

Project II: Assignment 3 - Design Ethnography

Setting/Activity:

The setting we chose for this assignment is Union South, which is a student activity center on the south side of the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. We chose to observe three specific areas of Union South: the main area (area starting from the main fireplace to the area right before the restaurant Ginger Root), the Sett (restaurant on the left-most side of Union South when you enter the building), and the computer lab which is located on the left side of the 2nd floor at Union South. The general problem area that we chose to focus on as a team for this assignment was seating and the ease/difficulty of finding places as students to sit at busy places on campus like Union South for studying or recreational activities. Given this general problem area, we believed Union South would be a great location to look at because Union South is an extremely busy area where students frequently visit for studying, eating food, and meeting up with friends and others to hang out, and they need seating for all three of these actions. So, when we entered Union South, we walked around the first floor and the second floor to determine which specific areas we wanted to focus on i.e. which areas would help us get a better idea of any potential seating issues students face as they conduct typical activities in Union South. We believed that the 3 specific locations within Union South that we chose provided a true view into any potential seating issues that students may face as they participate in these 3 kinds of activities that are common in such busy locations on campus. Specifically, the Sett allowed us to understand more about if there were seating issues in the more restaurant-focused areas of Union South and other similar centers on campus. The main area allowed us to understand more about if there were seating issues in the more leisurely/academics-focused areas of Union South and other similar centers on campus. Lastly, the Computer Labs allowed us to understand more about quieter areas that are more academics-focused in centers like Union South and other similar centers on campus.

Use of Ethnographic Data Collection Methods:

We observed the environment for 3 hours, 1 hour for each specific location within Union South, so we spent 1 hour observing the Sett, 1 hour observing the main area, and 1 hour observing the Computer Lab on the 2nd floor on November 17th, 2021. We spoke with 3 informants in total, for ~40 minutes in total, with each interview being around ~10-14 minutes long, and we interviewed one student from each area, so Interview #1 corresponds to a student who was sitting at the Sett on this day, Interview #2 corresponds to a student who was sitting on the second floor on this particular day, and Interview #3 corresponds to a student who was sitting in the main area of this particular day. For the fly-on-the-wall observation of the first area (the Sett), we sat at a table of four right in the middle of all the seating in the Sett, which gave us a nice vantage point to observe all the individuals and activities we were interested in. For the fly-on-the-wall observation of the second area (the main area), we sat at a table at the complete right of the main area, which gave us the ability to look at the entire main area of Union South from one point, so we could see all the macro-level interactions between individuals in this area, but also could hear the conversations and interactions between people from the people closest to

us. For the fly-on-the-wall observation of the third and final area (the Computer Lab), we sat at a table that is right in the middle of the lab, which gave us the ability to see closely what people were doing on the computers and also see the macro-level interactions that were occurring in this space. To record the data for the fly-on-the-wall observations, we just all took down notes on a Google Document and categorized the information by the specific location we were observing. To record the data for our interviewee, we had Zooms pulled up for each interviewee, and we just recorded those Zoom sessions. For analyzing our data, we first annotated the transcripts, and these annotations just contained summaries for each point that our interviewee made. We then added our annotations as well as our field notes into an affinity diagram. We organized items based on whether it was a feature of the environment, a piece of equipment someone used, something an individual did, something a group did, or something a person was working on. We then modeled different aspects of what we observed. We created a physical model of Union South by editing a map of it. We modeled the interactions at Union South that had breakdowns in them, such as a sequence model for someone trying to find a seat to study, a sequence model of someone trying to find their friend at Union South, a sequence model of someone trying to get a meal at Union South, and a physical model of an annotated map of Union South. These sequence models served as the “Theory Building” final result of our coding process. For our coding process, we completed each of the required steps: open coding, axial coding, selective coding, comparative analysis, and theory building (models). For the open coding step, we defined three categories: Food, Studying, and Socializing and we defined specific codes within each of the 3 categories. Within the food category, we defined two codes for negative experiences with restaurants and people eating/walking with food. Within the studying category, we defined three codes for finding spots to study, people working on school materials, and people working with groups. Within the socializing category, we defined three codes for trying to find your friends, socializing in groups, and FaceTiming/calling. With this legend in mind, the categories and underlying codes, we went through each line of our field notes and interview notes and noted down the category and code associated with them if applicable. The next step of our coding process was the axial coding step. For this step, we defined the three most repeated phenomena that we observed based on our open coding step: negative experiences with restaurants, finding spots to sit at to study and trying to find your friends, and for each of these phenomena, we noted down the reasonings behind them. For the next step of our coding process, selective coding, we took our three categories: dining, studying, and social experiences and broke them down into conditions, actions, and consequences associated with the phenomena we had observed. For the last step in our coding process, the comparative analysis, we took our three categories and then looked at what would occur under the presence/absence of a particular condition.

