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Group consultations: Developing dedicated, technological spaces for collaborative writing and learning

Landon Berry*, Brandy Dieterle

Texts and Technology, University of Central Florida, 872 Cape Dory Ct, Apt 1015, Winter Park, Florida 32792, United States

Abstract

Using activity theory as a framework, the authors studied how the design of a digital workspace in a multiliteracy center influenced collaboration between human and non-human actors. The authors identified two types of spaces that facilitated collaborative practices in the digital workspace: interstitial and surrounding. The interstitial space was the space between human actors in a consultation and the surrounding space was the space directly outside of human actors in a consultation. Findings suggested that the placement of particular high- and low-tech tools and technologies within these spaces heavily influenced the work that occurred. Furthermore, the shape and style of the furniture in the space also had an impact, with rounded tables and chairs on wheels fostering mobility in the space which also impacted collaboration. Finally, tutor and tutee perceptions of the space also heavily influenced the work that occurred, as there was a common perception that the space would be conducive to group consultations or consultations using technology despite the space being designed with all potential consultations in mind.

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1. Introduction

The phrase “collaborative writing and learning” can have multiple understandings when thinking about the work done in multiliteracy centers. Muriel Harris (1992) argued that there are largely two forms of collaboration: (1) multiple authorship collaboration, oftentimes seen in group projects or group essays where writing decisions are jointly made, and (2) collaboration in learning about writing, seen in peer consultations in multiliteracy centers where tutors facilitate learning about writing but the writer makes all final decisions regarding the text being discussed. Since Harris’ effort to articulate these differences between tutorial and peer-group collaboration, there has been a move towards the rise of multiliteracy centers focusing on the ways “in which oral, written, and visual communication intertwine and interact” (Trimbur, 2000, p. 29). Since John Trimbur’s (2000) initial call, there have been many conversations about the development of multiliteracy centers. While some conversations exist regarding the construction of spaces in multiliteracy centers that accommodate technologies and new literacies (Inman, 2010; Lee, Alfano, & Carpenter, 2013), there are fewer conversations that examine the intersection between collaboration and multiliteracy. In other words,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: landon.berry@gmail.com (L. Berry).

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how do individuals collaborate using multiliteracies, and how do spaces and technologies facilitate these collaborative efforts?

The University of Central Florida (UCF) had approximately 60,000 students enrolled in the 2014–2015 academic year, and UCF's University Writing Center (UWC) typically staffs roughly 50 undergraduate and graduate students each semester under the direction of three different administrators. The UWC has recently seen an influx in the booking of group consultations from a variety of areas of study including the sciences, humanities, and hospitality. Moreover, UCF has recently developed a B.A. in writing and rhetoric, and with that the UWC has seen an increase in demand for consultations that incorporate multiliteracies. However, the UWC was not constructed with collaborative and multimodal writing practices in mind, and is limited in terms of physical space. In response to this limitation, we have converted a largely unused corner in the UWC into a digital workspace intended to support groups as they brainstorm, research, and compose collaboratively. In the remainder of this article, we describe a study conducted on the digital workspace, and describe how our findings illustrate how such spaces and tools can foster collaboration amongst tutors and tutees. Using activity theory as a framework, we observed and video recorded nine different tutoring consultations, surveyed participants in those consultations, and also conducted follow-up stimulated recall interviews to further understand the impact of space design. Our focus on space helped us explore our research questions related to the ways in which the design of the space, tools and technologies available in the space, and tutor/tutee perceptions of the space informed the collaborative work taking place during consultations.

2. Review of the literature

Throughout our study, we paid particular attention to understandings of the terms multiliteracy and multimodality, as well as the design of space and its impact on learning and collaboration. According to Courtney Cazden et al. (1996) of the New London Group, when thinking of a definition of a multiliteracy pedagogy, language alone was not enough to represent the myriad of literacies being made and remade by various cultures and contexts. Though emphasis on writing within the university has traditionally been placed on the textual, the New London Group advocated that “the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on” (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 64). This understanding of literacy, then, acknowledged that meaning-making and productivity embrace a host of modes that support the functions of social, political, corporate, and educational life.

While many scholars look to digital literacy as a nexus for multiliteracies, some researchers understood multiliteracies and multimodal pedagogy as involving any combination of high- and/or low-tech tools. For Jody Shipka (2011), literacy was best seen as a process instead of a product. As individuals seek to make meaning or produce texts (broadly defined) in the world, they engage with various practices across various contexts. When highlighting one of her students who inscribed an essay on a pair of ballet shoes, Shipka illustrated that the best arguments oftentimes stem from modes that require physically altering three-dimensional objects in a three-dimensional space. Likewise, Russell Carpenter and Shawn Apostel (in press) and Sohui Lee, Christine Alfano, and Russell Carpenter (2013) advocated for “decentralized” spaces that foster invention by affording student agency over three-dimensional objects (p. 52). In a multiliteracy center, this can be accomplished by adopting a “Post-It note pedagogy,” where students can work with consultants by manipulating objects (such as Post-It notes) nonlinearly as a means for exploring storyboard-like processes (Lee et al., 2013, p. 52). Another possibility in a multiliteracy center would be to integrate technologies that foster the visual and social processes of composing by providing opportunities for students to “cluster around large, touch-screen monitors or low-tech dry-erase boards” (Carpenter & Apostel, in press).

To foster opportunities for multiliteracies and collaboration in a space, administrators will want to consider designing spaces around the type of work that is to be done in the space, rather than the technologies and furnishings it will house (Inman, 2010; Doorley & Witthoft, 2012). To this end, James Inman proposed the concept of “zoning” parts of the multiliteracy center, much like there are zones and districts in cities. In the multiliteracy center, these zones could be either “dedicated” or “flexible” spaces in order to accommodate different types of work those visiting a multiliteracy center wish to accomplish (Inman, 2010). The dedicated spaces become crucial when considering the work that is done in multiliteracy centers. Inman provided the example of audio composing and publishing. In a flexible space open and available to other consultations and activities, the audio recording would likely pick up unwanted background noise. A dedicated space, however, might be designed with this issue in mind and use floor plans and tools (e.g. partitions and acoustical foam) to block out background noise. When designing flexible spaces, Scott Doorley and Scott Witthoft (2012) encouraged providing support for multiple uses and multiple activities. Therefore, when multiliteracy center

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