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Student housing as a learning space

Pauline Card and Huw Thomas

School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.

School of Geography and Planning,

Cardiff University,

Glamorgan Building

King Edward VII Avenue

Cardiff CF10 3WA

U.K.

Tel : 029 20874000

Corresponding author : ThomasH1@cardiff.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper is an initial exploration of the significance of students' accommodation as spaces for learning. In interviews, students of Geography and Planning discuss the spatiality of studying, and how their student housing features in this. The diversity of student living and studying emerges clearly. Yet there are some commonalities, notably the significance of the materiality of accommodation as a factor that shapes and is in turn shaped by students' agency. Their accounts underline the ways they seek to shape key aspects of their lives, and the reflective, learning, approach many take to this task. The paper concludes by drawing out implications for university tutors and lecturers. It also suggests avenues for further research.

Keywords: student housing; learning spaces; campus space

Introduction

It is decades since Massey (1995, p 1) claimed that "the real meaning of the slogan that 'space is relational' has not been taken on board". This remains the case in relation to aspects of university life. For, as Boys (2011) and others have pointed out, the spatiality of university student learning remains under-examined (Brooks , Fuller & Waters, 2012), even as the recognition grows that the ordinary lives and spaces of students merit investigation (Holton & Riley, 2013). Often, function and form is still central to discussions of spaces for learning in higher education; the implications of framing space as constructed in people's day to day social interactions, including activities involving learning, are still underdeveloped. Boys (2011) begins the process of re-framing and re-thinking. However, her focus is largely on university buildings (academic and library buildings, and so on). Among other things, this excludes student housing from consideration. Yet, in some countries, and certainly the UK, where this study was conducted, living away from home with people who are initially strangers remains for many - and this view extends beyond students - an important, perhaps

defining, aspect of being a university student (Silver and Silver, 1997; Stone, 2011).Moreover, the ontological, emotional and material significance of home is widely acknowledged (Blunt, 2005; Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine , 2012; Holton, 2016a) .

Communal living involves a blurring of distinctions which may pose challenges (and perhaps opportunities) in relation to studying by students. For example, there may be far less rigidity about where the activities of daily life are conducted than is usual in family domestic space where cooking is for the kitchen, sleeping is in bedrooms, and so on (Holton, 2016b). This may be related to materiality of accommodation, such as no communal spaces (Holton, 2017), but students living away from their families may also choose to experiment with different ways of organising their life as they explore, construct and perform identities (2016b). The blurring of public and private space that communal living may involve (Holton, 2017) could also pose obvious practical challenges in relation to studying. It would be reasonable to expect, then, that the construction and negotiation of a student's domestic space would be bound up with the establishment of study habits and routines. This is a matter of obvious practical significance for those involved with student learning and student housing and welfare, not least because factors related to studying are acknowledged in the literature as significantly related to student stress (Robotham and Julian, 2006). Understanding student accommodation in relation to studying also has scholarly significance in providing insights into the everyday spatiality of student life.

The paper discusses findings from interviews with students about where and how they studied. This focus is quite different from that of most research into student housing – notably the studentification literature (Smith, 2009), which tends to concentrate on the relationship of student housing to the neighbourhoods, cities and regions where they are located. As Hopkins (2011, pp 157-158) points out, the theme of regional and urban impacts is one which has dominated geographical research about university life. This paper, on the other hand, explores students as active participants in shaping particular kinds of campus space in interaction with the social and material dimensions of the campus. For practical reasons the students who were asked to participate were in a School of Geography and Planning ; the significance of disciplinary background will be touched on in the paper,

but in all key respects it is the concern for space and learning that makes this paper of particular interest to a geographical readership, not what the students were studying.

Four sections follow. The next reviews key debates about learning and spaces of learning, with particular attention paid to the developing literature on campus spaces. It situates the paper within a scholarly concern for understanding space as actively constructed (within constraints) by students and other actors as they interact with each other and the materiality of the university environment. This is followed by a section which explains the design and methodology of the research project and ethical issues it raised. The findings are then reported and discussed.. A concluding section notes some important practical implications of the research, and suggests some future research directions .

