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Accommodations: staff identity and university space

Abstract

Space has been of growing significance in social theory in recent years, yet explorations of it in the scholarship of higher education have been limited. This is surprising, given the critical role space has in shaping staff and students' engagement with the university. Taking a practice based approach and focussing on academic identities, this article analyses the spatial experience of an institution by defamiliarising spaces encountered in everyday work. We identify formative pressures upon institutional space, and how space then shapes experience: university spaces are designed for one purpose but come to be used for many, so that working within them can be a diverse and contradictory experience. The identification of academics with spaces is complex, and there are no simple experiences of belonging; rather, there is a constant project of identity-formation and change within mutable spaces.

[Keywords: space, academic identity, practice theory, field, habitus]

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Introduction

In the last few years the University of [name deleted], like many British Universities, has undertaken a major rebuilding programme. A landmark in 2007 was the opening of the [Library Building], an award-winning “integrated learning environment” (Lewis 2010). The building not only directly changed students’ experience of learning in space; other spaces were now re-evaluated in comparison to it. During this time in which space was defamiliarised, the authors were participating in the MEd in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at [name deleted], and many discussions came back to the role of space; for example, the simple spatial organization of the room seemed to affect the discussion in class. The authors of this paper decided to make a more systematic investigation of each other’s learning spaces, through visits, photography and interviews; and also to explore the existing scholarship on the relationship between learning and physical space. This paper is an outcome of the process.

In querying and defamiliarising the fabric of the environment around us we trace links to wider institutional processes and structures, with a view to expanding our understanding of academic identity. The question that emerged as the focus of our investigations was: What is the relationship between the experience of space and identification with the institution?

The paper proceeds by first exploring some previous research on the University campus as such. It then examines the surprisingly sparse literature relating academic identities and space. The “practice based approach” (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow 2003, Gherardi 2009, Schatzki 2001, 2005) taken in the paper is outlined. The methodology of the study is then explained. The findings section is presented as a description of an imaginary visit, to allow the reader to share the journey of defamiliarisation. Finally, a discussion draws out some of

the main conclusions from the descriptive findings; exploring identification as an outcome of tension between hierarchy and decentralisation; between administrative efficiency and personal nature of learning; between our desire for “community” and our desire for freedom and change. The heightening of critical self awareness is one path to changing our sense of alienation (Mann 2001, 17) from institutions, and we hope the paper contributes to this for the reader also.

Literature

Although metaphors of space are very powerful in educational discourse, as in the term “student-centred” (Sagan 2008, 176), until recently the nature of the relationship between space and learning has not been greatly studied or theorised. Echoing a call for a spatial turn in the social sciences generally, a number of authors have called for space to be more fully examined in the study of education (e.g. McGregor 2003; Edwards and Usher 2003). Gulson and Symes (2007) reflect on the nature and risks of the movement of ideas between disciplines in the context of the nature of Education as a discipline. But, without there being a well defined field examining spatial questions in education, they conclude by pointing to clusters of literature exploring spatiality about school architecture, policy on equality, curriculum, literacy and critical pedagogy.

The turn to space has not yet been felt in writing on university space as such. Indeed, Temple (2007, 11) notes the paucity of studies of university learning spaces. This may reflect a powerful discourse about the virtualisation of the university. Commentators on the contemporary university frequently call attention to the apparently diminishing significance of geographical space. As universities become more internationally-focused, and academic capital less respectful of national borders or tied to the national state (Readings 1997), they

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become harder to pin down as geographically solid institutions. The lack of writing may also reflect the taken-for-granted character of the space around us.

Yet these trends coexist with a wave of rebuilding on university campuses. A useful starting point for thinking about how typical university spaces are experienced is Jessop and Smith's (2007, 2008, Jessop, Gubby & Smith 2011) recent study of the University of Winchester. The authors articulate three key themes in university space, ones that would probably be recognised by most university staff and students.

1. A symbolic hierarchy in the campus layout;
2. A tension between attempts to project an impressive image through iconic buildings and the ill-maintained character of many actual learning spaces; and
3. Class room layouts affirming a teacher-centric, transmissive micro design.

