

Georg Simmel's Spatial Sociology and Tutoring Centers as Cultural Spaces

JOSEPH CUNNINGHAM
University of Cincinnati

Abstract

Student culture carries a variety of benefits for the student population, including better social integration and stronger academic performance. At a two-year commuter college, however, student culture is far more difficult to construct due to the travelling distance as well as the lack of conducive space for its generation. The sociology of spaces, as written about by German sociologist, Georg Simmel, provides four crucial characteristics of space, and these features can be appropriated by tutoring centers in order to serve as one of the few spaces at the commuter college where student culture can flourish.

Introduction

Culture is such a ubiquitous concept that we often take it for granted. More significantly, there is a tendency to take *the generation of culture* for granted as if culture produces itself or the production of culture is beyond our control. Ultimately, the construction of culture (or lack thereof) is within the hands of people interacting in a shared space, and in the case of student culture, students, staff, and faculty members all contribute to its creation. However, in many institutions—in particular two-year commuter colleges—student culture can be compromised by a lack of conducive spaces. This unfortunate reality has serious academic and emotional consequences for many students, including those of poor academic performance and increased student alienation.

With its emphasis on community, student ownership, and collaborative academics, college tutoring centers serve as pivotal spaces where student culture can flourish. Moreover, many of these centers reflect a sociology of space that was written about by esteemed German sociologist, Georg Simmel. Although Simmel was writing near the dawn of modernity about more macro-sociological concepts, his spatial reflections operate as a

For more information contact:

| Joseph Cunningham | The Academic Writing Center | University of Cincinnati | Email: joseph.cunningham@uc.edu |

powerful socio-philosophical theory that could positively influence how we understand the way through which tutoring centers construct student culture. Within Simmel's theory, we have a similar spatial-cultural construct present in many of the best tutoring centers—one that can facilitate student interaction in commuter colleges and foster academic success.

The Challenge of Student Culture

The concept of student culture is a challenging one to securely grasp. While a general definition describes it as “the environment and social norms held in a school that lead or do not lead to social cohesion” (Moiseyenko, 2005, p.94), the numerous factors and implications influenced by student culture are vast and specific to the college. Everything from student preparedness to perceptions of the college to academic honesty to issues regarding mental health can be included in the cultural spectrum. Additionally, this culture is continually changing and evolving with new students coming every year with their own cultural characteristics (Bishop et al., 2004). Urie Bronfenbrenner's influential ecology model is yet another way to understand the consistency of student culture as the product of “the specificity of the individual life history, the campus milieu, and the larger societal and historical context of development” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p.273). Within this model, student community is produced by a series of groups, consisting of students and faculty (Nitecki, 2011). However, with students belonging to several communities and many of these groups “invisible” to college employees, student culture becomes a slippery concept, one that cannot easily be apprehended (Kuh, 1995, p.564).

The most common ways to measure or approach student culture is, like any other culture, its products and members' reflections. Students who are socially integrated into the campus are more likely to be successful due to having a stronger understanding of what it means to be a college student (Barbatis, 2010). Furthermore, colleges can foster this integration by offering a variety of “agents” for students to contact, and indeed, in a recent survey, 92% of students pointed to a specific agent who was “instrumental to their sense of adjustment, comfort, belonging, and competence as college students” (Deil-Amen, 2011, p.61). Consequently, colleges often have more power in improving student integration than employees often realize, yet in a two-year commuter college such efforts may not come to fruition.

The primary reason for this struggle is that the student culture in two-year colleges differs significantly from traditional four-year universities, largely

due to a different student makeup that includes more nontraditional students, part-time students, students with lower socio-economic status, and a greater diversity of reasons for attending school—all of which fold together to define the two-year college's overall mission (Ethington, 2000). The other critical facet of the two-year college experience—one that often hinders the development of student culture—is the large percentage of commuter students whose involvement with the school is rather limited (Davis, 1999).