Learning and learning spaces

What is taken as constituting learning is contested and this has implications for what are regarded as potential learning spaces (Boys, 2011). It is now widely accepted that learning is not uniquely found, nor containable, within the tutor-student interaction in formally-designated places of instruction. This is something agreed upon by approaches as diverse as those associated with reflective learning (Schön, 1983), situated learning/communities of practice (Lave & Wenger,1991), and critical pedagogy (McArthur, 2013, p 17). But the implications of this can still be misunderstood. Lange and Costley (2015), who posit a binary distinction between formal and informal learning which runs together institutional goals and institutional settings, is just one recent example of what Boys (2011) rightly criticised in much older bodies of research: the use of the insight that learning is not contained in lecture rooms to justify a formal/informal distinction into which both too much and too little is read.

It does not follow – except by a sterile definitional stipulation - that because institutions like universities create specific environments for learning then the learning associated with the university's goals only occurs in those environments; it is even less plausible to claim that any learning outside these environments must inevitably relate to individually-defined goals or personal projects. If the (social) construction of space is conceptualised as distinct from (physically) constructed buildings then it reminds us that learning (entered into for whatever reasons) creates its

own space as it is being undertaken, and opens up the possibility – which may be realised or not according to contingencies at any given time - that the materiality of this space involves this or that particular kind of building (eg university teaching rooms). The technologies of learning and teaching – be they, for example, pen and paper, borrowed books, or information and communication technologies (ICT) - will be "linked into heterogeneous active networks, in which people, objects and routines are closely connected" (Lawn and Grosvenor, 2005, p7), and within which spaces of teaching and learning are constructed (Brooks, Fuller &Waters , 2012). The assumption of a strict distinction between the virtual and the physical can mislead because the socio-spatial networks which students shape and which shape them involve virtual and non-virtual activities, and associated materialities (eg Madge, Meek, Wellens & Hooley, 2009).

More significant than an informal/formal distinction for Boys (2011), is the fact that most accounts of learning now underline the significance of the agency of learners and the capacity (and necessity) of learners' working – alone and with others – to make learning happen. Working with a relational conception of space, this exercise of agency by students in their learning is ineradicably a spatial process. It is not unreasonable to suppose that potentially, shared student housing can create the kinds of conditions supportive of, for example, peer-learning, where students "learn from and with each other in both formal and informal ways" (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 2001, p4). Riese, Samara and Lillejord (2012) argue that knowing one's fellow learners well because of shared backgrounds and experiences (as in friendships) is a significant factor in facilitating peer-learning. Understanding whether and how these kinds of potential are realised requires research into the lives of real-life learners. This research considers the learning strategies of students, and the role which may be played by places of accommodation (student halls and especially privately-rented accommodation) within them. It does not evaluate whether and what students actually learned, but does ask them about their approaches to learning.

The strategies and vicissitudes of students' exercising their agency in relation to living spaces has recently been explored by a number of researchers. The emotional work associated with (not

always entirely successfully) establishing personal boundaries and negotiating shared domestic responsibilities with strangers who may not subscribe to or be familiar with all one's norms and habits can be demanding and fraught (Holton, 2017). The university campus, and student residences within them are, indeed, micropublics, allowing for the possibility of exploring living with difference, but this is not straightforward, and a common coping strategy for students is to seek out those they identify as similar from within these thrown together groups (Andersson, Sadgrove & Valentine 2012), or to withdraw (Holton, 2016a,b). Yet, even a self-defined group of similar students is not homogeneous (Holton & Riley, 2013) and the work of negotiating shared living will still need to be undertaken (Holton, 2017). It is clear that on occasion conditions can be created which facilitate open and constructive discussion of what a shared existence requires (Holton, 2017), but student residences are no more innocent of power-relations than any other social setting and oppressive and exclusionary behaviour is always possible (Taulke-Johnson, 2010; Holton, 2016b). The consequences of not feeling that one is 'fitting-in' within accommodation and the university more generally can be serious for student welfare and academic progress (Thomas, 2002).

