abstract: Many universities have decided to invest in updating their informal learning spaces. One decision to be made in planning the space is how to staff it. The researchers carried out a qualitative case study to better understand the perspective of learning space managers who work in offices within their assigned space. The research generated six themes from the perceptions of the managers, observations of their activities, and document analysis. The authors also introduce a concept that they call “situated spatial interactions” to explain the complexity of student behavior and interactions in informal learning spaces.

Introduction

Pedagogical practices have shifted from objectivism, an approach that expects learners to create meanings through passive transmission of knowledge, to constructivism, which holds that learners construct their own knowledge by experiencing the world. At the same time, educational approaches have moved from individual knowledge acquisition to collaborative work and learning in a social setting, which involve working together toward a common goal. In response to this pedagogical shift, colleges and universities have begun to create and promote more collaborative spaces for active learning.

...colleges and universities have begun to create and promote more collaborative spaces for active learning. This transformation has occurred in traditional learning spaces, such as classrooms, as well as in informal learning spaces, including libraries.

An informal learning space is one that provides an environment and culture for students different from those in a formal learning space. Informal learning, according to Peter Jamieson, is “course-related activity undertaken individually and collaboratively on campus that occurs outside the classroom and does not directly involve the

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The focus of informal learning spaces is to support student learning in a social setting that is welcoming and supportive.

A good design for all informal learning spaces should be “flexible, future-proofed, bold, creative, supportive, and enterprising.” The focus of informal learning spaces is to support student learning in a social setting that is welcoming and supportive. Informal learning spaces may be planned or unplanned and may be designated by the students or by the university. In this study, only informal learning spaces that were preplanned, designed, and implemented by the university were used to study the role of learning space managers.

Over the past 25 years, many new buildings and renovated areas have resulted from this pedagogical shift toward social learning, collaboration, and group work. Notable among these movements is the creation of informal learning spaces in academic libraries. These areas are often referred to as “learning commons,” also called “information commons,” “knowledge commons,” or simply “the commons,” as well as unique titles. Like informal learning spaces, learning commons strive to be flexible, open, and supportive, with an emphasis on learning-oriented and learner-centered offerings. The success of learning commons in libraries “has prompted widespread interest in creating ‘learning spaces’ throughout the campus environment.”

There are many ways to design learning spaces as well as variations in how to staff them. With the shift away from collection storage to creating informal learning spaces, many libraries are exploring how best to staff these new areas. Robert Boyd highlights many staffing models, including an integrated service desk at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte and a “one-stop” shop for users at Emory University in Atlanta to access reference and technological services. Shay Keating and Roger Gabb identify three major models for staffing learning commons: “separate facilities, joint staffing, and integrated staffing.”

The staffing of informal learning spaces and how staff and users are expected to interact in these areas vary with both the design of the space and the services offered. Although there are general models of library staffing and visions of learning commons, few articles or books detail the role of the manager in these and other informal learning spaces. Joseph Fennewald summarizes the requirements in postings for job openings overseeing a library’s commons. Overall, however, the descriptions of staffing for learning commons seldom mention the role of the manager.

This study aims to begin the conversation on the role of learning space managers and their relationship with their space. It focuses on managers whose offices are inside the informal learning space they oversee and explores how their presence is felt within the space. Since Penn State University in State College has three managers working within the learning spaces they supervise, the authors—both librarians at Penn State—can contribute this perspective to the literature. Useful information can be gained from incorporating the perspective of managers on how they see themselves within their space and the observations they make about student behavior.
Literature Review

Our literature review is intended to provide some perspective on how learning spaces work, to give an understanding of the spaces where these managers work, and to provide a viewpoint through which to frame the managers’ experiences in their space.

Systemic Perspective

This research is based on systems theory, which holds that “change in one part of a system necessarily alters the rest of the system.”12 If a learning space can be considered a system, then placing a manager inside it will alter the system. According to Diana G. Oblinger, space is important and spaces themselves can drive change.13 Learning spaces are intended to influence the behavior and activities that occur in them. The manager can impact student behavior and staff interactions with students.

The social activity that occurs within these areas should also be considered in the learning space system.14 This notion is similar to the idea of situated cognition, in which the learning that occurs cannot be separated from the context or from how students use the knowledge.15 The learning that happens in a space cannot be separated from the components of that space, and managers are one component. Interaction is a fundamental part of learning, and “the context of interaction is provided by the situation.”16 This social interaction is a direct way that the managers can impact students’ experiences.

