Go Shush Yourself: Student Habitus at the New Thompson Library

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INTRODUCTION

The Thompson Library has been redesigned in part as a learning commons with the assumption that pedagogical models and student learning are becoming more and more social and collaborative. However, it is unclear whether students' ideas of how libraries should be used have caught up with these developments. Students may still have the habitus of a more traditional university library and may not view and use the library as a learning commons. The goal of the ethnographic study was to understand students' use of the new Thompson Library.

Our **hypothesis** was that the new design of the Thompson Library may promote collaborative learning, while students' habitus may prevent collaborative learning in the library.

"A **Learning Commons** is a dynamic, collaborative environment on campus, often physically in the library, that provides assistance to students with information and research needs. It combines individual and group study space, in-depth reference service, and instruction from a variety of sources, including librarians and information technology staff. Some of its key concerns are learning, writing, technology use, and research. Its main purpose is to make student learning easier and more successful" (York University Libraries 2010).

"Group learning and learning projects developed collaboratively with fellow students and professors are critically important" (Learning Group Report 2004).

Habitus is a concept from practice theory developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1980). Practice theory addresses two central questions: 1) how does the system shape individual practice, and 2) how do individual practices shape the system? Habitus can be described as an individual's system of acquired dispositions that work as a generative scheme of action (but does not determine action). Individuals acquire these dispositions, which are embodied and mostly learned through experience, as they are socialized within families, social groups, and institutions like university libraries. Habitus produces practice, which is best described as what people do in everyday life. Practical sense or logic is often described as "the feel for the game" in which the game can stand for social life but also for other domains, including behavior in university libraries.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1980). The logic of practice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

O'Reilly, Karen. 2009. Key concepts in ethnography. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

OSU Libraries Learning Group. 2004. Report of the OSU Libraries Learning Group (October 2004).

York University Libraries. 2010. What is a learning commons? Available at http://www.library.yorku.ca/ccm/Home/preview/infolit/mmons/learning-commons.en accessed on November 29, 2010.

BACKGROUND

This study was conducted within the framework of the anthropology course 650H: Research Design and Ethnographic Methods (Autumn 2010) taught by Dr. Mark Moritz. Students were trained in different research methods through participation in a collaborative project in which they designed the study, collected and analyzed data, and wrote up the results in this poster.

For more information about the project contact Dr. Mark Moritz (moritz.42@osu.edu).

RESULTS

What is the student habitus in the Thompson Library?
Quiet, individual learning activities that aligned with traditional library use were considered to be most appropriate and least disruptive: reading, being quiet, studying for class. Activities that were louder, often associated with social interactions, were judged to be less appropriate and most disruptive (e.g., talking on cell phone). The exception is group work, which is both considered appropriate and disruptive.

"I mean, a library is a library."

Are there changes in student library habitus? Although the student library habitus is fairly traditional in that it favors quiet, individual studying, we found that there are also changes in what students consider appropriate library behavior; Facebook and food are considered part of studying in the library, with the exception of loud, crunchy foods like chips and carrots.

Keep quiet! Noise is the greatest disruption to individual learning activities. Cell phones are considered the worst, but other social interactions also rank high. Noises made by individual students working are considered less disruptive (e.g., typing on a computer, coughing).

"OSU's new library policy of 'talking is great because the library should be a group space' is horribly annoying. Why can't the library be a place that is quiet where one can actually concentrate? Are there no quiet spaces in this world anymore?"

How can group work be appropriate <u>and</u> disruptive? While group work is considered a highly appropriate activity in the library, it is also considered highly disruptive by students. The results suggest that students think that collaborative learning activities should be limited to the group study spaces.