These research-based insights into everyday life in student accommodation almost invite speculation about what they mean for whether and how student houses become particular kinds of learning spaces. Yet studying is not an explicit focus of the research reviewed above, and is rarely if ever mentioned, even when day to day negotiation of life in shared housing is explored. In focusing explicitly on student learning, therefore, this paper complements and extends our understanding of the ordinary aspects of student life (Holton & Riley, 2013, p 70), while also attempting to draw practical conclusions for those supporting student learning in pastoral and pedagogical roles.

Design and methodology of the research

The research involved semi-structured interviews with nineteen final year undergraduates in the School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University undertaken early in 2017 (9) and early 2018 (10). They were following degree programmes in either human geography, urban and regional planning or a combination of both subjects. Convenience sampling, supplemented by snowballing, was used to construct the sample. All students in relevant cohorts were invited to participate and this

was followed up by reminders as part of everyday staff-student interaction with the researchers. Some of the initial recruits sounded out others on the School's undergraduate degree programmes, some of which agreed to participate. From inception to conclusion the project involved potential ethical challenges as the researchers already had a power-laden pedagogical relationship with the students (Clark and McCann, 2005) , and in our case this involved assessing students' work, where students might feel especially vulnerable . How these issues would be addressed was fully discussed as part of the university's Research Ethics Approval process. Central to meeting the challenge was researcher reflexivity, in particular sensitivity on the part of the researchers to the power relations that are ineradicably part of staff-student relations, and the possibility of both witting and unwitting exploitation of this. While procedural safeguards such as consent forms were important features of securing informed consent, as vital was the awareness that these procedures are themselves capable of varying interpretations in the research relationship, and the need for continuing ethical sensitivity by researchers is not obviated by following ethical approval procedures (Thomas, 2009).

We must bear in mind that the students in this study were self-selected, and as such probably skewed towards being more interested in university studies than most students are. All of the students were in their twenties, and all but one in their early twenties. Thirteen were women and six were men. . Sixteen lived in privately rented accommodation which they shared with others; three lived at home. Two of those now living at home (Ayda and Yassim) had done so from their first year; the other (Andy) had lived for two years with other students and had moved home in his final year. Sixteen, including Andy, had lived in university accommodation in their first year, with one (who secured a place on the degree programme very late) living in shared privately rented accommodation. Seventeen had lived in shared privately rented accommodation in their second years (and in the case of five who were on four year sandwich courses in their 'year out' in industry). Even with increasing participation rates in higher education, living in rented accommodation at university remains the overwhelming expectation and practice among students, though an increasing proportion of students, especially at newer universities, are living at home (Holdsworth,2009, p 1861; Stone, Berrington & Falkingham, 2011; Lightfoot, 2018)Students living away from home will typically expect to attend a university

some distance from their home. This distinctive behaviour is not found in quite the same way in other countries, and to that extent the focus on the UK is an important limitation of the study.

Interviews covered two aspects of the day to day lives of students – their housing histories during their time as students in Cardiff, with a particular emphasis on their current arrangements; and their habits and routines related to studying. It brought these together at various points – for example by exploring what part if any patterns of studying had in the closely related choices of accommodation, and choices of people to share accommodation with. Interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, and the names ascribed to them in this paper are fictitious.

Findings and discussion

Attending university throws together people who do not know each other. For those who live away from home – by far the larger group in our research – the construction and negotiation of new relationships that is part and parcel of all aspects of university life will include those that define/create the necessarily intimate spaces of where they live. All of our respondents living away from home had experienced living in shared accommodation with people not of their choosing. For most this ended in the second year of university, when they helped form groups of students with whom they would be willing to live together in privately rented housing. Thirteen of the seventeen students living in privately rented accommodation chose all or most of those they lived with in their second year. Yet, it was not unknown for accommodation in years two and three to involve living with unanticipated strangers. For example, Petra and her house-mates in year 2 found that two of the original group of sharers dropped out of the arrangement, to be replaced by two new house-mates nominated by the letting agency; and Sue decided that in her final year – with its special stresses - she needed distance from her very closest friends, who were also doing her course, and so entered a house shared by seven students from two different universities, put together by the letting agency. In other cases, house-mates might be friends of friends and in that sense slightly unknown quantities when it came to living together.