The social aspect of learning is one of the major themes emerging from the research. Susan E. Montgomery refers to the “social environment for learning.”17 Charles Crook and Gemma Mitchell emphasize “space as social.”18 Many educators consider it important to have a social setting in which to learn. A manager whose office is within the learning space becomes a social character in the educational environment for students. Ethnographers frequently go into the field to engage in participant observation, learning about the people under study by watching and taking part in their activities. Through this observation, the anthropologists get to know the culture of the people they study.19 While learning space managers are not ethnographers, they may have a similar experience by immersing themselves in the culture of their learners and observing the users of their space, day in and day out. This immersion gives the managers insights into how students behave and what they need.

Technology-Equipped Informal Learning Spaces

Learning spaces directly influence the behavior and activities that happen in them. Traditional learning spaces, such as classrooms with rows of fixed desks, stand in opposition to more recent pedagogical theories of how students learn.20 Educational institutions
have begun to create more collaborative areas and areas for active learning that reflect this pedagogical shift. An informal learning space produces a different environment and culture than a traditional, formal learning space would. Informal learning is “course-related activity undertaken individually and collaboratively on campus that occurs outside the classroom and does not directly involve the classroom teacher.” Informal learning spaces are where students engage in such learning. Some people have described informal learning spaces as nothing more than computer labs or social gathering places. However, informal learning spaces focus on supporting students’ learning and not simply on providing computers and comfortable chairs for them to use. Informal learning spaces have become increasingly important due to the growth of technology, the proliferation of personal devices, and the small amount of time that students spend in formal learning environments.

Technology-equipped informal learning spaces have the following general characteristics: they recognize and accept students’ constant connection with technology, they enhance the ability to work collaboratively, and they support faculty in their use of technology. In addition to the learning commons within libraries, these spaces have begun to appear elsewhere on campuses. For example, at Penn State, students can use an area within the College of Education building that features many of the characteristics mentioned by Mary Ellen Spencer. This space builds on students’ natural use of technology, encourages students and faculty to bring their own devices, and is designed to foster collaboration. In the past, few universities had planned informal learning spaces, but the number of learning commons and other such spaces has grown significantly.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of technology-equipped informal learning spaces, it is important to understand the perspective of embedded managers.

“Third Places”

Recent renovations to informal learning spaces have focused on turning them into what sociologists call “third places.” Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett coined the term “third places” to refer to places other than home and work where people gather to spend time. Third places draw people who desire social interaction and relationships. The potential to establish relationships with embedded managers holds a key to turning informal learning spaces into third places for students. There are few places where people feel comfortable having relaxed or “loose” relationships with other people. Third places provide a place for students to engage with technology while surrounded by other people. Third places are essentially any informal place that is not home, work, or a formal schoolroom, but they have several distinguishing features. For example, people feel at home in them. Third spaces also foster relationships, create a sense of community, provide a source of relaxation, and “enrich public life.” Having only a
home and a work space limits the experience of life, but third places allow for a more complete experience. Libraries are an attractive third place to students because they provide a central gathering place on campus with both digital and text resources and access to technology. Many libraries have areas that are formally or informally designated as social, relaxed spaces, as well as areas set aside for quiet study. Third places can serve as “anchors of community life” on campus, in much the same way that a local coffee shop can anchor a neighborhood. Lisa Waxman, Stephanie Clemons, Jim Banning, and David McKelfresh asked students why they selected the third places they had. Students preferred spaces that allowed for “socialization, relaxation, eating and drinking, ‘getting away,’ and doing homework.” The characteristics they wanted from third places included “wood flooring, comfortable chairs, furniture that could be rearranged as needed, light levels appropriate to the tasks undertaken in the space, pleasant coffee and food smells, views to the outside, and ambient characteristics.” The students did not discuss the presence of staff or a manager, but this research addresses this presence as part of a welcoming third place.

A third place is “uniquely qualified to sustain a sense of well-being among its members.” In third places, the owners or managers come to know their customers and make them feel comfortable. Within the library as a whole, and especially in renovated learning spaces, the staffing becomes important to provide quality service to students. The staff can be compared to the employees in a third place, and the manager can be likened to the owner. One of the biggest determinants of the experience students have in college is the quality of relationships they form with others. One way to make students feel welcome in a learning commons is to hire student staff because “many students feel more comfortable seeking assistance from a peer.” In addition to having student workers, having staff or a manager consistently present can bring a sense of comfort and belonging to students, who perceive the area as a warm and welcoming environment with familiar faces.

