"I could study anywhere, as long as I could sit I'll study:"
Student Spaces and Pathways at the City University of New York

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On a warm fall morning last October, I sat in a study room on the lower level of the main City College library in northern Manhattan talking with a student. The room's institutional fluorescent lighting brought into relief the pen and pencil scribbles of student graffiti on the desk and walls around us. "What do you usually do on your commute?" I asked. "Riding on the train?" he replied. "My homework. Because I have long days. So, I do my readings, my…. Sometimes I type papers on my cell phone." And the student lifted his hands to his chest and imitated typing with his thumbs. I contained my surprise at his response: it had never occurred to me that a student could write an academic paper using a cell phone on a New York City subway train.

This student articulates the experience of many other students at the City University of New York: the struggle to get schoolwork done on long days with long commutes. At the time of this interview Mariana and I had been working for 17 months on a study of the scholarly habits of undergraduate students at CUNY. Our research project was originally inspired by the *Undergraduate Research Project* at the University of Rochester, led by Nancy Foster (Foster & Gibbons, 2007). After learning about the Rochester project, we were excited to study our own students at CUNY, where we were confronted with multiple research sites at diverse, urban, public, commuter colleges in a large university system.

Through photo surveys, mapping diaries, and retrospective research process interviews with students, we are examining the structure and patterns of studying, research, and scholarly behavior among students at urban commuter campuses. Our study includes six different CUNY colleges representing community, comprehensive, and senior colleges.

As we spoke with students, the importance of where they do their coursework has emerged as integral to understanding the student experience. Like the students at Fresno State, site of a similar research study by Henry Delcore and colleagues, college for CUNY students "is implicated within and inseparable from other spheres of student life" (Delcore, Mullooly, and Scroggins 2009, p. 13). We seek to understand how our undergraduates navigate multiply occupied places as they attend college, and how locations at school, on the commute, and at home influence and shape opportunities for them to accomplish their academic work.

Place, Space, and Taskscapes

De Certeau describes a clear distinction between place and space. He defines place as "the order…in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" (1984, p. 117). Places are physical locations constituted by socially derived rules, with both implicit and explicit understandings about their purpose and acceptable behavior in them. Degrees of control may vary, and in public and semi-public locations there is often an (implied) institutional authority—the law, the parks department, the college—that determines and possibly enforces the

rules of that place. For example, academic libraries typically have articulated rules of behavior and institutional representatives to enforce them. They also typically have areas with little oversight where patrons are expected to engage in self-regulation.

In contrast to place or location, de Certeau suggests that space "is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (1984, p. 117). The activities of people in a location create a space constituted both in the present moment as well as successively over time. Activities that create a space may or may not be congruent with the intended purpose or the sets of rules for that location. It also follows that multiple actors may be simultaneously engaged in creating different kinds of meaningful spaces in the same physical location.

Ingold's notion of taskscape extends de Certeau's theory and is useful to our understanding of how students create their meaningful spaces. First brought to our attention in the *Library Study at Fresno State*, the taskscape is "an array of related activities" that constitute an individual's view of her own space as it is co-produced by the setting and the participants over time (Ingold, 1993, p. 158). Ingold proposes that "every task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel" (1993, p. 158). Activities, individuals, and places are all interconnected, and both the task and the location the task occurs in derive meaning, at least in part, from the activities that surround it.

Ingold further suggests that taskscapes are by necessity social, "because people, in the performance of their tasks, *also attend to one another*" (Ingold, 1993, p. 160, emphasis in original). As Lefebvre posits, "social spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another" (1991, p. 86). With this in mind, we can contextualize what our students experience when they are engaged in creating a meaningful academic space for themselves in a location that may be multiply occupied by other people who are themselves engaged in a variety of activities. The result may be what Lefebvre terms collisions or interference (1991, p. 87), as taskscapes overlap and impact each other.

Findings

Qualities of Place

We heard from students at CUNY that they can study anywhere, and the variety of locations where students regularly study is so broad as to seem like they really do study "everywhere." **(SLIDE)** For many students, however, place matters—the academic spaces each student creates are constrained and determined by her taskscape. Indeed, individual students describe very specific locations where each regularly finds both the opportunity in their busy days and the conditions amenable for creating a space for themselves in which they can and do study and work on their assignments.