Our findings suggest that living with others away from home has potential benefits for study, but also challenges (cf Holton, 2016 a, b; 2017). Students adopt a number of strategies to address the

challenges, with varying degrees of success. Yet we must also remember that there are lots of reasons that can affect a student's choice of accommodation, and studying may not always be significant, or even considered at all.

The discussion of our findings is in three sub-sections : first, we explore a little further the nature of student choices about accommodation; we then discuss some benefits for learning of living with other students, the challenges that living this way can bring; and, finally, strategies that students develop to address the difficulties.

Choosing who to live with, and where

All our interviewees wanted accommodation that was conveniently related to the university and its libraries (even those students living at home), but only three said that factors relating to studying - other than having such access - significantly influenced their accommodation choices. In one case (Andy) it loomed very large indeed – he left shared housing in order to live at home largely in order to be able to study more effectively. For some of the others a concern for studying was a less overt part of decision-making, but was significant nevertheless. For three female students (Joanna, Martha and Anna) it was important that the groups they shared a house with were as studious – or as Joanna put it, "motivated, work-wise" - as they were. Martha knew her house-mates "will work hard …[and] won't irritate me", and acknowledged this was a factor operating in the background when decisions were made about who to share with and what kind of house to share. These three students do quite a lot of their studying at home and for Joanna this is the prime location; it is understandable that they needed to secure a supportive context if possible. Hugo pointed out that sharing with people that were equally "committed" to studying was probably a necessary condition for any kind of peer-learning :

> "If you had a less committed student, let's say …it's then naturally harder to share your ideas knowing that they've not put in as much …" (Hugo).

For Charlie, on the other hand, studying was not a consideration in choosing house-mates because he knew he'd do most of his studying in the library (and could also go to stay with his girlfriend). For other, too, studying was not a major factor in choice of house and house-mates.

Nevertheless, the literature suggests that living with others still provides potential benefits for student learning. Were these ever realised, and if so, how ?

The benefits of living together

Learning to live with others is by no means always a threat to studying; indeed, diversity can be a resource as well as much as a challenge. Holton and Riley (2013) make the point that what counts as diversity can be differences within a student group that are significant to the students themselves, given their backgrounds and relative youth, though researchers may overlook them in their focus on major social distinctions such as class, gender and ethnicity. Though he sometimes withdrew, Charlie valued the range of differences in his household, noting the diversity of subjects studied and the fact that two of his housemates went to public school (still relatively unusual in a university like Cardiff, though its intake is largely middle-class). Kate, who had a private school background, thought that the diversity of her shared house helped her broaden her view of the world; this was something she valued as part of her personal development, but she noted that it also helped her engage better with some modules:

Probably because a lot of what we do, especially this year…….. you do need quite a broad view because a lot of it is looking at the inequalities. So, I would say, it probably hasn't taught me anything but it has given me a better starting place to look at these things. (Kate)

All but four of the students not living in the family home lived in houses where most of their peer-sharers were not following programmes in Geography and Planning. In interview we explored whether this diversity had in any way helped our interviewees' learning, bearing in mind the possibilities Riese, Samara and Lillejord (2012) hold out (see above) . We had in mind the possibility that students in humanities or social science, for example, might share insights and experience about, say, essay-writing. In most student households there was a degree of interaction in relation to academic work. For the most part it appeared to involve help with straightforward, relatively limited, mechanical tasks such as proof-reading, where any extra pair of eyes could be helpful. Occasionally this small-scale assistance might have a slightly greater connection to disciplinary background, such

as the help Joanna received with English grammar from her English and journalism house-mates, or Jenny's being helped with a Planning Law essay by a housemate who was studying for a Law degree.