Findings:

We studied individuals at parts of Union South, in particular the main area, the Sett, and the computer lab. We found that a majority of people at Union South use it for studying and eating. At the time we observed, we found that most people were studying or working on homework, instead of eating. From gathering our data in an affinity diagram, we noticed that

there was a lot more activity from individuals instead of groups, in part because most of the people at Union South were working by themselves. For many of our interviewees, we found that the increased number of people in a location was a significant issue. Specifically, the issues interviewees faced with long lines for restaurants and lack of seating for studying are all underlying caused by the increased number of individuals in Union South and the lack of space to accommodate for these crowds of people. We also found that the environment of Union South greatly impacted the people we observed as well as those we interviewed. The seating issue that we noticed was impacted by the number of seats in a location as well as the configuration of those seats. Because there were more group seatings than individual seats, individual people would take tables that would normally seat 4 for themselves. The sound level of Union South also impacted one of our interviewees, who noted that they preferred how Union South had some noise but wasn't too loud of an area, while our other interviewee noted that they could only sit on the second floor of Union South to study because that was the only place there where it was quiet enough. Largely, the last issue among our interviewees and based on our fly-on-the-wall observations, the size of Union South and the lack of signage and directories made it difficult for individuals to find the places they are looking for.

Design Ideas:

One of our interviewees found it difficult to navigate through Union South. Most of the signage in Union South is only directly in front of a restaurant or area, so from afar it is difficult to know where things are. It would have been useful for them to have either a more available map of Union South, or some signs in a central location to tell them where locations were. This interviewee remarked that they don't go to Union South very often, so this would be especially helpful for people unfamiliar with the Union.

Another of our interviewees found it annoying how the lines for some of the restaurants at Union South can have ridiculous wait times, one place having a 30-minute wait. This person would have found it helpful if they had a way to see how long the line is ahead of time so that they could find somewhere else to eat or come back later when it isn't as busy. This could be achieved by having restaurants track how people are waiting in line or by providing more ways for people to order their food ahead of time.

Multiple participants noted that it was sometimes difficult to find seating at Union South, particularly the main area with the fireplace. They would have found it convenient if they could have an idea of how many seats were available in an area. This could be done by tracking what seats are available, or by creating a reservation system. Part of the reason for the seating problem was due to the fact that individual people would take tables that are meant for multiple people, such as booths or large tables. The seating problem could also be remedied by adding more tables for individuals, encouraging people to share seating, or encouraging people not to take up more seats than they need.

Reflection:

One thing that was difficult was finding good places to observe people. We started off our project wanting to look at the CS building but chose to observe Union South because the CS

building was difficult to observe. The seating in the CS building was much more scattered, and was very columnous, so it was both difficult to observe up close, or from a distance. Even at Union South, we weren't able to find spaces to view everything, which is part of why we observed 3 different spots within Union South. Because Union South is a big building with multiple floors, to get a more comprehensive idea of what happens, only observing one room doesn't provide adequate data. Another difficult part of observation was how static some of it was. Some people at Union South were there the whole time we observed and did not change their behavior at all. This is the other reason why we choose to observe multiple locations within Union South, as we got to points in time where the number of new observations plateaued. Observing people was generally easy, however, since we could just silently find a place to watch people. There was a decent influx and output of people, but it wasn't very rapid, so it wasn't difficult for us to record our observations. Finding people to interview was slightly more difficult since most of the people at Union South were busy, but we were able to successfully find 3 interviewees, 1 from each location who had good insights to share about their experiences at Union South. We did find it useful to conduct the fly-on-the-wall observations because that provided us a view into the macro-level interactions that were occurring in each of the 3 locations, while the interviews provided us with more context as to why students come to Union South and why they did the actions they did, so the interviews did definitely expand on our findings from the observations, as we were able to understand the *why* behind their actions.