There are certain qualities of place that students seek out when they are constructing an academic space for themselves. While the characteristics of what makes a location suitable or appealing are specific to each student, our informants share the desire for a place that has an optimal level of sound, illumination, and comfort, findings that accord with other studies (Webb, Schaller, & Henley, 2008, p. 419). For many students, habit and familiarity with an environment

that encourages or limits their behavior in particular ways are important characteristics of places for them to engage in academic work. Indeed, students tend to return to the same places repeatedly, sometimes in ritualized ways, an avenue of inquiry we are interested to pursue further.

But the search for academic space is based on more than a shopping list of attributes; the temporal aspect of a taskscape, that is, where the space is constituted in a student's day, has an enormous influence on the student experience. Convenience is a critical factor that often determines choice of place for students at some point in their days. One result is that sometimes students study in locations that are less than ideal for them because that is what is allowed by the time they have. Most students we spoke to are opportunistic studiers: studying in liminal places throughout their day, typically before, between, and after classes**.** For students constrained by their need to do schoolwork in in-between places and times, their academic space is constructed more by familiarity with and investment in the taskscape than on the qualities of a particular place.

Academic Spaces in Academic Places

Of all locations on campus, the library has one of the strongest institutional expectations as a place where academic work occurs. As one study found, "both student and faculty respondents most frequently regarded libraries as fostering learning behaviors important to them" (Bennett, 2001, p. 776). This expectation may be communicated externally in a variety of ways, including a library's visibility in its location, campus signage, and on the college website. It may be further signaled within the library itself, as the "general layout of a library, the organization of the material, the location of the reference desk, and so on are all based upon general expectations and designed to guide behavior" (Elteto, Jackson, & Lim, 2008, p. 333).

The students we met understand and can articulate the institutional expectation of the library as a place for scholarly work, and some choose to study in a library for this reason. For them the library is a place to seek a transformative experience, a place where they not only can, but also, if the rules of behavior such as turning off phones and resisting conversation are followed, indeed, must, be students first and foremost. So important is the organizing effect of the library place that for a few students who describe themselves as studious and academically motivated, finding a "serious" library is imperative to creating an adequate space for study. For some their own college library provides such a place, while others seek out an alternative college library.

At the same time, we found that the presence of other students or the traces of their activities sometimes inhibit students. Some told us that their campus library is too loud, too messy, or too crowded to work in, or the presence of other students socializing and eating interferes or collides with their own attempts to constitute an academic space. (This happened to Mariana at Hunter, who came upon a student sleeping in a study room reserved for interviews!) Though the library has a strong institutional expectation as a studious place, and behavior there is regulated both by representatives of the institution (the librarians) and the students themselves, we met many students who create a social space in the library to meet friends (in person or

online), or a personal space for eating or sleeping, all uses that transgress institutional expectations for behavior (Suarez, 2007, para. 5).

For other students, the college library is simply another location on campus, no more likely to satisfy their need to create an academic space than any other (Hobbs & Klare, 2010, p. 351). And though aware of the intended purposes of campus locations and the corresponding expectations for behavior or appropriate activities, students often transgress these expectations in locations not necessarily intended for academic uses. Students choose to study in the more open, flexible areas of campus, such as hallways and lounges, only when those areas are quiet—they cannot impose a quiet academic space on that location in the same way that social students could impose sociability and its associated noise. In this way the community of students negotiates the interpenetration or superimposition of social spaces and competing taskscapes.

Since the college campus is a traditionally defined location for scholarly work, it is not surprising that many of the CUNY students we met succeed in constituting their academic taskscapes on campus, including in the library. However, we also found that some students struggle to engage with their schoolwork outside of class at the college. Where then do the rest of the students find places to study?

