

Space Matters: The Physical Space of Tutoring

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In the article entitled “Designing Spaces for Effective Learning” (2006), the contributors state, “If we are to foster truly flexible, creative... minds, we need to look more critically at the... learning space designs” (p. 14). The purpose of this article is to begin thinking outside of the box in terms of tutoring theory and practice. Many times, professionals reflect on the practices of tutoring (how one tutors, what he tutors, when he tutors, etc). Yet, the physical space of tutoring is often ignored. The physical space can entail many different elements, including the lighting of the area, the layout and type of furniture, the wall colors, any dividers and many other things. Changing any one of these elements can alter the atmosphere and purpose of one’s tutoring center. During this time of decreasing budgets in higher education, though, changing even one area of your physical tutoring space is not always an easy thing. This article discusses one college’s attempt to alter the physical space of its center, making it a more open and welcoming space; all while doing so on a decreased budget with small, but important changes. In order to really understand the complexity of the physical space of tutoring, one must have a basic knowledge of environment psychology and its connection to the learning environment, which will be the beginning basis of this article. Included is a photographic history of this transformation, which is a critical part of understanding the changes. Readers from many levels of tutoring centers will find this article useful, from peer tutors to administrators. Throughout the article, one will see real-life examples from the author’s center and its changes.

Environmental Psychology and the Theory of Space

Raymond De Young (2013) defines environmental psychology as “a field of study that examines the interrelationship between environments and human affect, cognition and behavior” (p. 17). This definition is not limited to the corporate world, but includes the world of higher education, more specifically, in this study, the physical environment of a college’s tutoring space. Many studies exist to examine the ways in which we tutor, the content we tutor and whom we tutor, but little information has come of the environment out of which tutoring takes place. In the historical sense, the enclosed space of learning has generally been a minor aspect of the learning environment- with schools focusing more on standards for lighting and heating than the actual physical elements of the learning environment. It was not until the 1960s that administrators started rethinking environment in relation to people (Araca, 1996, p. 13). Now, there is an increasing trend towards studying the ecofriendly environments and human behavior. Tim Davis’ article, “The Influence of the Physical

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Environment in Offices,” divides the physical environment of organizations into the physical structure, the physical stimuli, and symbolic artifacts (1984, p. 271). This article, in comparison, will focus on the learning environment and how altering this environment changes both the perception of the tutoring center and the effect on learning. Using the example of one institution’s transition in the physical tutoring space, one can see these effects clearly and argue for a keener look at environmental psychology in relation to learning spaces.

One study by the Jisc (formerly the Joint Information Systems Committee) e-Learning and Innovation team (2006) uses various international examples to stress the importance of environmental psychology in rethinking tutoring spaces. Examining many elements of the space, including the entry area and the social spaces, this study stresses the examination of all elements of physical design to “promote learning as an activity” (p. 3). This study argues that all educational buildings must be: 1) Flexible 2) Future-proofed 3) Bold 4) Creative 5) Supportive and 6) Enterprising (p. 3). Although one recognizes these are the ideals for one’s tutoring space, this author also recognizes the budgeting realities out of which higher education functions. It should be noted, however, that this author found more research on the physical space for the business environment than research on space in learning centers.

One Institution’s Background for Change

Located in South Georgia, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC) is a college that must incorporate both the monetary realities and the space desires at the same time. ABAC consists of about 3300 students, eighty percent of which are on a type of financial aid. The most popular majors in this college are agriculture-based majors, the nursing major and its newest four year degree in Biology. When discussing tutoring space, it is important to recognize the institution under which the tutoring center functions. ABAC began as an open-institution campus and then transitioned to a

four year college in 2008, offering a limited number of bachelor's degrees in various areas. The physical space of the tutoring center at ABAC, referred to more formally as the Academic Achievement Center (AAC), began as a one-room facility, dividing up the subjects by either math or writing. With this subject division a literal physical division of the tutoring services was drawn, utilizing half the room for writing tutors and the other half for math tutors. After outgrowing this space, the AAC moved to a larger, conference room-type location across the hallway, which allowed for more space and students. The AAC's physical space, and, in turn, tutoring philosophy, remained very much the same until the summer of 2013 when Rebecca Cofer took over as the Coordinator of the Center. Using her philosophy of open space tutoring working at both Virginia Tech and Texas Tech, Ms. Cofer knew that "well designed learning spaces have a motivational effect" ("Designing Spaces", p. 2). Examining Image 1, the reader can immediately see some of the physical obstacles the new coordinator wished to tackle immediately upon taking on this new role. In addition to dividing up the tutors by subject area, the Center literally divided up the tutors within the Math section in to various subject-specific tables, as the white signs above the tables indicate. Finally, the Center was divided by the use of an unattractive maroon divider wall, shown in Image 2. This wall served as the physical divider between the already-divided tutoring subjects.