The analysis is reminiscent of Costello's work, where he reveals how the campus spatial hierarchy creates conditions for distinction along social lines. The opulent buildings of a law school with donation plaques, art works, and lecture theatre layouts socialise students to "adopt role expectations of power and authority, wealth, comfort and an appreciation of upper class culture." (Costello 2000, 58) This may engage the "traditional" applicant; but creates conditions for alienation for others. "Non-traditional" applicants may find they feel more "like a 'fish in water'" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) in the faded grandeur of the school of welfare, say, with its more personal decoration, student work displays, and seminar rooms laid out so students face each other in circles, all of which send alternative messages of "limited resources and class aspirations, and about the values of empathy, modesty, tolerance, public service and communal responsibility" (Costello, 58-59) As

Bourdieu suggests: "agents have points of view on this objective space which depend on their position within it and in which their will to transform or conserve it is often expressed." (Bourdieu, 1984,) Arguably, in the majority of cases, those actors who wish to conserve it will be successfully socialised whereas potential transformers will be excluded.

The use of iconic buildings in prospectuses and on web-pages may be regarded as another method of creating distinction and reinforcing messages about what is normal within the staff/student body. These buildings are usually at the "heart" of campus and contrast with the teaching spaces which are frequently marginal, temporary and in various states of maintenance, as Jessop and Smith remark.

Such reflections invite a Bourdieuan analysis, with a focus on the "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) represented by the power-laden symbolic hierarchy apparent within the design and ordering of university space. An individual's *habitus*, their more long lasting and unconscious dispositions and understandings based on early experience, may not fit the environment into which they are placed, making them feel out of place. Thus a prospective student's testimony about visiting a higher education institution quoted in a study by Ball et al (2002): "It was a complete shock, it was different from anywhere else I have ever been, it was too traditional, too old fashioned, from another time altogether." This student decided to go elsewhere. This experience may also be a strong clue to the character of academic identity since as Mann (2001) argues factors shaping engagement may influence the alienation of "academics as well as students". Alienation is not, however, pre-determined by class. Evidence points to some students "combining strong connections and loyalties to family and home friends with what are seen to be classically middle-class academic dispositions". (Reay et al 2009)

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This certainly offers a persuasive analysis, but we also looked to more recent practice theory for further analytic resources relating to the relation of space and academic identity. Thus for Schatzki (2005) a university could be seen less as a unitary, symbolically structured field, as in Bourdieu, but as a site, a complex nexus of practices. Looking at the multiplicity of loosely coupled practices on campus may tell us something about the nature of identification for academics. Thus the individual academic is likely to have a strong affiliation to the practices of least one academic sub-discipline but it is unlikely to be a simple identification, e.g. depending on where they are placed along a trajectory of involvement from newcomer to old-timer, and complicated increasingly by non-standard entries to academe and part time roles. Further, managerialist and marketising trends within universities have tended to undermine the anchoring power of disciplinary practices to define academic identity by adding pressure to participate in a number of administrative practices and increased regulation of teaching and research. For the individual, the multi-membership (Wenger 1998) of different practices creates conflicts of values, for each practice has its own "taste" (Gherardi 2009), offers its own identities. Indeed disidentification (Hodges 1998) may be the outcome of our attempt to carry through some practices, because they feel wrong, our struggles to renegotiate or even make them habitable (Wenger 1998) fail because they embody values hostile to our embodied experience or *habitus* (Hodges 1998). Adopting the vocabulary of practice allows us to articulate such an experience of "uncertainty, conflict, incoherence" (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow 2003, 23).

Such a vocabulary can inform a view of space in particular. The practices we pursue shape our use of space and the meaning we give it, but, equally, spaces shape our practices.

Spatial arrangements are often the unremarked backdrop to action, but a shaping force. Thus Jan Nesor examines the construction of personal and academic subjectivities through the spatial and cultural practices of particular disciplines and departments (Nesor 1994). This work is particularly helpful in identifying the fragmentation of academic workspaces, and how construction of identity within them is a process of constant negotiation between pressures of alienation and engagement.

Our contention in this paper is that reflecting through practice theory on the experience of the physical space of the university can help make visible the complex nexus of multi-practice that makes up a university and so better understand the contradictory and provisional nature of identification and belonging for the contemporary academic. Our approach is to explore the authors' own sense of identity in university space, through a process of defamiliarizing the everyday places in which we work.