Methodology

This study aims to investigate space from a systemic perspective how having a manager in an informal learning space alters the functioning of the space. The researchers chose a qualitative case study as the methodology to answer two questions: (1) What
Embedded Managers in Informal Learning Spaces

is the perspective of informal learning space managers who spend their workday and maintain an office within their areas? and (2) How do learning space managers maintain their presence within their assigned areas? Two goals of this research are to present a more systemic picture of informal learning spaces and staffing models and to gain the perspective of embedded learning space managers. It begins to explore how the presence of staff can influence what happens in informal learning spaces.

Case study is a rigorous methodological choice appropriate when there is a lack of research surrounding the phenomena under question.44 The researchers employed a multiple-case, holistic study method—that is, the research included more than a single case and aimed to draw conclusions about the whole system and the interdependence of its parts.45 According to Robert K. Yin, a case study design should be considered when: (1) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (2) the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (3) the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions because he or she believes they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (4) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.46 The researchers chose the methodology of a descriptive case study, a technique used to understand a phenomenon in the context in which it occurs.47 They employed thematic analysis as a means of analyzing the interviews with the learning space managers—that is, the researchers identified and recorded the common themes in the interviews and sorted them into categories.48

In a case study, researchers should collect multiple forms of data to compare the information, enhance the credibility of the study, and understand the phenomena from a variety of perspectives.49 The data collected for this study involved (1) job descriptions for these positions, (2) interviews with three informal learning space managers, and (3) field observations of the learning spaces. The sample size for this research was three participants, all of whom were managers with offices inside their learning space. During the course of one interview, it became clear that it was necessary to interview the administrator who created the position to understand the rationale for having a learning space manager permanently in the space.

A limitation of this specific case study is that there is little uniformity among the spaces. They have different designs, different capacities, and are in different buildings on campus, and the job descriptions for the managers are different. However, this is a common problem in conducting authentic research in real-world contexts, and the investigators attempted to give as much detail as possible to understand how these differences might impact the managers’ understandings of their role.

Sample and Data Analysis

In case study research, the selection of the sample should be driven by a purposive technique.50 In this case, the researchers selected as their sample managers who have their office within their learning space. The rationale behind this decision was that these embedded managers possess a unique understanding of their informal learning space and have a wealth of experience that allows them to describe their space and how they perceive their role in it. The unit of analysis in this study was the learning space managers bounded within their space. The units of observation were the data collected, job
description summaries, interviews, and observations. Any tasks or observations outside of the area were not included in the analysis of the data. Therefore, the other day-to-day responsibilities of the manager outside of the learning space were not included. The goal of the research is not to understand the phenomena of being a learning space manager but to understand the experience of learning space managers bounded in their assigned space.

The researchers used a cross-comparative data analysis technique to interpret the interviews. Job descriptions were analyzed to gain additional information regarding the possible behavior and experiences of learning space managers. In September 2014, the researchers conducted field observations, which involved sitting “in the field” for 30 to 45 minutes to observe the learning space manager and the interactions and activities in the space.

Results

This study takes place at Penn State University, a large research institution. The three informal learning spaces explored in this study are similar in that they are facilities for students, have many different areas within the space, and house the learning space manager’s office within the space that students use. However, there are also differences both within the spaces and between the roles and responsibilities of the managers, as revealed in their job titles. All the current learning space managers are men.

Learning Space 1

The first space is an informal “learning commons” within the library that opened January 2012. It has areas intended for collaboration, including group study rooms, flexible furniture, and large-desk computer stations that can accommodate several students working alongside one another. In addition, many services are offered to students within this space, such as information technology support, writing tutors, reference support, and multimedia support. (For a detailed explanation of these services, see Joseph Fennewald.52) During much of the academic year, the space is open 148 hours per week. Its capacity is 180. Figure 1 shows this space and where the manager sits within it.

The manager of this space is a librarian with responsibilities for oversight of the space. The head of Learning Space 1 oversees its staffing, both library and nonlibrary personnel; assesses user satisfaction; participates in outreach activities; and conducts research resulting in publications and presentations. His typical work hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. This manager has supervised this space since it opened in 2012 and was originally tasked with marketing it. However, the space proved so popular with students that marketing was not needed. It was a conscious decision to put the manager in the space, and the manager chose to have walls of transparent rather than frosted glass.