Unsurprisingly, this lack of involvement dilutes the college experience for many students, which is why residential students are overwhelmingly more satisfied with their college experiences compared to their commuter counterparts (Qi, Anderson, Reid, Toncar, 2007). Furthermore, the principal dimensions separating traditional college students from commuter students—“(1) socio-economic and demographic differences; (2) academic differences; and (3) non-school obligations and activities” (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011, p.142)—favor traditional students and serve as the fundamental sources of student culture. The student culture at two-year commuter campuses has a tendency to reflect this disparity, leading to a greater possibility for a lack of investment and poor academic performance.

This burden is not squarely on the shoulders of the students. The commuter college faces unique challenges in fostering student culture, challenges that often prove difficult to overcome. Particularly in issues of access to spaces and services, many two-year colleges struggle to facilitate a positive cultural construction with their nomadic populations (Stevens, 2000). As Barbara Jacoby (2000) concludes in her article, “Involving Commuter Students in Learning: Moving from Rhetoric to Reality”:

The enduring challenge is to create opportunities that involve commuter students explicitly and intentionally in learning that enhances their college experience rather than allowing these opportunities to become yet another example of the unintentional exclusion from which commuter students have historically suffered. (p.86)

The culture of commuter students, consequently, is compromised by the students' backgrounds and connection to college as well as the college's lack of a concerted effort towards academic support. Once again, this inattention possesses real consequences, including the possibility of alienation, specifically a form of educational alienation, indicative of these populations (Muller & Pazaki, 2011). In order to actively confront alienation generated by spatio-cultural relationships, reviewing existing theoretical frameworks regarding space becomes crucial. In this venture, the sociology of space, as constructed by Georg Simmel, demonstrates how spatial formulations can be

considered and applied to tutoring centers, reconfiguring them as rare spaces of cultural construction in two-year commuter campuses.

Georg Simmel's Sociology of Space

In many ways, Georg Simmel defies easy classification. The German sociologist, whose publications range from 1890 to 1917, acted as a shrewd commentator on modernity, yet also anticipated several postmodern inclinations. In some sense, Simmel draws close affiliation with Marx, most notably in that his best known work is the tome-like, *Philosophy of Money*, yet Simmel's work goes beyond pure Marxist materialism into more abstracted realms. This is perhaps best represented in Simmel's attempts to avoid analyzing sociology or society in a rarefied manner, but instead he examined society from an interactionist and conflict perspective, discussing how "the fleeting, fragmentary, and contradictory moments of our external life are all incorporated into our inner life" (Frisby, 1986, p.62).

For the purposes of this discussion, Simmel's sociology of space is of considerable interest, particularly how the external spaces we inhabit influence our internal experiences. Like much of Simmel's theory, his sociology of space is quite intricate with reoccurring themes of "separation and connection, distance and proximity, boundaries and openings" (Frisby, 1994, p.1). Simmel's theory of space insists upon the significance of "spatial context and [individuals'] use of space" in human interaction and socialization (Lechner, 1991, p.196). This is not to argue that Simmel conveyed a certain "spatial determinism" (Lechner, 1991, p.195), but rather espoused a dialectical process in which people both construct the socialized space in which they operate and are influenced by this space internally.

Perhaps the most useful document in Simmel's overture on space is an essay appropriately titled, "The Sociology of Space." Within this essay, Simmel (1997/2007) discusses four key features of space as it relates to socialization: (1) the exclusivity or uniqueness of space, (2) spatial divisions and boundaries, (3) the notion of fixed contents, and (4) the proximity and distance afforded by the space. Each one of these characteristics requires some unpacking to comprehend their relationship to tutoring centers and student culture.

The first concept, the exclusivity or uniqueness of space, is perhaps the most difficult to grasp initially, yet what Simmel essentially argues is that all spaces possess an undeniable uniqueness that differentiates them from other spaces (even similar ones); what generates this uniqueness is a combination of physical characteristics and objects as well as more abstract principles such

as “the intellectual, economic, and political waves” (p.139). Therefore, each space possesses its own geography and culture, which both harmoniously and discordantly relate to one another to generate exclusivity. Also, Simmel’s sociology of space indicates a complimentary relationship between individuals and the spaces they inhabit—a simultaneous construction and influence on one another. This is best exemplified in this first concept, for what ultimately makes the space unique, beyond that of its physical characteristics, is the people who operate within that space.

