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Recommended Citation

Howell, J. Benjamin, "Writing Center Space The First Frontier" (2020). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 57.
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/57

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Writing Center Space

The First Frontier

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ENGL 4910

28 March 2020

Abstract

This paper discusses the influence of writing center spaces on the impressions of tutors and students. First, the importance of creating a “homey” space is introduced, then followed by an example of a writing center thought by its denizens to be particularly welcoming and effective. An analysis of another writing center’s evolution and subsequent changes in impressions and use is included. Finally, scale is introduced as a foundational principle in the architectural field with particular application in creating a desired impression.

Keywords: space, architecture, “homey”

Writing Center Space: The First Frontier

First impressions, especially in regards to a physical space, have always been a subject of particular fascination for me. I remember cleaning our home while babysitting my younger brothers and very carefully considering the first impression the space would make upon my parents when they returned. I paid special attention to the sights, sounds, and smells around the doorway I knew they would first walk through, then considered their sight-lines as they continued through the rest of the house. This focused but holistic approach ensured that the moment they walked through the door, they recognized our house as a clean and inviting space.

My first impressions of our Ray B. West writing center was only a handful of months ago. I remember navigating the strange split-level entrance, and struggling at first to locate the minimally marked entrance to the center itself. Walking through the doorway, I noticed the tight physical confines of the space, the sparse but intriguing art and poems on the walls, and the childish clip art-illustrated tags giving each branched off room - each with as much square footage as a glorified closet - its own name: names like "The Bug Room," "Narnia," and "The Gateway." The supervisor's desk filled most of the space and imparted the notion of a secretary guarding access to an unseen boss beyond. It was difficult to visually locate the entrance from anywhere in the hallway. Once inside, it felt cramped and crowded with only a couple people. The decorations were interesting (I spent the minutes before my appointment reading several of the poem-clad posters taped to the walls) but lacked a sense of unity and visual cohesion. On the whole, my first impression was that of a pragmatic but constricting space.

I strongly suspected a connection between these physical surroundings and the occupants' thought and behavior. Michelle Miley's "Feminist Mothering" article in the Writing Lab Newsletter was my first breakthrough into developing this idea. Miley establishes that a writing center should feel like a "homey" space, which will promote "listening, encouraging, [and]

nurturing." She describes this as empowering and vital to both tutors and the students the writing center is designed to serve. However, her article focused strongly on best practices for tutors and supervisors but did not include any concessions to the physical aspects of the writing center that contribute to a "homey" feeling.

So what makes a writing center "homey"? A writing center professional named Josh Ambrose experimented over the progression of the 3 different spaces his school's writing center occupied to find out why some spaces were more successful than others. He shared his findings in an article titled "Democratizing Space in the Writing Center." Starting with a dungeon-like writing center inside a small windowless office, they moved it into a 30' by 30' classroom, then that space was reconfigured to expand the main thrust of tutoring work into a previously underused library area. Ambrose was careful to point out that the size of their space (in terms of square footage) mattered as much in making it a "homey" space as how it was used. Configurations of tables, chairs, and sofas that allowed for a diversity of "collaborative clusters" were not possible until they grew out of the first office into the large classroom and eventually merged space with the library. By making those changes, they "literally 'produced' a new space, with new usage patterns, new populations using the space, and new forms of collaboration with the community at large" (Ambrose).

Ambrose added an additional factor of analysis by including the writing center's location. He states that moving the main work of their writing center to a more centrally located building on campus "led to important transformations in the types of relationships made possible in our space." Once relegated to a little-used corner of their campus, Ambrose measured a large increase in student participation for the writing center after it was relocated to the heavily-trafficked central location.

Instead of relying on the assumption that the space influences behavior, he had the opportunity to personally demonstrate, through measurements both qualitative (student and tutor impressions on the space) and quantitative (number of writing center appointments per semester,) the improvements that occurred when transitioning different writing center spaces and configurations led to a more comfortable, configurable space.

Making a writing center comfortable and configurable should be considered important factors in creating a “homey” space. The writing center operated by Katrin Girgensohn, author of the article “Space Matters,” was a highly configurable environment. The large, open room had rolling tables that could be rearranged into clusters, “islands” for small-group projects or one-with-one tutoring, or moved out of the way entirely for large-group tutor training. Girgensohn also included details about the other inviting physical elements of their writing center, including decorations like “colorful signs that indicate the opening times, the writing hours, consulting hours... our mission statement, printed on red paper, and various newspaper articles.” Girgensohn described their overall effect as working harmoniously to create a “living and beautiful space.”

Decorate it all you want; does size matter? Simonds and Starke’s *Landscape Architecture* provides insights into how scale, the physical characteristic of a space that describes the way a human relates to the size of their surroundings, influences the interaction between space and observer. On the largest scale, vaulted ceilings and skyscrapers make an observer feel insignificant, quiet, or reserved. On the opposite end of the spectrum, small (but not overly confined) spaces have the effect of creating an intimate, secure, and safe environment (Simonds). As a foundational principle of design, scale illustrates how a small space can still be conducive to the creation of a “homey” environment.

Ultimately, every writing center will be driven by their own directives and the limitations of their space. However, looking at each writing center holistically (in terms of scale, square footage, spatial configuration, and decorations) is necessary in order to create inviting, collaborative, and safe spaces for students, tutors, and supervisors. Exciting possibilities for improving a writing center include having a comprehensive review by architecture experts or surveying students on their impressions of the space. This will help us adapt our space so that every person who comes through our doors will feel at home.

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