Observation of this space led to the following general description: the manager of this space is almost always present and is frequently interrupted throughout the day. He makes an effort to walk around the space and assist students as needed with technology. When he observes that students have encountered problems, he intervenes to help them
continue their work. The manager also tries to be proactive in preventing problems, for example, by putting students’ belongings in a safe place if he perceives that the owner will be away for an extended period. This both protects their belongings and opens the space for another student who would like to use it. He also responds to students’ requests, such as that they would like sanitizing wipes available.

**Learning Space 2**

The second space was designed to support collaboration and group learning. It opened in April 2012 within a College of Education building. The facility was designed according to the principles of a sociocultural theory on how people learn. Therefore, the space has few individual study areas. The space has seating for 60 to 70 people. It is typically open 70 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters. The photographs in Figure 2 depict the space the manager can see and the manager’s position within it.

![Figure 1. Learning Space 1](image1)

![Figure 2. Learning Space 2](image2)

Figure 1. Learning Space 1—The photograph on the left looks from the manager’s office out onto the learning space, and the photo on the right looks into the manager’s office from the space.

Figure 2. Learning Space 2—The photograph on the left is what the manager sees looking out from his office, and the photo on the right looks into the office from outside.
Since the learning space opened, the director has redefined the role of the manager. The manager’s position was initially designated as a research technologist. During this study, the title changed to postdoctoral scholar, in part to reflect the status of the person in this position. A description of the original position stated that “the research technologist oversees the daily operations of the Krause Innovation Studio including supervising wage employees.” This technologist is responsible for being in the studio from 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. Primary responsibility includes supervising the staff of the space. In addition, this person is expected to conduct research and to work with the director of the space to plan and publish their findings.

During the conversation with this manager, the interviewer repeatedly emphasized that the interviewee should speak from his role as manager of the space and less from his position as a postdoctoral researcher with other designated responsibilities. The manager of this space has an open office that he keeps relatively bare. If the manager was not there, users might mistake the office for another group room in the learning space. Learning Space 2 was designed to foster a sociocultural learning community, and having the manager’s office within the space was an intentional decision to support the activities that make it a sociocultural learning space. The manager’s shift from a managerial to a research role resulted from his career progression. It did not change his physical location in the space but did alter his mental focus while he was there. His role shifted from that of an active observer of student behavior and source of suggestions to that of a less active observer and planner of research. A new person emerged to fill the role of active manager of the space.

This learning space manager appears consistently busy and holds frequent meetings within the space. When not in meetings, he stays in his office to work but heavily interacts with the student staff in the space. At this point, the manager is trying to produce publications to advance his career. As a result, he is less concerned with how students utilize the space and more interested in how faculty use and feel about it.

**Learning Space 3**

The third learning space selected for this study has a mix of formal and informal areas. During the evening hours, tutoring services are available. Prior to 10:00 A.M., the space is restricted to mathematics classes. During much of the morning and afternoon, it is an open, informal learning space for students. This space has movable furniture and areas for group and individual study. During the fall and spring semesters, it typically opened 57 hours per week. The Learning Center renovated this space in 1995. It seats 80 to 100. Figure 3 shows the space and the manager’s office.

According to an administrator, 50 percent of the learning space manager’s responsibility is devoted to managing the space because he is classified as professional staff at Penn State and must have a clear list of job responsibilities. The other two managers in this study have different roles, those of a librarian and a postdoctoral scholar. The university decided to put a manager in this space to help students, to establish a certain culture for the space, and to supervise the student workers. The administrator worked hard to create a position whose primary responsibility would be management of all aspects of the facility, from supervising students to working with the university’s
Office of Physical Plant on service calls. The manager accomplishes many of his other responsibilities, including Web design and usability and data reports, during his time in his office. He holds office hours in the space from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 p.m., Monday to Friday. His official title is “student services associate.”

The following description of this manager’s responsibilities comes from the worksheet that was prepared to fund the position. The manager is expected to troubleshoot problems; to maintain a clean, warm, and inviting space for students to use; to provide assistance to faculty or students who want to use the space; and to have an understanding of the space sufficient to provide recommendations about its use. This manager is also expected to oversee the utilities of the space and to alert the physical plant about problems or repairs that need to be made. Requirements for this position include two years providing direct service to students and the ability to assist students with computers. The manager collects data on how the space is used but is not expected to publish or present research.