Methodology

The methodology employed in our study reflected the collaborative, reflective ethos of the MEd programme that had brought us three researchers together. By investigating one another's spaces of academic work, as well as the journeys and (dis)continuities between them, the defamiliarisation of space prompted by the opening of the [Library Building] was continued in our methodology. The intention was to explore the multiple ways in which spaces, bound together under the common heading of "the university", could be used, interpreted, and experienced to engage or alienate users from the institution. The authors, Arthur, Tony and Phil, are all lecturers who have been appointed in the last five years, working in Information Studies, Education, and Ophthalmics and Orthoptics respectively.

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Their backgrounds are mixed in terms of whether they are the first in their family to go to university.

The first step in our research was to photograph one another's spaces of work, encompassing teaching spaces, offices, other work locations, and routes of journeys between them. The two aspects of defamiliarisation here – photography as a medium, and investigating unfamiliar spaces – were followed through in the next step of interviewing one another about our uses of spaces. Each of us interviewed one other member of the group, and was re-interviewed by the other, using the photographs as prompts for discussion and commentary. These interviews were then analysed by each of us separately, drawing out themes that cut across different situations; and these themes were shared, refined, and prioritised for further investigation in a series of group meetings. Throughout the process we kept a collective blog, sharing significant images and commentary, and reflecting on the research activity. The writing of this article has been similarly collaborative and communal, and is only one stage in an ongoing process of critical reflection.

The role of photography reflects an increasing use of visual methods in studies of space. An interest in the multiplicity of everyday experiences of educational space has already led a number of researchers to adopt participative visual methods of research (e.g. McGregor 2003, 2004; Loxley 2009). Often participants are invited to make photographic images to try and articulate how they view different spaces (photovoice) with follow up interviews using the photos as stimuli to further exploring these meanings (photo elicitation).

The form of this article – a series of vignettes about different spaces – is intended to reflect more evocatively our experiences and ideas than traditional academic writing, and represent some of the complexity of the research question. It draws on autoethnographic

methodologies and conventions to construct a resonant personal narrative, but as what Anderson (2006) calls “analytic autoethnography” it has a sustained commitment to analysis of broad social phenomena. Such methodologies offer privileged access to insider meaning and are recognised to be particularly powerful in pursuing “the connections between biography and social structure” (Anderson 2006, 390). There is a good fit between such ethnographic methods and our theoretical concern with concrete social practices. As the culmination of a research process, the form has helped provide critical distance from the immediacy of our everyday working lives, and enabled reflection on the latent and realised possibilities of our habitual spaces. It is hoped that the article will provide a space for readers to begin a similar defamiliarisation of their working environment(s), and therefore enhance the potential for broadening individual and collective uses of institutional space. For this reason we include some of our photographs, but in an appendix, allowing the reader the choice whether to view them or not.

A visit

To share with the reader our journey of defamiliarisation, we invite you to participate in imagining a visit to our places of work. None of the buildings the authors work in or use, and that are described here, are part of the prestigious, landmark buildings. Arthur’s department is located on a couple of floors of one side of a modern but rather non-descript building from the early 1990s. Tony’s office is close by, contained within a large rambling, difficult to understand building, that here faces out onto a busy shopping street. Phil’s office is on the 8th floor of the [name deleted] Hospital, some several hundred yards up a steep hill further west of [central university buildings]. These buildings constitute some of the fuzzy edges of the campus, and the academic identities we construct are negotiated not

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only through sustained engagement with these spaces while engaged in a number of different practices but also through our alienation from the more “picture postcard” spaces of the heart of the campus.

Accessing Arthur’s office begins with a short journey from central campus to a modern red-brick office block with a subtle sign confirming that his department is here. Once through the gateway, however, you enter a quadrangle with nice lawns and plants circumscribing the space. It is very quiet. You enter and go up two floors; then you are in a corridor, looking the same, whether you turn right or left. Head to the right and there is a succession of doors, an occasional poster, and the majority of doors are shut. You may wonder whether everyone is busy or absent! Further along you go, daring to be challenged about your presence in this space until, typically, the last door is Arthur’s. You knock.