Mobile Challenges

The vast majority of CUNY students commute to college from their homes. Many travel an hour or more by public transportation, often with multiple transfers between commuter trains, subways, and buses. While many of the undergraduates we talked with perceive the commute as a burden and bemoan the amount of time it takes each day, others have grown so accustomed to it that they expressed surprise at its length when discussing it. For the students we spoke with, long commutes are a critical physical and temporal aspect of the '"ensemble of tasks" that makes up their taskscapes.

Some undergraduates actively work to create an academic space for themselves on the train or bus and use that time to study, read course materials, even write papers. As we spoke with students it emerged that their ability to do so is determined in part by a specific, sometimes almost accidental, attribute of the commute: students who do coursework while traveling to campus typically board the train or bus early in the route, secure a seat easily, and ride it for most if not all of their commute. We found that the temporal rhythm of the semester also influences students: thus some only work on the commute when their school calendar demands it, while others look forward to it as a time for leisure activity only as the semester draws to a close.

The multiply-occupied places of the student commute make it difficult for students to accomplish meaningful academic work. Many students specifically articulate the difficulties they face in doing coursework on public transportation: it's too loud, too crowded, there aren't any seats, etc. Some undergraduates keenly feel the loss of this time. While other students we spoke with are more resigned and fill their commute time with leisure activities like reading or playing video games, and a few take the opportunity to relax or do "nothing."

Expectations and Reality at Home

Many of the students we spoke with prefer to engage in their academic work at their homes. The broad picture of their home life was varied: while some live alone or with roommates, most live with nuclear or extended families. They may have their own bedroom, share one, or they may not have a bedroom at all. They may have their own desktop or laptop, share a family computer, or they may have no computer at home at all. Finally, access to the internet may be limited by access to a computer or by connection speed.

Students who prefer to do their coursework at home particularly note it as a place of familiarity and comfort. Many students value the option to take breaks to eat and drink while studying at home, which is not always true for campus locations such as the college library. A few students appreciate the opportunity to discuss their coursework with other family members. Students employ a variety of strategies for organizing and storing their course materials, and working at home allows them access to all of their academic materials at once, rather than the more limited set that they may bring to campus each day.

For some students the constraints of time, in particular getting out of class late, dictate that they study at home, whatever their preference. However, many students find that their home offers too many distractions to enable them to successfully create an academic space there. The most common factor cited is lack of private space and the activities of others; many students mentioned television or videogames at home as a major distraction. Lack of access to a computer is another important reason why students could not write papers or engage in some kinds of schoolwork at home. Disaffection with roommates or conflicts with parents interfere with the creation of study space at home for others. As with the commute, the creation of academic space in their homes may be especially difficult for many CUNY students whose need for study space collides with the needs of other residents of the house concurrently using those locations for non-academic purposes.

Conclusions: How Do Student Pathways Affect Student Engagement?

In conducting this study we seek to understand how students engage with their coursework outside of the classroom, and how the college does and does not support them in their endeavors. Campus places, in particular the library, are defined by the administration for specific uses, with corresponding behavior expectations for those locations. Thus, as Plum noted in his study of academic libraries and the rituals of knowledge: "when students study in the library, they know they are doing the right thing" (1994, para. 37). However, the inherently social nature of taskscapes show us how, despite its academic setting, students may not find the college library to be conducive to their creation of a meaningful space in which to accomplish their scholarly work. We heard from many students that it was challenging for them to study in their college library or in other locations on campus.

It has been suggested that the existence of good learning spaces and the good learning behaviors that go with them is an important component of student success in college (Bennett, 2001, p. 783; Manning & Kuh 2005, p.1). Yet we have also seen that student study preferences are highly constrained by the overlapping or interfering taskscapes of others who surround them,

both off and on campus. Thus, as we observe our CUNY students making the most of their in-between times to engage with their coursework, we wonder, as have other investigators (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009, p. 38), if the extra burden of attempting to construct academic spaces under these less-than-ideal conditions may be negatively impacting student engagement.

While we acknowledge the difficulties inherent in accommodating varied study preferences, we hope that our data will positively inform decision-making and will support new strategies to provide places on our campuses where all CUNY students can successfully create meaningful academic space for themselves.

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