Field observations reveal that this manager spends time interacting with the student receptionist staff, ensuring that the facility is orderly, offering additional seating to students who fail to find a place on their own, and periodically walking through the space. The learning space manager is the only one of the three managers who does not have a glass-walled office exposing him to the space, primarily because the space was created years ago without the intention that the manager be visible from outside his office. Although he has a private, closed office, he routinely leaves his desk and walks around the space. This routine helps make him a visible member of the space even though his office is closed. This manager strives to make this a third place for students by allowing them to rearrange furniture and bring in food. He even supplies comforts such as blankets for students to use when they are relaxing or taking a break from studying, as advocated by Lisa Waxman and her coauthors.53
Summary of the Spaces and Managers

The three spaces meet the definition of informal learning spaces and so were appropriate for this study. They vary in size, hours, and services. Managers in each are responsible for oversight of the space and supervision of staff working in it. Two have offices that enhance their visibility to users, and the third spends much of his time walking around the space, away from his closed office. The three managers differ in the degree of assessment they are expected to do regarding how the space is used. The managers’ personalities and their job descriptions impact how they manage the space. The first manager interrupts students when they need help and considers serving them essential to his job. The second manager is more concerned with making sure faculty are content and less concerned with student satisfaction. He feels that the staff below him can handle student needs and satisfaction. The third manager is extremely concerned with student satisfaction, and students are the primary users of his space. He wants all users to feel welcome there and works hard to maintain it for them.

Interviews

Six themes emerged from the interviews with the learning space managers, supported with data from the observations and job description documents. One of the goals of interviewing the managers was to learn how they perceive their informal learning spaces. Another goal was to explore the importance of managers being present in the learning space they supervise. The themes that emerged are (1) patterns of space use; (2) managers’ perception of their place in the space; (3) challenges with managing the space; (4) relationships with stakeholders; (5) creating a welcoming environment or third space; and (6) rules and regulations.

Patterns of Space Use

All the learning space managers reflected on the patterns of use they see within their space. These insights provide an understanding of how students utilize the areas that could not be captured with gate counts or quick walk-throughs of the space. Manager 3 made observations about how a space might actually be less crowded than it seems due to the arrangement of students in the space. Manager 1 noted that, in his learning space, word of mouth was all the marketing needed to attract users. Manager 1’s space is consistently busy when it is open, and students circle, he said, “like hawks” to find an open computer. Manager 2 described the increased use of his learning space before midterm and final examinations.

Student behavior changes over time and is regulated both by the environment of the space and by its established norms. Articles by Tim Montgomery and by D. Christopher Brooks mention space-impacted behavior in the design of formal learning environments, and such behavior is also seen in this study of informal learning spaces. Students use
Table 1.
Observations from managers on patterns of space use

Manager 1  So there was a gradual occupancy of the space. But I would think that, if I remember it was about the fourth week, word pretty much spread that there is this new space in the library and that there was a lot of very cool features with it, and students started coming here on a pretty regular basis at that point.

Manager 2  Then grows exponentially as it gets closer to midterms and then toward finals it’s like people, I come in at 8 o’clock, and that is when I find out that they have been camped outside until I open the door.

Manager 3  If you were to be here in this space you would say, “Wow, this place is packed.” The reason why it’s deceiving is because if you have an environment that has four seats, maybe two are in use and two are not, so it’s really dependent on if another person that is walking about the space is coming to do work. If that group of two is talking, my guess is that that person is not going to sit down next to them.

spaces differently depending on the space. The users of some spaces form a community and promote a common culture with certain behavior expected. As Diana Oblinger describes, the space itself can drive change.55

Managers’ Perception of Their Place in the Learning Space

The managers have different perceptions of their role in the learning space. All the managers are concerned with the student experience. The job description of Manager 3 is that of a postdoctoral researcher, and he has transitioned recently from being the main presence in the learning space to spending more time in his office. The student staff now provides the main interaction with users. The focus on the student experience is important when looking at space from the perspective of providing a third place. Viewing the students as customers and ensuring that they have the best possible experience is similar to the service concept advocated by coffee-house owner Steve Spracklen.56

Relationships that students have with their teachers and, in turn, with managers of the academic spaces they use, have great impact on student success.57

Challenges with Managing the Space

Having an office in an informal learning space comes with its own set of challenges. For universities thinking of creating or redesigning learning spaces, it is important
to consider the challenges that face a manager who works within a student-centered learning space. Scott Bennett and other authors have suggested that it is important for educational institutions to consider the type of learning they want to happen in the space. For example, they might want to avoid a design that continues the transmission model of education, which views learning as the transfer of knowledge from librarians and technology experts to students. Formation of a collaborative learning community, in which students are responsible for one another’s learning as well as their own, may be limited by a traditional design of library staffing in learning spaces. For example, assigning staff to the space can confirm the notion that the staff are the experts and the students are novices. A different perspective on managers appears in the literature on third places: owners of such spaces have a close relationship with the users. Informal learning space managers can hold the same position. The challenges confronting a learning space manager primarily involve the distraction of working on other responsibilities and student misuse of the space.

