Interchapter 4C

From Black Hole to Mission Control: Study Space Exploration

Evangeline Schmitt, Western Washington University

About the Author

Evangeline is a biology major who loves writing. Her favorite kinds of spaces have views of Bellingham Bay. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio’s email: rws@wwu.edu.

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My desk is a mess. I have no idea where all those papers amass from, but amass they do. I usually push free a tiny corner to perch my laptop on, and then sit hunched over it, trying not to elbow books onto the ground. It makes for a distracting workplace, and even as I ignore the mess, I know it affects the way I study. On some level, we all recognize that our surroundings affect our cognitive processes. Ken Graetz puts it very eloquently: whenever we are trying to learn, we are “awash in environmental information, only a small fraction of which constitutes the sights and sounds of instruction” (2006, p. 6.1). If this is true, then we really need to talk about how we interact with space when we’re trying to learn, both in and out of classes. In this little interchapter, I’m going to talk about creating individualized study spaces, at home or in a place like a writing studio. Back to my desk. If I know surroundings are important, why don’t I make the effort to organize things? It’s like there’s a kind of mind block going on – it’s hard to be intentional with study spaces. A clever professor, Robert Gifford, named this block phenomenon “environmental numbness” (1976). Gifford did a whole experiment asking students to work in a room with very awkward desk arrangements. The furniture was lightweight and rollable; they could have easily moved it. But they didn’t. Like me with my black hole of a desk, students ended up adapting themselves to annoying surroundings rather than improving them. Why do we do this? Gifford and others partially attribute students’ passivity to our educational system (Bernardi & Kowaltowski, 2016; Gifford, 1976). And it makes sense. Everything’s always set up for us at school, so we don’t get in the habit of setting up spaces for ourselves.

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1 Graetz illustrates “being awash” with a passage from Harry Potter about Hogwarts! So fun!
Not so at the Research & Writing Studio! This is one of the (many) reasons I love working here—it encourages environmental awareness (the term Gifford used for the opposite of environmental numbness). It’s not only that we can leave our clutter behind. The furniture and layout of the studio encourage visitors to take initiative in setting up a space. Visitors can choose from all kinds of furniture—swivel chairs, rolling tables, couches, armchairs, bars, pods, and the list goes on. There’s also an open floor plan and different noise-level areas. Having these obviously different options already available helps visitors choose their surroundings intentionally. As Lori Gee explains, “Providing furniture that people can rearrange and tools they can manipulate gives them the feeling that they have permission to claim ownership” (2006, p. 10.10). I love watching people come in, look around, and set up camp by moving tables together, spreading out on a couch, barricading themselves with whiteboards—we’ve seen it all.

Taking initiative with furniture is a very encouraging way to start a study session. There’s the feeling of having successfully taken agency in the physical aspect of studying, so maybe there’s hope for the intellectual part of it as well. Seeing the spaces students create is also a reminder to studio assistants to act as guests. We may be hosts for the whole Studio, but visitors invite us into their learning space when they have a question. Being a good guest looks like listening more than you talk, asking questions more than instructing, and giving visitors the final say, and encouraging reflection on their preferences.

To summarize, studying and consulting both come more easily in our lovely studio space. So imagine how I felt when, during my second year working at the studio, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world. The studio went virtual: virtual meetings,
chats, and webcasts. No friendly furniture, no open floor plan, no tangibility whatsoever. Also, guess who was now spending all her time at her messy desk. How could anyone possibly make nice study spaces now?

I found an answer by asking a different question. I was having my regular beginning-of-quarter check-in meeting with studio pro extraordinaire, Pippa Hemsley. She asked me about my classes, etc. and I was telling her how hard it is to focus on virtual lectures when more interesting projects are ready-at-hand to distract me. Pippa suggested a few work-from-home sensory habits that my brain could associate with studying—wearing different clothes, or a hat, listening to certain music, using a candle, or a diffuser. Little things that would make me experience the same space in a new way.

I tried the hat and the candle. The hat was fun but annoying, so I ditched it after a few days; the candle was super helpful and is here to stay. Ideally, yes, I would have totally reconstructed my room and furniture, but that’s hardly realistic, and taking charge of a space doesn’t have to be limited to big projects like that. Little changes can still make a pretty big difference. Even more than the scent and cheerful glow, the act of striking a match to light my candle is a helpful way to send my brain an intentional message: “I’m studying now.” A little tiny bit of agency.

Screens are another studying environment to keep in mind. When someone pointed out to me that my laptop layout was also a study “space,” my mind was totally blown. I’d thought a lot about how to change my actual desktop, but never my computer desktop—that’s how much I had adjusted myself to my environment. What if I organized my desktop into a mind map? Or color-coded my app icons? Or create a wallpaper
shortcut and make a habit of changing it to something focus-y while studying. A few browser searches and all these options (plus 24 million more, of course) could be yours.

I got even more ideas from reading, “All in a day's work, at home: teleworkers’ management of micro role transitions and the work–home boundary” by Fonner and Stache (2012). Despite the unwieldy title, the article is actually affirming. Apparently successful work-from-home professionals create on- and off-duty cues using these little rituals all the time (2012, pp. 243–244). Once I tailored my own space and developed my own rituals, I suddenly realized: these were strategies I could encourage visitors to develop during the period of online school.

But such helpful study habits shouldn’t be reserved for pandemics and teleworkers. Sensory habits like these are super helpful, both in home and public spaces. In the Studio, our furniture and layout send an implicit message about the importance of taking initiative with space. But why leave it there? Underlying cues are important, but studio assistants could be explicitly discussing study spaces, encouraging students to be aware of how they are using or choosing study spaces.

Encouraging reflection on study spaces connects to the treasured studio practice of metacognition: awareness of what you are aware of and how you are aware of it. And as with any kind of metacognition scaffolding, the best strategy is to ask questions, even one as simple as this: “Where have you found good study space this quarter?” In weekly sessions with one visitor, I made this a regular check-in question. That way we both remembered at least once per week that space is worth thinking about. Another prompt could be “How have you set up your computer space for this project?” Then maybe you brainstorm with them a few little changes.
Remember when I said that we all know, on some level, that space is important? My personal space practice goal includes raising space awareness, bringing the unconscious up a level or two so we all develop mindful perceptions about how study spaces affect us. Graetz’s (2006) term was environmental awareness, after all. No matter how intentional space designers are in choosing furniture and affordances, it’s us, the students, that ultimately need to take space agency. So, dear reader, take a look around. What in your space is helping you read? What is distracting? What are a few small changes you could make? Try a few. See where it launches you.

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References


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