What was generally absent from all but one household was the enthusiastic engagement described by Martha: "We like talking about each other's work …. We're all interested in each other's work". She described critical reviewing of draft dissertation chapters, informal discussions of topics being studied, and recommendations for reading. As she spoke we had a sense of a group of students engaging in the kind of self-reflection and exploration of ideas that peer-learning can involve (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999). But it is significant that in this case the apparently constructive engagement with disciplinary diversity occurred within a group of students that was notably homogeneous in terms of gender and culture, being all Welsh-speaking women who had chosen to live together for at least two years, and in some cases three years. These were people who in some ways knew each other's background very well (Riese, Samara and Lillejord, 2012; Holton , 2016a). Moreover, many of the subjects they studied overlapped in relation to Wales and Welshness – some studied Welsh, others chose dissertation topics on legal or geographical or political topics to do with Wales. Yet Martha's account of constant lively intellectual engagement showed what kind of learning space student accommodation can sometimes become. Her experience shows that shared housing can allow something to develop that is far richer – and more pleasurable (Goodlad and Hirst, 1989) - than instrumentalism.

Tim's experience was more modest, but also displayed the reflectiveness about his work and what he needed to achieve within it that is characteristic of peer-learning (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999). Tim has a room on the third, attic, floor of a house. The only other room on this floor is occupied by a student in his year. They get on, and have been four years on the same programme. A combination of convenience (being so close to each other) and familiarity/friendship means that they regularly discuss their work; Tim gave as an example talking about seminar readings for a theory module that all students were finding difficult . This is the kind of spontaneous peer-learning that might be difficult to engage in in any other setting.

A more instrumental and focused example of learning with housemates was the self-styled "homework club" that housemates of Joanna who were studying the same subject as each other (but not Geography or Planning) set up in the kitchen of the house at exam time. Self-initiated group arrangements for study are not uncommon in universities (Christian & Talanquer, 2012), and perhaps the most illuminating point from this episode was that those housemates not in the club (including Joanna) felt obliged to respect its claim on the nominally public space of the kitchen for the duration of the examinations. It seems plausible to suggest that this kind of forbearance issues from shared perspectives and values relating to the place of studying in student life partly developed through the hard work of "frank" exchanges prior to agreeing to shared living arrangements which will be discussed in the next section.

The lack of cross-disciplinary engagement in the vast majority of houses is at the very least consistent with the claim that students quickly develop an instrumental and mechanistic approach to learning (Maguire, Evans & Dyas, 2001) – i.e. learning and studying is about getting the coursework done, and that is rarely facilitated by interventions by students doing completely different pieces of coursework for degrees in different subjects to yours. But as Hugo found in his second year, when he shared with people following programmes different to his, explaining to one's peers can be a very good way of developing and testing one's own understanding (Goodlad and Hirst, 1989, p 14), even when the peers know little about one's subject :

> when you're explaining something that no-one else knows and they understand it from your explanation you almost demonstrate you know what you're talking about (Hugo)

In effect, Hugo had undertaken informal peer-to-peer tutoring , which in a more structured, and managed, form has been advocated as an effective form of peer learning because it can produce precisely the benefits Hugo experienced (Goodlad and Hirst, 1989).

The challenges of living with other students

The challenges to study and learning arising in rented accommodation are of broadly two kinds : those to do with the materiality of accommodation, and those to do with negotiating mutually acceptable behaviour with house-mates. We consider these in turn.

As the years went by, the materiality of accommodation loomed large in decision-making, and very often had clear consequences for learning. It reminds us that in a very fundamental sense the nature of physical spaces remain significant even as virtual learning environments become ever more prominent (Brooks et al, 2016). Physical comfort was a significant way in which materiality mattered. One aspect of comfort, warmth, was important enough to be mentioned by five of the students, and clearly was not to be taken for granted in privately rented accommodation. As Jenny put it when discussing what she needed her accommodation to provide in relation to studying:

I need to be comfortable, warm …[and]… any little noise around me distracts me … (Jenny).