**Relationships with Stakeholders**

Managers who coexist with their learning space have unique opportunities to build relationships with stakeholders and users of that space. This is not to say that managers who are physically separated from the space they oversee cannot build such relationships, but they need to make a greater effort to have the potential to build those relationships. The relationships students have with faculty and staff greatly affect their experiences in college. Informal learning spaces present an opportunity for students to interact with their peers and with academic staff members, and help foster a sense of belonging.

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**Table 2.**

Managers’ perceptions of their place in the learning space

| Manager 1 | I think it is very important for me to see and also to be seen. And even though students may not come into the room [his office], I get a sense sometimes that they are always aware that I’m here. |
| Manager 2 | This is a space for the students and whatever I can do that when they come here so they have a positive experience. |
| Manager 3 | The role that I still have and I will always have no matter what my position is here is giving tours, and that is the way that, especially, you interact with people the most. Do a really good job of hiring student staff because chances are you are probably going to be much less of a presence in the space than they are. |
Managers who work inside a learning space can engage in natural interactions with students and other staff, as well as understand from firsthand experience the culture of the space. The quotations from the managers describe the different stakeholders with whom they foster relationships. As a postdoctoral researcher in education, Manager 3 appears to focus on building relationships with College of Education faculty, while Manager 1 and Manager 2 concentrate heavily on the student experience.

Regardless of the primary user group with which they interact, all the managers are committed to positive relationships and support the users of their space. This dedication creates a warm environment where users can develop an attachment to the place.

### Welcoming Environment

All three managers view the learning space as belonging to the students and do whatever they can to support them. Having an embedded manager helps students orient to the space and fosters a sense of belonging. Efforts to assess how informal learning spaces, such as learning commons, impact student performance often ignore other variables that can affect student success. Gaining the managers’ perspectives on the third-space characteristics of their informal learning spaces can provide an alternative, valuable assessment of student use of the facilities. The welcoming actions that the managers institute help to make these areas third spaces.

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**Table 3.**

Managers’ observations on challenges with managing the learning space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager 1</td>
<td>I think the concern about noise is rather a more concern from the staff perspective because it seems to me that, I think that most kids are wearing some type of earplug.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager 2</td>
<td>We don’t stop them from having food and drink and stuff, and they will just leave their trash all over the place. That’s probably the single biggest thing [issue in the space].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager 3</td>
<td>Our walls are glass . . . but from a staff perspective, you see someone just walked in and he was the director of Ed Tech and he was about to knock on the door and open, and I said “no” basically because I was busy with you, and that [being interrupted] happens quite often.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*All three managers view the learning space as belonging to the students and do whatever they can to support them. Having an embedded manager helps students orient to the space and fosters a sense of belonging.*
Table 4.
Observations from managers on relationships with stakeholders

Manager 1  Instead of having the students come to see me, I will often go out and talk to them. And I am much more likely to be proactive or take that initial step rather than waiting for them to come to me.

I never go into a room and say you’re doing this wrong. I always go into a room and I say, “Hi, I’m the manager, I just want to let you know that I’m here to help if you are having any trouble.” And that will usually open the “Yeah, this isn’t working, and we can’t seem to figure out how this works.” And I’ll go from there.

Manager 2  When we get to stuff like the business people or the engineers are working on group projects that they will stay here [after he leaves], and I’ll just say make sure that you turn off the lights when you leave, and that only happened with one or two groups this semester, and they seem appreciative.

If they see me here regularly, they definitely know who I am, and I leave the door open all the time so people gravitate into the office. I’ve had everything from a person coming in and asking to borrow a pencil. There’ve been other people who want to know if there is a calculator they can use or do you have any paper.

Manager 3  The best way to interact with faculty is to be noncombative. To be very open and very friendly and to be very supportive.

The accommodation and adjustments the managers make for students and other users and their efforts to welcome everyone into the community and culture are important factors in having students and other users feel that they belong. Over time, a psychological attachment forms to the space, and feeling welcome makes this attachment stronger.

