Public Abstract

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The wide adoption of mobile technologies in education has made it possible to turn every common space in a higher education campus into a learning place. Libraries, student commons, lounges, or even corridors are all now potential places to learn. Having so many places to choose from, current college students - many of whom belong to the Net Generation - have the luxury of selecting the ones that best match their learning styles and needs.

This research study focuses on the relationship between current college students and informal learning spaces, specifically the college students' choice of informal learning spaces. Adopting Lewin's (1951) formula of human-environment relationship in which behavior is the result of the interaction between person and environment, this study further examines the relationship between current college students and informal learning spaces in higher education campuses. Specifically, the study investigates factors that contributed to students' choice of campus informal learning spaces.

Data were collected through observations at ten informal learning sites (two libraries, two student centers, two residence halls, and four academic halls) in a Midwestern university and 54 interviews with students, professors, campus facility planners, designers, and administrators.

Using grounded theory, a model to illustrate the ways current college students chose informal learning spaces was developed from the data. The findings showed that current college students adopted a unique relationship with the physical environment as they chose informal learning spaces on campus to study. There were many factors affecting their choice of informal learning places including their preference to balance academic success and social success, the nature of the learning tasks, the environmental factors (setting, noise, crowding, lighting, furniture, amenities, and location), and the facility management factors (accessibility and control). They preferred private zones inside these social facilities such as study booths, study rooms, study nooks, or even corridors rather than places with extreme privacy or sociability. Adjustments of place selection were found to base on the situations, their needs, and the students' ability to adjust to the distractions within the informal learning spaces.

The study contributes to the literature about the Net Generation and their choice of informal learning spaces. The findings helped teachers, administrators, parents, and designers to understand more about current college students and their learning spaces. Campus facility planners, educational designers, and campus administrators in particular can now refer to the factors influencing students' choice of informal learning spaces identified in this study to design compatible informal learning spaces for current college students.