Changed Spaces Means Changed Tutoring

Another element that had to be addressed was the amount of "artwork" and graphics on the Center's walls. In Image 3, there are examples of two of the posters which hung within the Center prior to 2013. While Aslam acknowledges the need for personalization in the physical space, arguing that it allows the students to go beyond the "all business" attitude, also stresses the need for open space (2013, in *International Vantage Point*, p. 2). She also goes on to argue that "selected items of artwork such as encouraging/inspirational quotes... can assist with providing perspectives and feelings of calmness" (p. 2). However, it should be noted that all elements of the environment, as

stated by the “Designing Spaces” collaborators, needs to be “future-proofed” (p. 3). Much of the former artwork in the AAC at ABAC was fairly dated and, as some faculty members of the college community noted, “condescending” and “elementary” in their approaches. In revamping the physical design of the AAC, the coordinator followed Antonio Araca’s approach of less is more in terms of decorations. Araca’s research (1986), which focuses on art classrooms, argues that “classrooms should be minimally decorated” (p. 13). The Academic Achievement Center at this particular college currently contains very minimal amounts of wall décor, focusing instead on creating a collegiate setting.



Image 1

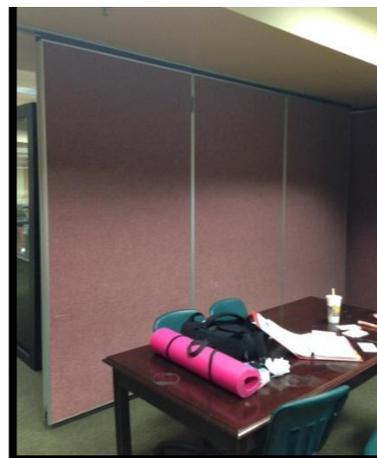


Image 2

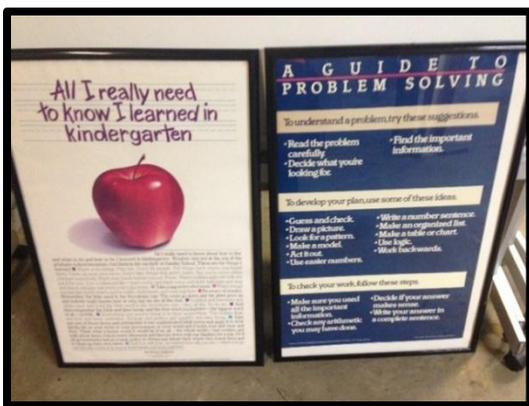


Image 3

In removing the artwork and desegregating the tutors by subject area, the new coordinator emphasized a philosophy of collaboration and openness in tutoring. It is these “open-plan informal learning areas” that allow for a community to begin both amongst the tutors employed at the AAC and the students visiting the Center (“Designing spaces”, 2006, p. 4).

Connecting with this philosophy of openness is the need to clear access to any staff members housed within the tutoring space. Image 4 shows the former office of the coordinator, located directly as a student walks in to the space. In addition to working against a positive entry way, this office also appears closed-off and inaccessible, as noted by tutors who experienced the transition. The former coordinator chose to put up privacy blinds and then added cardboard blockades for even more privacy and exclusion. Image 5 shows the office cubicle of the new coordinator. With a focus on openness for tutors and students, this office chooses not to utilize the privacy blinds, unless absolutely necessary. Its location is also in the corner of the center, as opposed to right beyond the entrance way. When discussing the merits of an open versus closed office, Davis (1984) states, “they facilitate interaction among organization members, improve communication, and increase office efficiency and productivity” (p. 274). While Davis does acknowledge that closed office spaces are more often supported by researchers in the field of management, he does recognize the validity of open spaces for various functions.

As is evident upon further examination of Image 5, the coordinator also chose to exhibit some personal and professional items within the office. Classifying such decorations as “symbolic artifacts,” Davis (1984) defines these items as “aspects of the physical environment that individually or collectively guide the interpretation of the setting” (p. 276). He stresses that these little elements communicate details about the people that work in these offices (p. 277). One displayed item shows the credentials of the coordinator. Some research, as noted by Aslam (1986), states that “credentials on the wall demonstrate a positive perception of the service provider’s qualifications, skills,

experience, achievement and training (p. 2). The type of artifacts that coordinators choose to display in offices depends largely on the format in which they function. For instance, offices can be divided in to three main types: creative administrative and client-centered. If one views tutoring centers as client (student)-centered, then the office must compliment the person's professional work and offer comfort, security, and confidentiality to the student (Davis, 1984, p. 277). Outside of displaying credentials, this open office also contains notes of praise from previous tutors, personal items, and professional books. The space has now become "disarming" because of such additions (Aslam, 1986, p. 2).