Setting Regulations for Behavior

All learning spaces have rules and regulations, regardless of how relaxed they are. However, users do not always follow the regulations. The learning space managers observed that students sometimes acted in a way that had a negative impact on the students around them. For example, Manager 3 saw that the original policy allowing food and drink in the space needed to be modified because furniture was being ruined. In Manager 2’s learning space, he initiated rules that he believed were needed to maintain an optimal space for students. He put signs on the tables saying, “You bring it in, you take it out.” He explained, “I put it [the sign] in a couple of places because it seems to happen when I am not here and it seems to work.” Manager 1 has regulations to prevent students from being bothered by other students’ behavior. The quotation in Table 4 describes how he approaches students to help regulate noise. While the managers have different strategies to administer the spaces, the goal of them all is to maintain an optimal environment for the majority of students who use the spaces.
Table 5.
Managers’ observations on creating a welcoming environment

Manager 1
We will tell a student that there are computers in other areas that are available, and I’ve been told that they would say they preferred to work in the Knowledge Commons space.

I call them my “hawks” because they seem to circle the area to see if some space is available. I get to see the students who are very persistent to be in the space.

Manager 2
Especially people that have big papers due or big group projects and stuff, they may move furniture around, and I actually brought in an afghan that is family handed down and I brought it in, and I’ve seen people actually put it on themselves and fall asleep back there.

I think they see it as their space. This is a space for the students and whatever I can do that when they come here so they have a positive experience.

Manager 3
[Speaking about someone asking to use the learning space] “Can I use this space?” And our first response is yes, come on in, and the expectation that anyone can use the space is awesome because it promotes this community that any time of day, anything you are doing, people walk in and it’s a completely different feel. There is no expectation that you are not part of the community. The expectation is that everyone is part of the community.

Table 6.
Managers’ observations on rules and regulations

Manager 1
“Do you realize your voice is carrying across the air?” Last week, I had a young woman who was sitting next to somebody, and she was so loud that everybody around her kept turning around, looking at her. At that point, I decided, well, I should go over and say something to her. I just said to her, “He is right next to you, you probably don’t have to be so loud.” And I don’t know how that sounded, but she did seem to be fine with it.

Manager 2
First rule—You bring it in, you take it out.

Second rule—Don’t open the windows as they are old and low to the ground and let squirrels in.

Manager 3
We started to see coffee stains on the chairs . . . our chairs are baby-blue tones, and it’s not the type of furniture you can easily clean.
When the managers restrict what students can do, they act only in ways that they intend to benefit all students in the space. If the spaces were unstaffed or had no leader to set appropriate behaviors, other students might not feel comfortable correcting their classmates’ misbehavior. Even though these spaces have an embedded manager, the students have no more restrictions on what they can do than they would have if the manager were not present. For example, Manager 1 echoes the mission of the space as student-centered when he says, “One of the things I felt very strongly about is that, we don’t tell students how to use the space, but rather we observe how students are using the space.”

Discussion

Qualitative data can provide rich accounts of phenomena. The analysis of the job responsibility documents, field observations, and interviews of managers provided nuanced knowledge of informal learning spaces and the managers’ place in them. Collecting multiple forms of data is always recommended in case study research. In this case, the observations and document analysis helped to interpret the interview responses. For example, Manager 3 is now a postdoctoral researcher and has shifted from serving as the primary contact for student users of the space to managing the space for faculty members using it. It was clear from his interview that his responsibilities had changed. Many universities have begun to give priority to the remodeling of informal learning spaces. As part of this process, they need to decide how to staff them.

Multiple issues affect how learning space managers perform their role. This, in turn, affects the users’ experience in their space. Regardless of the managerial approach, managers perceive themselves as on the periphery but ready to intervene if necessary.

Situated Spatial Interactions

One of the most interesting concepts to come out of this research is how the space impacts the interactions within it. This idea stems from the manager interviews and a realization that, although experts talk about space as driving change and impacting behavior, the social interactions within that space have little theory to explain those interactions. Students enjoy studying with other students nearby but do not necessarily want to collaborate with them. However, the literature fails to provide a term for the phenomena of social spaces. Therefore, we propose the concept and term “situated spatial interactions” to describe the social dynamics and interactions that take place within such spaces. This term takes into account how the presence of a learning space manager within the space impacts the social interactions there. Student interactions with the manager can positively or negatively impact their experiences in that space and can benefit their learning outcomes. These situated spatial interactions can lead to relationships with regular users of the space and foster a sense of belonging.