When he first moved into his office Arthur self consciously took over the space by bluetacking a large number of postcards and photos onto the wall. They are postcards of places he has been or others have sent to him, pictures from art galleries, some photos he had taken, many are quite random choices of images that caught his eye. Tian and Belk (2005, 299) identify this sort of personalisation as a possession ritual, marking the occupation of space. Assembling this collage could be seen as a way to cope with the impersonality and built-in transience of the modern office space, though in a way which is itself rather temporary; it would take five minutes to take the cards down.

Looking out from Arthur’s window you see the courtyard below. This quadrangle may seem to you to refer to a rather traditional notion of academic space, implying certain forms of academic practice. Yet such traditional academic practices are fundamentally distinct from the conventional history of the redbrick University of [name deleted], complete with civic

dedication and incorporation of buildings used as working men's colleges. In summoning up the imagery of restive quads in Oxford and Cambridge, this space makes a bid for a similar level of prestige, and jars with other narratives of the university's development.

All the more striking, then, if we tell you that this space was initially built for spin-off companies developing University of [name deleted]-patented products. At the point at which the University was most visibly attempting to connect with commercial enterprises, its architecture is programmed to engage users with a traditional idea of academic life. And in handing over the building to academic departments, the University has possibly misjudged the practices such spaces are designed to foster. Oxbridge colleges are intended to be unified communities of scholars, sharing a common identity. This space is occupied by diverse academic departments, nominally allied under a corporate University banner, but in practice heterogeneous communities with different social practices and epistemologies. In one way, each department has more common practices with cognate disciplinary departments on the other side of the world, than they do with the different academic grouping just down the corridor.

There is little reason to cross the courtyard, or to visit another academic tribe (Becher and Trowler, 2001); the key movement is done within the building, along the corridors, and only occasionally up and down the stairs. The empty space in the middle is left for those who are not at home within the building, and who are already marginal to local practices – visitors, prospective students, lunching staff in summer.

Your visit can continue by visiting Tony. Tony works 250 yards from Arthur on a street with many shops. This does not look promising, and you may begin to fear that you are lost. A check of the instructions confirms you are going in the right direction. Sure enough, Tony's

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office is in a building nestled amongst the shops and bars, appearing as an incongruous interloper. What is it doing here? You head into a quiet reception area; the contrast to the busy world outside is great, and the receptionist points to an open door.

Tony will explain that his door isn't always open but as he was expecting you he wasn't trying to work. The door being shut was a sign for the students to leave him alone unless it was particularly important. If the door was shut and the curtains drawn then this meant Do Not Disturb. Of course, he is still interrupted.

Unlike the voided centre of Arthur's courtyard, Tony's building has no centre at all, no centripetal point pulling the disparate practices carried on here together. From one entrance it is like an academic department with a series of labs; from another it is like an information centre in a shopping mall. Visitors rarely grasp that it is one building. In this respect, it is potentially emblematic of the fragmentation and incoherence of the university as a field of practices.

Looking round Tony's room, you may notice a scattering of small, cheap toys, mementoes of his own travels and trinkets brought back from holiday by his friends. He has deliberately brought these in from home in recognition of spending more time at work than at home, so reflecting a blurring of public and private domains (also present in Arthur's collage). But it is not simply that private practices are played out in a public space, rather that reference points in the personal have a use in a public space. These objects have a role in reassuring visitors to the office; they are fluffy and friendly, funny, childish. They are partly used as Tian and Belk (2005) describe to shift mood in interaction, for example, from a student's anxious self-analysis to comedy and relief. The character of these toys seems rather to reflect Tony's personality, yet also seem particularly appropriate to the feel of the practices of adult

education, where there is more explicit acknowledgement of the emotional labour of learning and the pastoral role of the teacher. In a classic academic department emotion tends to be construed as creating a problem which can be sent off to counselling services. Here the emotive is evoked directly.

When you visit Phil's office there is a further contrast. Phil has an office on the eighth floor of a teaching hospital close to the centre of the campus but about 20 minutes walk from Arthur and Tony's buildings. To reach Phil's office, you *can* take the stairs, mostly used by staff; but you will probably use the Main Lift which you share with the patients, staff and other visitors. When you arrive at the correct floor, you need to gain entry to Phil's corridor through a swipe card access. First year undergraduates do not have cards, and there is a list of phone numbers to request access. Phil's office is shared so it always best to let him know in advance that you are visiting. It may be that all of his three colleagues are absent and you will be able to have a confidential space; but if not, then you can arrange to meet in another room on the same floor, or on the lower ground floor of the hospital.