On days she stayed in her shared house Kate studied while still wearing pyjamas, and the theme of (physical) comfort – and its absence - cropped up in a number of interviews , often in remarks suggesting frustrations at the messiness, and downright dirtiness, of their shared houses and how this inhibited learning. Sophie and Kate noted how the comfort and cleanliness of home were part of a supportive material environment for studying; Charlie would just disappear to his girlfriend's to study when his shared house became distractingly dirty and messy, and Petra felt her options for study-spaces within her house were narrowed because communal spaces were so messy. As she put it , "….I think they are quite dirty people so I wouldn't want to do work in, like, the kitchen because it is dirty but they [the boys] wanted a table so they could work." Yassim, who lived at home, also pointed out how its material comfort supported his study as well as removing a potential source of friction with others (ie housemates) were he to live in shared housing.

Another aspect of materiality was the size and layout of rooms, and the adequacy of furniture within them, which could constrain or facilitate the creation by students of the kind of learning spaces that they thought suited them. Three students – Petra, Sue and Joanna – were determined to have rooms big enough for them to be able to study as they wished. This requirement had featured in the

"frank" discussions Joanna had with her potential housemates before they committed to sharing in year two (they stuck with each other in year three). She does most of her studying in the room, so it needed to be large enough for her not to feel claustrophobic. For Petra, a key requirement was a room that was large enough to accommodate a desk and a bed; she has come to understand that her sleep is affected if she sits on her bed in order to work. It was the smallness, darkness and noisiness of her second year room – which simply distracted her from working effectively - that showed Sue that this was a factor that she had to pay attention to.

Noise is, understandably, a major challenge to study and as such exercises students. Fiona spoke of "some dispute" among her housemates about the allocation of rooms in her final year because no one wanted the room next to the kitchen. Others, such as Arthur, chose to work in the library, and accept that the house was a space to relax in. Joanna's concern about having an adequate sized desk was shared by others. Andy had memories of "an insanely small" desk in his room in second year; Kate, who reads hard copy because of an eye condition and related migraines, needed a desk she could spread things out over. Because she tends to do a great deal of handwriting (of notes and drafts, for example) , Nancy too needs space. Rosa simply likes spreading her books and notes around her as she works on an assignment; the upshot is that having space is important, but she'll find it where she can – in her room, in front of the communal television, or in a library.

Five students chose not to study at their accommodation at all, but even for them, accommodation was not irrelevant to their studying – rather, it served as a complementary space. They wanted to create an environment in their shared house which provided a contrast with their learning space – one which was a place to chill out for example. As was noted earlier, some students certainly talked to house-mates about studying and learning, and a few went further and would use their house as a base for group-work. Yet this was clearly not always viewed as a standard learning space, for not all fellow-learners might be granted access. As Kate put it, when doing group work, "…if it's people I know we will use my kitchen", but if not, they will not, clearly noting the special, and ambiguous, characteristics of her student-home as a private domestic and quasi-public learning space.

Perhaps the most striking example of the significance of materiality in the construction of spaces of learning was Sophie's account of how she revises for exams in different subjects in different places. This will help her later, because she associates the materiality of place with what she learned – " I sat there when I did this …".

Turning now to negotiating ways of living in shared spaces, we have already noted that Jessica, Fiona and others had discussions with housemates about what living together might involve. Negotiating the spatio-temporality of daily living is perhaps the most obvious challenge in shared accommodation, particularly in the absence of any acknowledged hierarchy of authority as typically exists in a familial setting (Holton, 2016b). Little wonder, perhaps, that many students reported some tensions in negotiating a shared domestic life; tensions that sometimes had repercussions for their studying. This project can shed little light on the power-dynamics of discussions and disputes within households. But the strategy of withdrawal that some students engaged in (see below) suggests that at times they felt unable to construct a study-space at their accommodation (cf Holton, 2016b). For example, in his second year Andy lived in a house shared by eleven people. In his words, life there was "a bit crazy", and in particular there was an informal norm of students' rooms having an "open door" that meant he found it difficult to find space to study in. For his final year he decided not to share at all, and now lives at home, though it so happens he has also now changed his study patterns (see later). It is clear that creating spaces conducive to learning can sometimes be a fraught affair, but what comes across very strongly in interviews is that these students are active in changing and managing their circumstances and develop (more or less effective) strategies for doing so.