Students enjoy studying with other students nearby but do not necessarily want to collaborate with them.
Recommendations for staffing and how employees should interact with users of learning spaces come from Shay Keating and Roger Gabb. Staff, including the manager, should be student-oriented and student-centered, interdisciplinary, responsive to students’ needs, and collaborative. They should instill a strong sense of community and connote a welcoming and open environment for users. Robert A. Seal states in relation to planning for learning commons that “old service patterns no longer apply and librarians must be creative and flexible in finding an appropriate mix of services and staff support that meet local needs.”

The necessity to consider local needs when planning learning spaces cannot be overstated.

Previous research has investigated how users perceive the staff within the learning commons. That research revolved around the kinds of staff present in the library, perceptions of the academic librarians, attitudes of the staff, and if students regarded staff in the “commons" library differently from staff in other, more traditional libraries. This research showed that students perceive their interaction with library staff positively but do not differentiate who holds what role.

These “situated spatial interactions” uniquely impact the experience of both learning space managers and users of those spaces. Students would have a fundamentally different experience if learning space managers were not there. For example, if Manager 1 did not intervene when a student needed assistance with a group study room or if Manager 2 did not provide a microwave and blanket for students to use, students would experience those spaces differently. A learning space without a manager in it has the potential to make the space more like a traditional computer lab than a collaborative learning environment. The learning space manager is available to unobtrusively observe student behavior and assist learners when they need help. This improves the learning experience for students and brings help to them in what educators call their

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**Figure 4.** Diagram representing the notion of situated spatial interactions, the social dynamics and interactions that take place within spaces.

[Diagram showing interactions between student behaviors, manager actions, space design, and relationships, with specific examples of interactions such as “Design, space, privacy, commonness, architecture, placement of staff, extra chairs.”]
zone of proximal development—the “sweet spot” where assistance is most beneficial for each student, just beyond what he or she can do without help. Manager 1 observed that students did not use an area as it was originally intended but instead modified it to better meet their needs. Rather than enforce the designers’ original intent, the manager permitted, and even encouraged, students to alter their space. Future informal learning space renovations can take information like this and possibly use it to design better, more flexible spaces for students.

Conclusion

There are three questions to ask when staffing an informal learning space with a manager. The first is what is the required skill level of that manager. Our study participants had three levels of degrees: one undergraduate, one master’s, and one doctoral degree. The person or persons tasked with creating the position of learning space manager will need to decide what academic qualifications are required. The second is what is the goal of the space you are designing. This goal will often dictate what academic level the learning space manager needs. The third is where, in relation to the space, will the manager have an office. Through this paper, we have shown the value and constraints of working within the learning space. The choice of whether to place the manager inside or outside the learning space will significantly impact the culture of the space.

The results and discussion from this study need to be considered with the study limitations in mind. The sample size was small, so the results do not meet traditional notions of generalizability. However, it might be possible to make modest generalizations that can take local needs and apply them to similar cases. In this case, a sample size of three (with an additional interview obtained with the manager’s superior to provide the rationale for the position) provided an in-depth but not necessarily exhaustive description of being an embedded learning space manager.

Another limitation of the study was that all the learning spaces were designed and staffed differently. While the authors made efforts to triangulate the data and to describe the spaces for readers, the small sample size can impact the full understanding of the study. Gaining the insight of the managers provided an emic or internal perspective that gives an insider account of the culture of informal learning spaces. Suggestions for further research are to expand the sampling pool to see if other universities have chosen to embed managers in informal learning spaces. A national survey could investigate specific ways of staffing informal learning spaces. Another suggestion is to include learning space managers who do not work within the space to see how they perceive their role and any unique challenges or issues they face.

The final suggestion for future researchers is to devise a way that embedded managers can track student achievement in their space. The learning space manager is but one component of the recent movement in higher education to provide learning spaces, but the “situated spatial interactions” that students have in these spaces can be positively impacted by the warm and friendly face of an embedded, in-situ manager.
Embedded Managers in Informal Learning Spaces

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Notes


22. Ibid., 19.


27. Spencer, “Evolving a New Model.”


32. Ibid., 125.

33. Oldenburg and Brissett, “The Third Place.”


36. Ibid., 427.

37. Ibid., 428.


40. Keating and Gabb, *Putting Learning into the Learning Commons*.

41. Waxman, Clemons, Banning, and McKelfresh, “The Library as Place.”

42. Keating and Gabb, *Putting Learning into the Learning Commons*.

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49. Baxter and Jack, “Qualitative Case Study Methodology.”
55. Waxman, Clemons, Banning, and McKelfresh, “The Library as Place.”
56. Montgomery, “Space Matters”;
59. Ibid.
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