Yet if Phil's personal office space is very constrained, he does have a strong sense of ownership over one specialist learning space. Returning to the ground floor, Phil would show you his specialist optics room, behind an inconspicuous door, close to the main hospital entrance. It is a small, windowless room, full of specialist tools of the professional practice, familiar from an opticians; and it has been laid out to particular dimensions with mirrors and equipment at a certain distance for sight testing. Phil has fought to get this room dedicated to his students, and only he teaches here, making it in a sense more his room than his office. Here the mysteries of the practice of optics, profession-as-science, are taught in small groups. In the semi-darkness students peer closely into each other's eyes.

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For Phil this is a special place where people are transformed; the barriers between the lecturer and students fall, and the small teaching numbers and low light encourage rapport and connection.

On the wall is a poster of one of Newton's classic experiments splitting light with a prism, given by students to Phil for the room – perhaps both affirming their passion for the topic and expressing a wish to be remembered in that place. Yet a recent incident with lamps being pulled from the wall indicates an undercurrent of resistance or complaint. Phil felt that vandalism very personally. You may identify with this pride and anxiety about students' response to our teaching, and the sense that the greater the rapport with students the more sensitive we are to the ups and downs of their experience, arguably suppressed in more impersonal teaching arrangements.

You can then walk down the hill about 500 yards to where Phil lectures on theory. The rooms are bright and clean, but there is a certain absence of character to the rooms – rather typical of the spaces we all teach in. There are often remnants of previous practices that have been carried on in the space, which have been largely but not completely erased, or pushed to a corner so that one quickly comes not to notice them. These seem like spaces that could be used very flexibly, and by virtue of this lack a clear character - the spaces are so flexible that they are not even marked strongly as teaching space (in the way a lecture theatre is). To add to this sense of impersonality, the buildings you are now in are portacabins. Yet, Phil talks powerfully about appropriating this space. Much of his theory teaching is based on deriving equations and drawing optics diagrams by hand. There is no use of PowerPoint, and he keeps the lights up, allowing for an authentic, physical event that enacts discovering theory anew, not presenting given formulae to learn by rote. This

enactment is unapologetically challenging. He talks about “booming out” and people have told him that sometimes his talks could be heard in other rooms. Such bursting of boundaries expresses an evangelical zeal for his subject, making it overflow the teaching space. As a teaching practice it tackles head-on the anonymity and transience of the given space.

Analysis and discussion

The vignettes evoke the fragmented experience we would expect from a complex and contradictory site like a university. We have a limited sense of belonging. We are genuinely marginal from the iconic centres of the university. The university's scale and the diversity of the practices that occupy university space are at times in conflict with our *habitus*. Equally, at times, we ourselves withhold participation, for the complexity itself creates a degree of indeterminacy within which our *habitus* orders things in ways that fit us. Our individual *habitus* does not find an easy place in these complex fields, but is active in its constant creative remaking.

Walking around an Oxbridge college a potential student from a working class background feels like a “fish out of water” (Ball et al. 2002). The grand and ancient fabric is in a sense only a surface, but one which materializes a history and culture that is alien. Their *habitus* does not fit and they lack the cultural capital to operate effectively. He or she is an outsider (Mann 2001, 11). In contrast, the authors of this paper are themselves on permanent contracts as lecturers in a somewhat less grand university, one which merges physically into a city with a strongly working class identity. We differ in our cultural and social capital but have more to draw on to fit with some practices of the institution. We are given our own spaces, however temporary in feel. The publication in 2010 of a statement of the [name
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deleted] academic shows that the institution has a desire that we identify strongly with it (University of [name deleted] 2010). Yet, at times, we too have a sense also of being fishes out of water. How can we explain, that despite having more permanent status than a student, despite our having a room with our name on the door and being pictured on notice boards and web sites, we too, at times, experience the university space as alien?