Strategies for managing communal living and for studying … and how they change

The most extreme consequences of tensions with house-mates involved the kind of withdrawal from the (micro)public sphere of the kind that Holton (2016b) noted. Andy's decision to live at home has been mentioned above. It is to her parents' home that Anna also retreats when deadlines loom – despite an increasing number of arguments among the housemates over what is an appropriate level of cleanliness in the house remaining unresolved, and she finds a cleaner, tidier, less fraught environment more congenial for study when she is facing a particularly anxious time.   Charlie uses

the same strategy – but in his case he resorts to his girlfriend's house (which is local) rather than his parents. In each case, the emotional work and mixed success of negotiating difference is, for longer or shorter periods, abandoned in the face of the exigencies of study. This strategy of withdrawal may well work, as long as there is a bolt-hole that can be resorted to.

But withdrawal is only one of a number of strategies used; and students change and develop their approach to learning, and the role of accommodation in that, during their time in university. To varying degrees, they are reflective learners (Brockbank , McGill & Beech, 2002; Moon, 2004), though they may not always recognise the term. For example, it was the end of the second year, so well over half way through the degree,that Martha came to use the library more as a study space, but having seen that it worked for her she carried on in the third year. For Fiona, too, the library became more important over time. In her case, it was seeing house-mates not on her programme using the library that made her consider it as a serious possibility (something we might call a positive outcome of living with strangers). As has already been pointed out, Petra and Charlie worked out what spatial organisation of life's activities helped in getting a good night's sleep and shaped their (spatio-temporal) routines accordingly; Andy was another student who reflected on what went right and, more often, wrong in years one and two in relation to learning, and realised that he needed a stark distinction between working and sleeping spaces. Most of these students appeared to have reflected alone. Charlie, on the other hand, reflected with his girlfriend about how he studied most productively, and then set about creating those conditions. The value of collective reflection has been noted by (Brockbank & McGill, 2007) , and it may perhaps be something that those responsible for the pastoral care of students might think of facilitating, if only in the first year of a degree, when many students are finding their feet, and may not have obvious reflective 'buddies' to hand. In our final section we consider implications of our findings for some of those who support student learning, and also relate the findings to the developing understanding of student and campus geographies.

Concluding discussion

Our conversations with students show that for some, but not all, their student accommodation is an extremely important learning space. For many others, it is one part of a more complex space that

stretches over many buildings and places. Certainly, these interviews – albeit with a self-selected group – are at odds with lazy stereotypes of student life in their accommodation (even in the first year) as revolving around socialising. Socialising is important, of course, but even that is not all about carousing; it can involve discussions of the subjects being studied and assessments being undertaken. Tim, Fiona and Nancy, for example, all regarded chatting about the content of their respective degree programmes as interesting components of social interaction with housemates.

For those with a pastoral role in relation to students – such as personal tutors, year tutors and programme directors - polite, often routine, enquiries about accommodation being 'alright' may unwittingly be touching on a key element of successful learning for a students. Those with pastoral roleswould be well advised to be attuned to this possibility when they listen to, and interpret, the answer to their question. Materiality, for example, helps shape learning and space, and issues about leaking roofs, internet connections, not being able to afford a new PC, and so on have implications that may be worth exploring with one or two additional questions. In the first year, especially, students are plunged into the process of living with strangers thrown together by the university allocation process. It is here that some encouragement to reflect and learn – either alone or with others (perhaps of their choosing) – might be helpful. Students are arriving at spatio-temporal solutions about how to study that work for them, and accommodation is an important part of any solution: as potential learning space, or indeed as contrast to, and refuge from, learning. It is not difficult to envisage tutors having a sensitive and helpful input into this for some students.