"The factors which are most influential in the formation of the habitus are transmitted without passing through language and consciousness, but through suggestions inscribed in the most apparently insignificant aspects of the things, situations, and practices or everyday life. Thus the modalities of practices, the ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even of speaking ("reproachful looks" or "tones," "disapproving glances" and so on) are full of injunctions that are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating" (Bourdieu 1991:51).
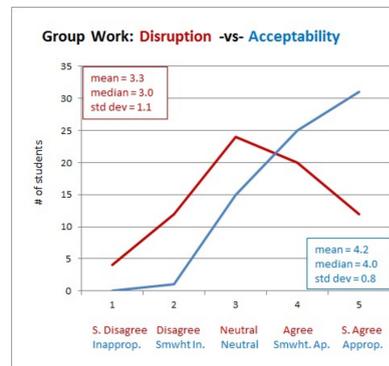
What are the informal rules? The informal rules that guide the behavior of students are guided by a sense of respect and courtesy for other users. The overarching rule is to be quiet and not disturb others studying.
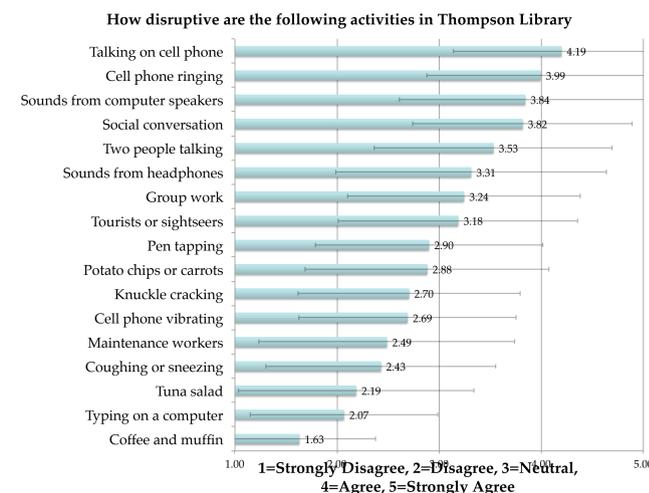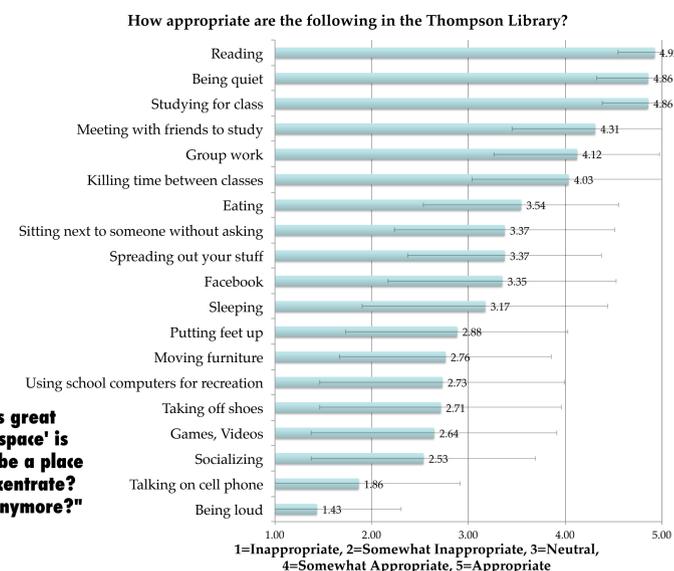
"You don't mean for it to but it just gets really loud and you find that, oh crap! I'm disturbing the person next to me."

How do students cope with violations of informal rules? Many try to ignore it or move to another area. Others clear their throats, send nasty looks, or shush the violators. Some directly confront violators and ask them to consider others and be quiet. Only a few students go to library staff for assistance.
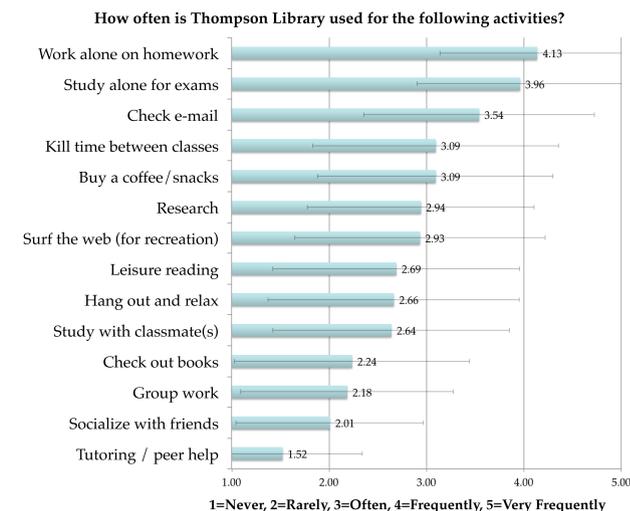
Where do students do group work?
The university library was mentioned most often by the students interviewed (56%), followed by dorms (45%), coffee shops (35%), and student lounges (34%). The Thompson Library and the Science and Engineering Library (SEL) were specifically mentioned. The group study spaces in the Thompson Library were favored for group work (77%), while other spaces were mentioned by less than 18% of the students. More than half of the students interviewed had ever done group work in the Thompson Library.

Is the Thompson Library a learning commons? None of the students we interviewed knew what a learning commons was, but when we explained it, more than 70% agreed that the Thompson Library was a learning commons.
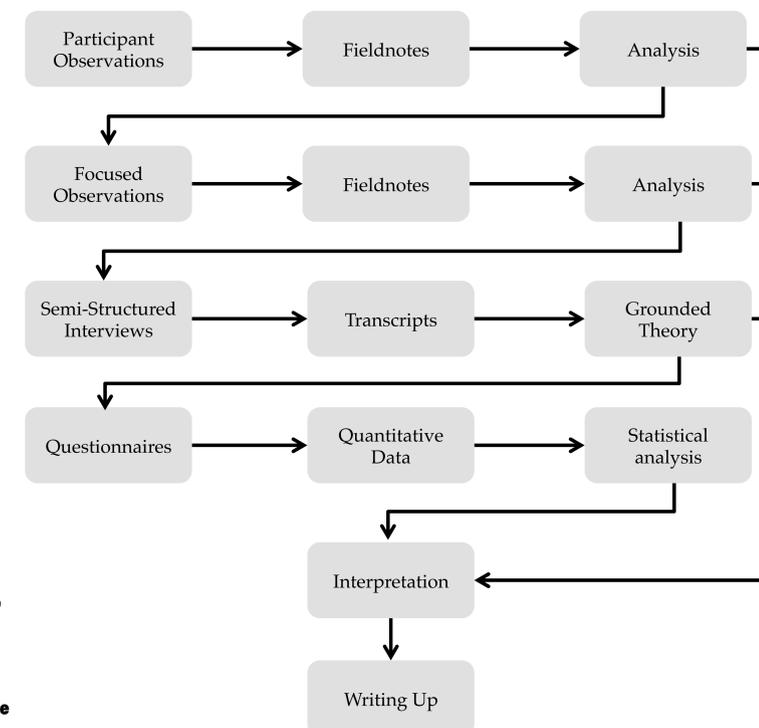
How appropriate are the following in the Thompson Library?

