

The Power of Place in Learning

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Abstract: The commonly-used expression “going to college” affirms that higher education is still rooted in place. Our institutions have three cultures in which learners physically immerse themselves: collegiate culture (a generational culture); academic culture (an intellectual culture); and campus culture (an institutional culture). Other agents—the armed forces and the work place, for instance—also acculturate young adults, but colleges and universities alone nurture academic culture. For this reason, the design of campus places as learning spaces becomes a critical issue. We must be endlessly inventive in creating and celebrating the cultures of place in academic life.

A recent conference sponsored by the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative focused on the design of classrooms as learning spaces. But speaker after speaker emphasized how relatively little of college learning happens in the classroom. Speakers described the way wireless telecommunications and portable computing devices can now make any space a learning space. One speaker suggested that in the future we are unlikely to build classrooms, saying with wonderful irony that students may soon take college classes at home and come to campus to study.

Such a statement reminds us that while persons enrolled at the University of Chicago and the University of Phoenix can, with equal truth, say they are college students, only the student at the University of Chicago is likely to say she is “going to college.” Even as information technology promises to disembody our archetypal learning space, the classroom, the language of place continues to figure powerfully in how we talk about learning. Why is this so?

Imagine the difficulty of raising a child online. Every human first learns to learn by immersion, swallowed up within a place within a body where every sense has an embodied say. Such all-at-once integrative learning empowers an ordinary child to learn a language, an act of genius. Only later, when learning fragments into one-at-a-time lessons, does school make so many dull. Yet our larger capacities do not die. Going to college revisits immersion learning. For better or worse, living and learning within an academic place reframes a person's life in ways online courses never can.

As places, colleges and universities have lives of their own. In spite of ongoing faculty mobility, massive student turnover and constantly changing courses, an institution keeps its character by acculturating newcomers to its established ways. So while course content starts to fade as soon as students finish the final, college itself leaves life-long impressions. Going to

college draws students into enduring sets of values and practices—cultures if you will—that reorient lives. What are these cultures?

Collegiate Culture: Scholars describe a “campus life” culture of fraternities and football that arose in the late nineteenth century and flourished until the radicalism of the 1960s. Supposedly by the 1980s, the spread of youth culture and the democratization of college erased anything clearly collegiate. Yet going to college is still a distinctive experience in the American life cycle. It is a privileged place and time, a passing moment beyond parents but before career and new life commitments. Freeing students from their past as well as the future only intensifies collegiate culture's authority.

Each school has a particular collegiate culture that freshmen struggle to learn, the better to know where they fit and how college really works. Suddenly immersed in collegiate life, many freshmen settle into a semester or two of fitting in. Only then do they reverse fields, finding ways to make school fit them. This acculturating experience—first learning the system and then using it—perpetuates collegiate culture.

Academic Culture: A freshman encounters academic culture on the first day of class. A few students readily identify with this faculty-centered culture, and a very few go on to the advanced graduate study that is the rite of passage into academic culture. Although graduate students pursue disparate disciplines, they also learn the international conventions of academic life that typically center on libraries, laboratories, or both. That life is self-consciously skeptical and progressive and yet practically trusting and traditional. Always building on the work of others, scholarly life relies heavily on guild-like customs, resists external regulation fiercely, and accumulates knowledge wantonly, a gift that must be given.

Most students come to the academy as visitors, tourists expecting to find some other home. Ideally what they acquire even as visitors is respect and some enthusiasm for critical inquiry, informed discourse, and intellectual integrity. These values, espoused in liberal education, perpetuate academic culture.

Campus Culture: Where collegiate culture is generational and academic culture is intellectual, campus culture is institutional. Every campus delights in its notable quirks—local vocabularies, odd customs, mascots—but the crux of campus culture lies in the often unstated ways students, faculty, and administrators interact with each other and value the school's mission and heritage. Acculturation at Sewanee, for instance, involves the liberal arts and its Southern and Episcopal heritages. Campus culture centers on the idea that Sewanee is a unique place apart

from the mainstream, a thought that pleases many and annoys a few. Sewanee may embrace tradition the way other schools value sports or religion or modernity, but every viable campus has its culture.

Actual Places and Virtual Dreams: Just as an eighteen-year old can say, “I am going to college,” so she can also say, “I’m going into the Army” or “I’m going to work.” College is by no means the only place for acculturation, but it is the only such place that honors academic culture. The Army has the largest instructional program of any institution in America, but the culture of that program is different from college culture.

Recognizing that other agents acculturate young adults, and recognizing that colleges alone nurture academic culture, the design of campus places as learning spaces becomes a critical issue. We must be endlessly inventive in creating and celebrating the cultures of place in academic life. This imperative is often less than obvious because contemporary thought works within the Enlightenment’s Cartesian dualism. When mind is separate from body, the sheer physicality of a college campus appears to have no vital connection to knowledge. That is a mistake. Knowledge, we know, is a social construct embedded in bodily practices, and learning is a collaborative enterprise that engages every sense. We are social beings, first created out of intimate interaction with others and their traditions. We learn—or learn to learn—so that we can join the teeming society that surrounds us. Virtual environments can usefully mimic some of the social dimensions of learning, but the actual physicality of campus life still has no satisfactory substitutes.

The power of place in education is happily evident in the place-bound celebration of both the academic and institutional cultures of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The university has installed nearly five-dozen historical plaques on its campus, commemorating the very places where notable academic advances originated at UIUC. For instance, outside the Mechanical Engineering Laboratory (once the Power House for the engineering campus) is a plaque marking the collaborative research space of Don Bitzer and Chalmers Sherwin, who pioneered computer-based education in the early 1960s. The plaque describes the work of Bitzer and Sherwin in creating PLATO, “the first computer-based education system, the first time-shared education system, and the home of the first on-line community. By the early 1970s, PLATO included early forms of electronic mail, newsgroups, and computer games and provided hardware and software innovations for the computer industry. By the late 1980s, PLATO offered instruction on approximately 100 subjects to students around the world.”

No one facing this 75 pounds of bronze will image that the virtual university that Bitzer and Sherwin did so much to launch can be an adequate substitute for a real university—for the place- and time-bound construct of limestone, bricks, and mortar whose cultures first enabled learning in virtual space and now continue to be one of the home spaces for such learning. It is no bad thing that a university that takes as its motto the Cartesian statement, “Always Thinking,” might with equal justice describe itself as “Always Building.”



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