Image 4- Old Office



Image 5- New Office

Another element of the Academic Achievement Center which was altered with the new management of the Center is the entry way area. Recognizing that many students feel intimidated coming in to a tutoring center, the current coordinator wanted a direct access, open entry area that "create[d] a sense of excitement about learning" ("Designing spaces", 2006, p. 8). Many times the front space of a tutoring center is often overlooked, as was the case with the former design of the AAC, seen in Image 6. Here, the furniture devoted to this critical welcoming space consisted of leftover materials, a broken desk and a wall clock. The front doors even lacked a label to distinguish this area from the campus library above it. As some scholars argue, learning spaces must have "clear, accessible information" for students and visitors ("Designing spaces", 2006, p. 8). Focusing on

clear access to information critical for independent work in the Center, the new model of the AAC, seen in Image 7, brightly displays tutoring times, tutor availability and course help information, along with clear access to the front desk and the tutors.



Image 6



Image 7

The final major physical change to this particular tutoring center has to do with praise in the workplace and clear identification of its employees. At The Stevenage Centre in North Hertfordshire College, the Atrium of the center contains many things for students, one of which is “a display area for students’ work” (Designing spaces, 2006, p. 9). Stressing a need for praise and positivity amongst the Center’s tutors, the newly remodeled AAC takes this same approach, implementing a Tutor Brag Wall. As is evident in Image 9, the brag wall simply covered up a previously used temporary wall. While also covering up an unnecessary wall, the Brag Wall serves as a source of affirmation for the tutors. This new addition to the Center allows students visiting the AAC, its tutors and faculty and staff to post positive comments about the tutors’ work for all to see. It is with this brag wall that the new coordinator strives to “establish a culture of learning, support and professionalism” (p. 9).

One major issue within the Center was the identification of tutors currently available for help. With the addition of the “Meet Our Tutors” wall, students can easily locate tutors by the picture and name displayed. With the addition of the clearly displayed tutoring schedules and the Meet Our Tutors, students using the AAC are now able to be active and independent learners. One can easily identify the tutors, their subject areas and their faces by using the tool on the wall, as seen in Image 9. Another element of this creation of self-advocacy for the students using the AAC is the newly added use of the “I’m Available for Tutoring” display frames, as seen in Image 10. As Davis argues, “Physical stimuli in the environment can arouse or activate behavior” (1984, p. 276). These signs serve as activating stimuli, encouraging students to become active and independent learners in the tutoring center.

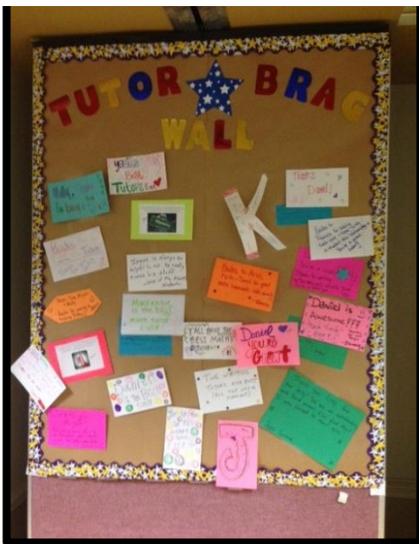


Image 8



Image 9

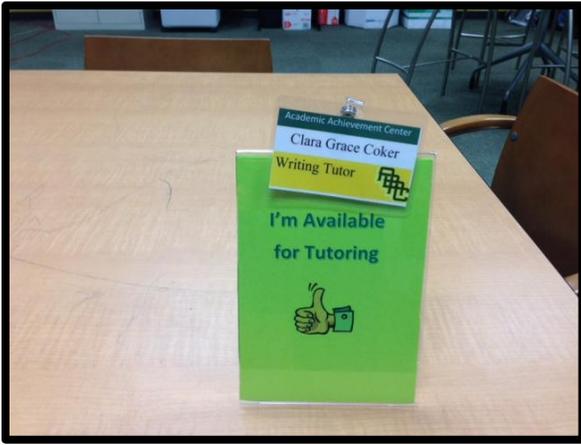


Image 10

Conclusion

The Academic Achievement Center at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College serves as an excellent example of the impact changing one's tutoring physical space can have on a center. Mark Haysom, the Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Council, is quoted ("Designing spaces," 2006) as arguing for this positive change. He states, "I believe passionately that when you walk through the door of a place of learning, you should feel proud, uplifted, motivated... That should be the intent" (p. 9). Upon walking in to the former space of the AAC, students found dated art work on the walls, multiple glass cubicles inaccessible to them and divisions of all sorts.

Working on a limited budget does not necessarily mean one has to sacrifice these positive changes. This particular college, ABAC, worked on a budget of zero dollars. Simply rethinking the way in which we tutor and the space in which that happens already redefines the philosophy behind the center. An opening of the Center, removal of dated pieces and divider stimuli has drastically changed the Center's approach to tutoring. As a result, the Academic Achievement Center is noticeably busier than previous semesters, which the coordinator credits to a more welcoming, open environment. Environment psychologists currently focus more on the ecofriendly nature of physical

spaces. However, if a tutoring center truly wants to revitalize its philosophy and approach, attention must begin with the physical environment of that center.

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