Activity	Rating
Reading	4.92
Being quiet	4.86
Studying for class	4.86
Meeting with friends to study	4.31
Group work	4.12
Killing time between classes	4.03
Eating	3.54
Sitting next to someone without asking	3.37
Spreading out your stuff	3.37
Facebook	3.35
Sleeping	3.17
Putting feet up	2.88
Moving furniture	2.76
Using school computers for recreation	2.73
Taking off shoes	2.71
Games, Videos	2.64
Socializing	2.53
Talking on cell phone	1.86
Being loud	1.43

1=Inappropriate, 2=Somewhat Inappropriate, 3=Neutral, 4=Somewhat Appropriate, 5=Appropriate

How disruptive are the following activities in Thompson Library

Activity	Rating
Talking on cell phone	4.19
Cell phone ringing	3.99
Sounds from computer speakers	3.84
Social conversation	3.82
Two people talking	3.53
Sounds from headphones	3.31
Group work	3.24
Tourists or sightseers	3.18
Pen tapping	2.90
Potato chips or carrots	2.88
Knuckle cracking	2.70
Cell phone vibrating	2.49
Maintenance workers	2.49
Coughing or sneezing	2.43
Tuna salad	2.19
Typing on a computer	2.07
Coffee and muffin	1.63

1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

Group Work: Disruption -vs- Acceptability

mean = 3.3, median = 3.0, std dev = 1.1
mean = 4.2, median = 4.0, std dev = 0.8

S. Disagree / Inapprop. — Disagree / Smwht In. — Neutral / Neutral — Agree / Smwht. Ap. — S. Agree / Approp.

"You don't really go to a library to socialize with people because everybody's doing their own thing."

How often is Thompson Library used for the following activities?

Activity	Rating
Work alone on homework	4.13
Study alone for exams	3.96
Check e-mail	3.54
Kill time between classes	3.09
Buy a coffee/snacks	3.09
Research	2.94
Surf the web (for recreation)	2.93
Leisure reading	2.69
Hang out and relax	2.66
Study with classmate(s)	2.64
Check out books	2.24
Group work	2.18
Socialize with friends	2.01
Tutoring / peer help	1.52

1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Often, 4=Frequently, 5=Very Frequently

METHODOLOGY

We conducted an ethnographic study of students' use of the new Thompson Library using an iterative-inductive approach moving back and forth between data collection and analysis (O'Reilly 2009). We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including: **participant observation** to document student behaviors in different spaces in the library, and in particular potential conflicts between collaborative learning and student habitus; **semi-structured interviews** to examine informal rules that regulate behavior in the library; **grounded theory** to discover categories of informal rules in interview transcripts; **questionnaires** to measure student habitus; and **descriptive statistics** to describe the patterns in student habitus.

Over the course of the study we observed hundreds of students in the Thompson Library and interviewed 145 of them. This non-random sample consists of students from every possible major (from Aeronautical Science to Zoology), and is a good representation of the OSU student population in terms of age, rank, gender, race and ethnicity.

Participant Observations → Fieldnotes → Analysis
Focused Observations → Fieldnotes → Analysis
Semi-Structured Interviews → Transcripts → Grounded Theory
Questionnaires → Quantitative Data → Statistical analysis
Interpretation → Writing Up

★ You Are Here

CONCLUSION

- While students are not familiar with the concept of the learning commons, they recognize that the new Thompson Library is different from a traditional library and use it in many ways as the designers intended.
- The library achieves its design goal of a learning commons as a dynamic, collaborative environment with mixed success. There are tensions between library practice of quiet, individual studying and social learning activities.
- While group work is considered an appropriate activity in the library, it is also considered disruptive because of the noise.
- Students share a traditional library habitus that favors quiet, individual studying and do not approve of disturbances, especially cell phones. Food and Facebook are no problem because they don't interfere with studying.
- There is a strong commitment to the traditional library practice. Students monitor their own behavior and that of others. They correct each other through stares, shushes and direct appeals.
- What was striking was the almost complete absence of library staff in the different areas of the library and that the quiet study atmosphere of the library was maintained by students themselves.