The next spatial concept primarily concerns how space formulates boundaries. Simmel’s emphasis on these spatial boundaries led to the construction of a specific article, “The Social Boundary.” Here, Simmel (1908/2007) writes, “Each border is a psychological, or more precisely, a sociological occurrence. But through its investment as a line in space, this reciprocal relationship achieves clarity and security through its positive and negative aspects” (p.54). Once more, physical boundaries, such as walls or, in the case of larger spaces, mountains and rivers, become sociological ones as cultural and political inclinations also serve to separate individuals. Boundaries not only serve to keep people apart, but serve to connect people as those contained *within* the boundary share sociological characteristics. Returning to “The Sociology of Space,” Simmel (1997/2007) argues, “a society is characterized as inwardly homogenous because its sphere of existence is enclosed in acutely conscious boundaries” (p.141). In order to elucidate this concept, Simmel utilizes the effective analogy of a painting’s frame in explaining how boundaries enforce a unity of vision and provide a window into understanding the laws of a particular space. While not always the case, spatial separations imply different rules and functions, applicable to spaces regardless of size.

The third characteristic of space, its ability to fix concepts is somewhat self-explanatory. Within most spaces, a system of objects becomes situated in the physical field. While these objects can be moved, a space will keep those objects within its boundaries. In a city for instance, various buildings are more or less fixed in their location. In a smaller space like a bedroom, the usual objects—a bed, a closet, a dresser—are often present. Simmel does, however, argue that these fixed contents serve as vital contributors to the socialization process. For example, Simmel discusses how a church serves as a fixed object of communal worship within a space. Without it, religious acts would occur largely in isolation. In addition, these fixed objects also operate as signs in navigating the space like landmarks or buildings used as rendezvous points.

Simmel’s final characteristic, proximity and distance, is the most explicitly

interactionist modality of space. Naturally, close proximity among individuals is conducive to social interaction, both positive and negative. However, Simmel puts even further significance on proximity as a foil to distance:

An economic cartel or a friendship, a stamp collectors' association or a religious community can do without personal contact permanently or for a period of time, but the very moment when there is no distance to overcome, the possibility of innumerable quantitative and qualitative modifications of the cohesive bond immediately appears. (p.152)

Proximity and distance not only serve as catalysts and obstacles to social interaction, but can *qualitatively* change the nature of that interaction. Moreover, distance is not merely a spatial marker, but holds temporal or ontological features. As Robert Cooper (2010) writes:

Social and cultural distances are constituted by this ambiguous unity between presence and absence: every *me* implies a *you*, every *here* reflects a *there*, every *today* includes a *tomorrow*. Distance in these examples is [as Simmel puts it] the “constant abandonment” of life in order to re-find itself. (p.72)

There is a multiplicity in distance, for distance is rarely fixed, nor is it limited to a single categorical plane. For Simmel, distance and proximity are undulating terms, evolving as the space evolves. Contributing to the previous three characteristics, distance and proximity represent the lifeblood of space, determining relationships and instilling spatial possibility.

Applications of Simmel's Sociology as it Relates to Tutoring Centers

In applying Simmel's spatial characteristics to tutoring centers as environments that generate college culture, numerous realizations arise. First, there is Simmel's exclusivity of space—a unique quality that is quite applicable to tutoring centers, particularly those of a smaller commuter college. Bryon L. Stay (2006) points out a number of unique facets to smaller centers' spaces (applicable to general tutoring centers in many respects) including a lack of training resources, limitations in regards to subjects tutored, and visibility that has legitimate implications in regards to college culture and politics: “Because the writing center direction likely has personal contact with most, if not all, faculty and administrators, it is possible for pressure to be placed on the writing center related to institutional goal and assumptions about writing” (p.149). As in Simmel's theory, there is a reciprocal connection between the physical nature of the space and the culture surrounding it. Tutoring centers serve as politicized spaces on campus, and the interaction among

students, faculty, and staff make it uniquely politicized (Stay, 2006). With the convergence of contextual factors, center directors and staff should be aware of this unique position and make the proper efforts to ensure harmony to benefit the student population.

