

University Arboretum as Agentful Topography

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Abstract: This study seeks to understand the place-based engagement undertaken by a university arts community. The study examines how the university arboretum, in which they perform, becomes an agent in the community's learning. Using ethnographic-based methods, including walking interviews and annotated maps, the concept of *agentful topography* is developed. The findings inform research on informal community and university learning spaces and provide methodological insight for utilizing various forms of ethnographic mapping.

Constructivist approaches to place

The study of place is an emerging area of interest in the humanities, education, and field of technology. Like the practice turn in education, which focuses on social constructivists' views of participation and knowledge-building as metaphors for learning (Sfard, 1998), the spatial turn in the social sciences and the humanities parallels similar constructivist views of place. According to theorists such as Lefebvre (1991), Massey (1994), and Soja (1989;1996), place is constituted by subtle and sophisticated kinds of participation and knowledge-building practices mediated by people's relationship with the physical world and environment (Warf & Arias, 2009). Consequently, how we ascribe ownership of and affiliation with places as spatial and cultural materiality is worthy of investigation, especially within an educational context.

The arboretum as an interdisciplinary learning space of an arts-based community

This study follows a university theater-arts community, Shakespeare in the Arb [SITA] and examines how the arboretum, in which they perform, becomes an agent in the community members' learning. By studying an established community of practice, the scope of this study is unique in that it traces the emergence of a community place-engagement from its inception across seventeen years of activity. This particular arboretum setting serves as an important case study of placemaking in higher education because it is quite different from other spaces within the campus proper. Often learning spaces are siloed into specific buildings and segregated by disciplines. However, the study presents a case of a university learning space that is not discipline bound. In the context of this study, the arboretum is conceptualized as an active participant in social interactions for the SITA community, a place that addresses or calls upon learners through various pedagogical forces.

The study examines how the arboretum as an *agentful topography*, a dynamic environment that actively shapes social activity and learning, recruits or draws learners in. Furthermore, the study examines how this engagement supported SITA's practices as a place-based community. Wenger defines engagement within a community as talking, making, and doing things together, or "learning what we can do and how the environment responds to our actions" (2010, p.4). The findings explore how participants described their relationship with the arboretum as a physical and social space to understand their emplaced engagement. The study analyzes how participants spoke about their membership in SITA and how their participation in the community's placemaking influenced and contributed to their personal meaning-making with the arboretum.

Methods, data and analysis

Ethnographic techniques form the basis for this study. Walking interviews and map annotations were used as an elicitation tool. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and lasted between 30-45 minutes. As part of the interview, participants annotated visitor maps and those who engaged in walking interviews took photos of their favorite spaces. The maps acted as a conversational tool that allowed me to corroborate participants' memories with the physical geography. Table 1 provides the type and quantity of data collected.

Table 1: Data type and quantity collected

Data type	Quantity
Walking interviews	6
Interviews	18
Participant photos taken	22
Participant annotated maps	13

Participants were directly asked to mark their favorite spaces on the map as well as areas that had particular meanings, strong memories, and associations (see Figure 1). The walking interview routes were marked on a map and a representative photo, taken by the participants, was added to illustrate sights on the particular path.

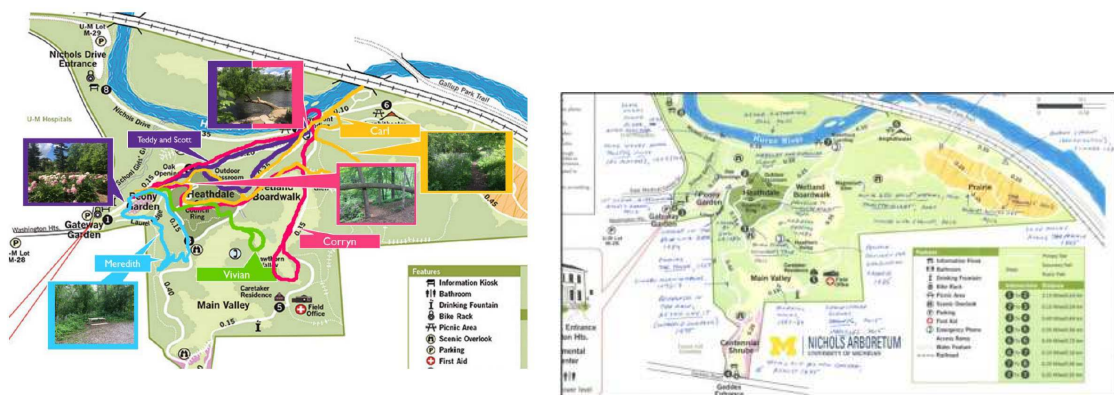


Figure 1. Map of walking interview routes and participant photos (left) and participant annotated map (right).

Findings

Across the interviews and maps, participants described their relationship with the arboretum and explained how partaking in SITA's collaborative placemaking activities influenced this relationship. Four themes emerged that inform participants' engagement with the arboretum as an agentful topography. 1) The arboretum was an open place of ownership and belonging. 2) SITA activities mediated and supported emergent and intimate ways of sensing and knowing with the arboretum. 3) The arboretum was a place of adventure, experimentation, and supported engagement. 4) The arboretum was a 'separate space' coupled with SITA's activities, facilitated participants' engagement in alternative forms of moving, sensing, and being. The analyses show that participants' engagement and meaning-making with the arboretum was personal, emergent, and highly affective. Over time, the members imbricated complicated associations and mental maps that span memories, feelings, and activities.

Discussion

Mapping in these various ways begins to show how past actions in particular places, although invisible to others, leave imprints that people carry with them through to the present. Furthermore, mapping in conjunction with interviews provides a methodological insight into how ethnographic maps can help make such data visible with places like the arboretum that are imbued with multilayered meanings. Dwelling, or the prolonged engagement and physical presence in the arboretum through SITA membership changed participants' relationship with the space. Agentful topographies can help us think critically about pedagogical places (both virtual and physical) that educators can co-create along with communities. Redefining the agency of place elucidates how learning and practice communities form around and are shaped by place, thus informing how learning spaces might be constituted.

References

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