Understanding Learning Spaces Sonically, Soundscaping Evaluations of Place

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Abstract

We spend all our lives in spaces, whether those are digital spaces, public areas, institutional sites, or the spaces of our minds. These spaces are necessarily filled with sounds—heard, felt, imagined, or evoked. In thinking about what Purdy and DeVoss (2017) call the "infrastructures of writing," and learning experiences of classrooms in particular, there has been an increased interest and scholarship within composition and rhetoric that focuses on built environments, learning spaces, and classroom design. However, much of this literature has yet to draw productively on sound. Most mentions of sonic dimensions of space merely suggest a signal/noise relationship, where undesirable "noise" would be minimized. In what follows I will argue that becoming attuned to sound in classroom design has far more potential than a desire to eliminate noise. In doing so, I offer the soundscapes of 7 cross-disciplinary, writing-intensive courses as a means of recovering the potential for sound in evaluating space. Finally, I argue for further work in putting the research of rhetorical soundscape studies in conversation with learning spaces and classroom design. © 2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Soundscapes of writing classrooms and classroom design

In their 2009 article, "Hacking Spaces: Place as Interface," Douglas M. Walls, Scott Schopieray, and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss reached the conclusion that "Space design is rarely—if ever—accidental, and as many scholars of space have indicated, spaces construct the social, that is, the positions and activities of the people in the space. However, this construction is not destiny" (p. 284). In his 2001 book, *Acoustic Communication*, Barry Truax explained that "whereas the 'sonic environment' can be regarded as the aggregate of all sound energy in any given context, we will use the term 'soundscape' to put emphasis on how that environment is understood by those living within it—the people who are in fact creating it" (p. 11). Both of these quotations emphasize the social, dynamic, and lived experience of space and sound, and a rhetorical dimension for space design and soundscape studies.

Within the field of composition and rhetoric there has been much scholarship on theories of space and place in writing and historical considerations of "place on a page." Frank D'Angelo (1986) unseated the suggested connection between topoi and topic sentence. More recently, Anne Francis Wysocki (2005) argued for the spatiality of writing and Jeff Rice (2007) has interrogated the particularity of hypertext in reconfiguring notions of compositional space.

In "Stories Take Place" Malea Powell (2012) emphasized the necessity and position of "place" in her CCC Chair's address stating that "Spaces, then, are made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place – like imagining community 'away' from but related to that space"(p.388). Finally, Nedra Reynolds (1998) has also challenged our assumptions of metaphors of space inherent in the "imagined geographies" of composition. In addition to this work on space in composition and rhetoric there is also a growing area of interest in learning spaces, built environments, and classroom design. The work of Douglas M. Walls, Scott Schopieray, Dànielle Nicole De Voss (2009) referenced above is just one example of scholarship that considers physical place design in learning and offers frameworks for conceptualizing the design of classroom (and other learning) spaces.

In addition to the importance of theories of space and place in our scholarship, scholars such as Mary E. Hocks and Michelle Comstock (2017) have noted the proliferation of research in sonic rhetoric—work that exists within a juncture between sound studies and composition and rhetoric. In a previous article, Michelle Comstock and Mary E. Hocks (2006) argued for a definition of sonic literacy that would make students aware of their own "personal and cultural soundscapes." Since then, work such as that from Steph Ceraso (2014), has explicitly drawn on and used the term "soundscape" to discuss the importance of the sound in space, particularly regarding the designing, recording, and composing of soundscapes. As much of this scholarship notes, the term soundscape was developed by R. Murray Schafer (1977) and continues to be used in various disciplines from music to ecology, archeology, history, media studies, videogame design, and more recently composition and rhetoric. Arguably, the proliferation of scholarship in our own field that draws on soundscape studies makes it possible to think about "rhetorical soundscape studies" as a specialized area.

In addition to the composition and rhetoric field at large, issues of understanding space and sound continue to hold meaning for the computers and writing community, specifically. In their introduction to *Making Space: Writing Instruction, Infrastructure, and Multiliteracies*, James Purdy and Dànielle DeVoss (2017) note the contribution of their collection as it "situates space design and digital technologies as deliberate, infrastructural practice" (par. 8). This configuration of space allows for the study of interfaces, physical spaces of writing (like computer labs and writing centers,) and notions of framing space in writing pedagogy. Recent conferences, such as the 2012 Computers and Writing Conference on *architextures*, which Purdy and DeVoss (2017) cite, have explored how architectures of space influence the reading and composing of texts. Similarly, there have been conferences and journal issues dedicated to sound, such as the 2006 *Computers and Composition* "Sound in/as Compositional Space" special issue, which considered theories, pedagogies, and production of sonic texts, as well as special issues on sound in *Enculturation*, *Currents in Electronic Literacy,* and *Harlot*. Also, much like Jason Palmeri's (2012) argument that writing has always been multimodal, Cynthia Selfe (2009) in "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing," has addressed the fact that a sonic-turn is not "new," by tracing the history of aurality and its place in the composition classroom. Finally, in *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Jody Shipka (2011) argues that there is a certain risk in too narrowly defining "technology" when she says "I am equally concerned with how *a narrow definition of technology fails to encourage richly nuanced, situated views of literacy*" (p. 31, italics original.) In other words, while research in learning spaces design may at times focus on online writing environments or networked computer classrooms and rhetorical soundscape studies may at times include the production of student-designed, digital soundscapes, these areas also cause us to complicate our questions about materiality, embodiment, and experience, both in the creation of texts and for our students. In this way, learning spaces design and rhetorical soundscape studies should be of increasing interest to writing teachers and scholars involved in areas of technology and computer-mediated writing, where materiality, embodiment, and experience are often questions on the forefront. However, I argue that it may not be as productive to continue to read these conversations on learning spaces and soundscapes separately.

In pointing out that our field has such rich scholarship in learning spaces and soundscapes, I mean to emphasize that there has as of yet been little cross-conversation between these areas. While the work in both is relatively new there is perhaps an opportunity being missed in not connecting some of the research in learning spaces and classroom design to that of soundscape studies and vice versa. For instance, the frameworks for understanding and evaluating classroom spaces (as well as a focus on empirical methods) often found in learning spaces and classroom design research can provide different opportunities for rhetorical soundscape studies. In turn, soundscape studies can offer back to learning spaces a more complex relationship to sound in the embodied experience of the classroom. To that end, I will present what could be gained by soundscape studies in applying the research of frameworks for designing learning