In terms of Simmel's second spatial concept of fixed contents, it is vital to recognize the number of resources a center offers and how those resources contribute to the space. For Simmel, a space is more than merely a place in which objects are situated. The objects are influenced by the space and vice versa. Tables and chairs are different in a tutoring center than in a classroom; they hold greater functional capacities for studying, tutoring, and other forms of academic support. The specific objects that a tutoring center can provide—computers, books, studying resources, etc.—help students recognize the center, and these objects do not have to be purely material either. Services unique to a space hold similar functions to objects in regards to assisting students in “feeling at home,” and both services and objects draw students into the center and help determine the wide variety of interactions within the center.

Boundaries are also imperative in conceptualizing a tutoring space. The most substantial boundary is that of designating the tutoring center space and distinguishing it from the classroom. Heather M. Robinson (2009) discusses this difference in terms of writing centers:

In their writing center sessions, they [students] can express their reservations about their assignments, and express doubts and frustrations as well as enthusiasm about what they are asked to do, to someone who, while still employed by the college and part of the formal educational loop, can give sympathy and one-on-one attention. (p.74)

The boundary separating the tutoring center from the classroom is both a physical and psychological one that entices students to utilize tutoring services as well as repels them as something foreign to the classroom experience. Other boundaries exist in a tutoring center that houses a variety of subjects versus a college with separate math and writing centers that have strong boundaries and completely distinct protocols and rules. More subtle boundaries also exist in regards to relational/role boundaries among tutors, students, and faculty. Elizabeth H. Boquet (2002) perceptively argues that “The tutors, for their part, have difficulty maintaining the strict boundary that constitutes a student's *own* work when students frequently arrive with papers filled with the *professor's* comments...” (p.17). Once more, spatial boundaries can be conceived as psychological or sociological ones, and a delicate navigation of those boundaries is necessary to create a space conducive to the construction

Distance and proximity play both obvious and nuanced roles in tutoring centers. Obviously, the tutoring center maximizes proximity in a number of ways by ideally inhabiting a location readily accessible to the student population and gathering resources together within a single environment. In the larger context of the commuter student, the tutoring center serves as an integral location of distance and proximity. Students who are commuting from some distance can perceive tutoring centers as an entry point to which a number of academic support services can be reached.

Tutoring centers serve as proximal zones where students can interact with tutors and peers to generate organic learning and student cultural experiences. Hadfield et al. (2003) wrote a compelling article on how the spatial setup of a center can maximize student interaction and create a comfortable space to share his or her work. Ferruci and DeRosa (2006) refine those points to include “the importance of local conditions and concerns derived from our own students and tutors” (p.26). While the culture of commuter students is one that should be recognized and respected, one must understand how the distance inherent in that commuter student’s experience dilutes the institutional student culture. The tutoring center operates as an area in which proximity to resources, support services, and other students are emphasized, thus providing a unique space for student culture to develop.

Conclusion

In considering the challenges of generating student culture at two-year commuter campuses, Georg Simmel’s theories of space provide a helpful framework in understanding how tutoring centers serve as perhaps the best spaces for the construction of student culture to occur. The unique quality of space creates a set of fixed resources, fluid boundaries, and various examples of distance and proximity—all of which facilitate the student interaction necessary for cultural construction. At two-year commuter schools where student interaction is limited primarily to the classroom, tutoring centers serve as crucial spaces where interactions focused on academics happen—more so than the library, cafeteria, or student lounge. Additionally, this academics-centered interaction often progresses to more culturally-significant exchanges that occur when people are gathered together and united by common goals. The synthesis of these forms of interaction, facilitated by the characteristics of the space, make tutoring centers vitally important areas for student culture, in some sense transcending their original mission. Tutoring center directors and staff should be aware of the importance of space in this regard and maximize the characteristics that enable student culture development,

for their spaces are perhaps best equipped for this profoundly significant endeavor.

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