Our description of the university campus reveals both an interpretation of it as a status hierarchy but also a sense of its multiplicity, of it being understood very differently within the different practices that jostle to occupy university space. As (relatively) new lecturers we do have a sense of being outsiders from some visible “heart of the campus” and centres of power; the symbolic centres as defined by dominant groups. But we also do not entirely fit the spaces offered up by the university because they are always being reimagined and reappropriated. The same space can change its meaning from one moment to the next. For universities are tenuous institutions, composed of multiple practices. They have multiple missions and decentralised governance. No simple identification can be on offer. Attempts to construct an identity position are inevitably incomplete, just as the privileged construction of the University of [name deleted] as fulfilling a mission of civic service represents only one of the multiple, complex histories that could be uncovered. The courtyard in Arthur’s building tells us how the references to imagery of the Oxbridge academic community disguise a collage, an assemblage of rather fragmented groups, each of which feels more engagement to specialist scholarly communities outside the institution and the city than to each other. Such unreadability applies to many university spaces that have themselves “learned” since they were built (Brand 1995), shaped by repurposing or even being embedded in buildings that are primarily designed for another set of practices,

such as a hospital. Just as the courtyard is not the focus we might imagine and Tony's building lacks one defined "heart," the university may be interpreted as having many centres or none.

Furthermore, the university is a business. The efficient and secure management of reusable spaces, cuts against our desire to occupy and make personal the space around us. We cannot escape a sense that we are in temporary occupation of our very offices, even as we fill them with personal trinkets and mementoes.

Yet it is also the case that on our side we do not desire simple identification with the university. To do so would be a restriction on our private selves and our freedom to create, change or leave. Our marginality is also a resource. Phil's restricted office space is emblematic of the awkward, temporary nature of our accommodation with the university. His ownership of the optics room, however, shows how some spaces, for a time, can be owned. Further, his temporary discursive filling, even over-filling, of the portacabins is symbolic of our ability to actively create room for our own practices and identities in this fluid environment. At times our *habitus* does fit the field in which we find ourselves; the malleability of space gives us room to shape it to our needs.

Our exploration of the university as a series of spaces, reveals that at certain times and places we can feel accommodated. But it also shows the breakdown of simple, unitary or one-to-one identifications. Even when we feel we want to be a [name deleted] lecturer, the identity is incomplete. We often feel we do not want to. As Bauman suggests "it looks as if we will never stop dreaming of a community, but neither will we ever find in any self proclaimed community the pleasures we savoured in our dreams." (2000, 5) Hence the tantalising quality of our engagement with the university space.

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Conclusion

University space, certainly its link to academic identity, has been rather neglected in the literature. This paper offers both a theoretical lens and a methodological approach to exploring this important issue. It has explored the complex way that space shapes academic identity and how our identities can shape space. Bourdieu's work emphasizing the symbolic hierarchy in a field can be complemented by Schatzki's sense of the multiplicity of social practices. By a method of defamiliarising the types of space that we move through every day, the power of structural forces to shape our daily experience within the complex nexus of the site of a university has been revealed. Equally the power of our own interpretations and choices within practice are also made more apparent. Such knowledge affords us some greater critical self-awareness.

The current research has been small scale, making the most of the immediacy of our own experience. It would be a natural extension of the research to use more traditional interview based methods to explore systematically the variation of academics' experience arising from type of institution, discipline, gender and seniority. Further, the complex, qualified nature of academic identities in these contexts is likely in turn to be a significant factor shaping student engagement. Thus what this paper does frame is the need for further exploration of how students themselves directly experience the spaces of the university, and how this relates to their sense of alienation and engagement. The case of a working class student at Oxbridge is an extreme case of a process found also in less imposing institutions, such as our own. How far are the signs of disengagement, in attendance, retention rates etc., a response to alienating power structures and institutional fragmentation, or a form of self preservation (Mann 2001, 15)? Such an investigation of

student experience would help us to understand better how students' own engagement with the institution is shaped through social practices, including by our own engagement with space.

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Appendix



A classroom in Arthur's building



The quadrangle in Arthur's building

Corresponding author:



Around the foyer of Tony's building



Around the foyer of Tony's building (2)



Accessing Phil's corridor



Phil's theory lecture space

Corresponding author: