is one potentially useful theoretical tradition that could inform our understanding. This perspective also prompts us towards employing new methods for the exploration of the senses. The fashion for visual methods in the social sciences has begun to be felt in information science (e.g. Julien et al., 2013). While a valuable extension of our methodological repertoire, this can be understood from the perspective of sensory studies as reflecting a privileging of sight over other senses. This study seeks to investigate the role of methods that explore the other senses in the experience of learning spaces (and of information behaviour). In practical terms the research will also contribute to the design and management of learning spaces and inform pedagogy.

7 References


