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Participatory Design Ethnography in the Learning Commons: Initial Research Findings

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Participatory Design Ethnography of the Learning Commons

Research in progress
by Prof. Krista Harper & students
in Anthro 397AR: Applied Anthropological Research
Spring 2014
Who we are & what we’re doing

• Applied Anthropological Research class
  – Teaching goal: Building ethnographic and user experience research skills
  – Research goals: Students studying students’ library experience
Ethnography in the Library

- Nancy Fried Foster
- Lynda Drake & Andrew Asher
- Donna Lanclos
Questions about the LC

• **Activities**
  – What do undergrads do at the LC?

• **Motivations**
  – What motivates students to come to the LC?

• **Built Space**
  – How does the built space of the LC impact users?

• **Technology**
  – How are students using tech?

• **Help**
  – How do students see “human element” of the Library?
Research Methods

• Student Cognitive Maps
• Self-observation
• Participant observation
• Walking interviews
• Photovoice Discussions
  – Favorite place
  – Least favorite
  – My study space
  – Why I come
  – Should change
  – Help!
Initial Findings: USE

• Expected uses
  – Studying individually & in groups
  – Taking classes
  – Seeking help
  – Using computers & printers

• Unexpected uses
  – On-campus “living room”: napping, socializing
  – Checking social media
  – “Playtime” during study breaks
Initial Findings: MOTIVATION

What *motivates* students to come to LC?
- Printers
- Group work
- “Quick work” between classes
- Convenience

• What *deters* students from coming?
- Feeling “overwhelmed” by environment
- Conflicts over space in high-use areas
Initial Findings: BUILT SPACE

• Students LOVE the group work cubicles
  – BUT conflicts and discomfort about solo users
  – Wish they had individual, transparent cubbies
• Laptop tables controversial: high-use, but seen as loud and distracting
• Outlets are key
• Preferred non-desk seating = comfy chair with moveable tray
• Considerations: Overall flow, people lining up
Initial Findings: SENSORY EXPERIENCE

• Sound
  – Students enjoy “white noise” of activity
  – BUT too loud during LC primetime
• Light: Maximizing natural light
• Color: More dynamic but “classy”
• Art & Plants: very desirable; use screens?
• Make the most of the Courtyard as an aesthetic asset
Initial Findings: TECHNOLOGY

• What tech do students *come to use*?
  – Printers—key problem area
  – OIT Computers with specialized software
  – Many don’t know about laptop rental

• What tech do students *bring*?
  – Smartphones common, tablets less so
  – Laptops (increasingly)
  – Need for ubiquitous outlets
Initial Findings: GETTING HELP

• “On my own”
  – Timing and crowds
  – Unclear who to ask for what
  – Don’t want to be bothersome

• “Not knowing”

• “Invisible” librarians
  – BUT students who formed a relationship with a librarian used their services
  – AND “Ask a Librarian” placement helped
NEXT STEPS

• Summer 2014: More data analysis; planning for next phase
• Fall 2014: 3-4 graduate students continue research
• Spring 2015: Possible collaboration with Prof. Amanda Walker Johnson
• 2015-2016 school year: Harper conducts more research with classes as needed
Thanks for joining us today!

• Ideas for further ethnographic projects?
• Contact Prof. Krista Harper at kharper@anthro.umass.edu
• Twitter: @kristamharper