One possibility might be to arrange workshops in, say, mid-year where students can share experiences about the spatial dimensions of their learning strategies, much as they did in these interviews with ourselves. Properly supported these could provide an impetus to reflection about their learning (what constitutes effective learning, and how and why it happens in certain circumstances rather than others) and initiate the process of learning about how they learn (Brockbank and McGill, 2007). One of us has incorporated something like this in a third year Urban Planning module, using support material similar to that of the University of Southampton's (nd) 'Navigating the Page' . Anecdotal evidence is that the response among students was mixed, but arguably doing this in the

final year of a programme was too late to encourage relaxed and open engagement with a process that can be seen as threatening by some (Moon, 1999, p9). Reflecting on the spatiality of learning from year 1 might encourage reflection at a time when students are more willing to take risks and try something new; it may also contribute to developing social networks within a programme. For lecturers in human geography the findings reported in this paper remind us of the resource that the students' own lives on campus represent as they come to understand the spatio-temporality of social life, its construction and its flux. The variety of ways that students negotiate shared existences within and beyond, their accommodation illustrate the complexity and variety of socio-spatial relations. The agency, and general competence, of students in creating (shared) spaces for living that work for them is evident, and provides a way into discussions of the usefulness or otherwise of concepts such as class, gender and ethnicity, and their performance, in explaining socio-spatial life.

Finally, this paper makes a modest but useful contribution to the geography of the university campus. One of its distinctive contributions is to highlight studying as an important part of student life outside the classroom, and in particular in relation to accommodation. For some students, a shared house has potential as a space for peer-learning within and across disciplinary boundaries. Realising the potential depends upon deliberate action by students in choosing who they might live with, shaping the material circumstances under which they live, and a foregrounding of studying and learning within their lives. Probably only a minority of students will ever want to do this. But for many more the micropublic of the shared house can still provide incidental yet important learning opportunities. These benefits are not available to those who choose to live at home, but in our study the few students who did this appeared to value the ontological and material security of living within established socio-spatial networks; for them, this was a firm basis for taking on the intellectual challenge of higher education, though we suggest below that there is still much to explore in relation to this.

The research encourages us to retain the complex wholeness of students' ordinary lives as we seek to understand them better. Most students regard studying as an important, but not all-consuming

part of their lives; their campus geographies – including the kind of "home" environment they seek to create - will reflect this intertwining of activities. Further research into student accommodation could therefore provide a gateway to exploring the richness of student life in its entirety. The students who emerge from the research are active creators and managers of the spaces they live in. Not always doing this as successfully as they wish, but generally thinking practically about ways of improving and enjoying their lives, including their experience of studying. We have suggested that there are ways in which those with pastoral and teaching responsibilities may be able to help students reflect on and perhaps better manage the spatial dimension of studying, but it is important that in doing this they continue to respect the capacity of students for independent living.

There remains much to be researched. For example. having a sample drawn from students studying two closely related subjects makes it impossible to judge how significant disciplinary background is in shaping student behaviour in general on campus. One of our interviewees (Andy) made an interesting observation that in his experience architecture students tended to live, socialise and study with other architecture students as soon as they could exercise choice in the matter. Anecdotal evidence suggests that medical students do the same. Might it be that certain professions with strong self-images and a powerful presence in the academy create conditions where student accommodation becomes part of professional socialisation? This conjecture is worth researching further.

Another notable avenue for further research is the relationship between living spaces in the university and a student's usual home, which is not central to the research study. It emerges, albeit incidentally, as some students talk about studying in relation to their accommodation in university and to their permanent residences; their experiences suggest interesting avenues for future research. The three students (all, 'non-white' in UK census terms) were living at home at the time of the interview. Their reasons for doing so were not a primary concern of this project and the size and nature of the sample precludes any exploration of the significance of factors such as class, ethnicity and gender in relation to housing choices (see Christie, 2007). But there is some evidence that the two students who chose to live at home from the outset were doing what Patinoitis and Holdsworth (2005) suggested

many such students do, namely prioritising the continuance of their existing sense of identity which was deeply rooted in the relationships and practices of home and eschewing some of the opportunities and risks associated with immersion in the world of the university and the exploration of new ways of being . Patinoitis and Holdsworth were particularly interested in working class students; but in this study it was ethnic minority students who exhibited this approach. As Yassim put it, he liked his family, and was not especially interested in extending his circle of friends. By his third year he was married with a young child living as an extended family. Staying in the family home rather than living in rented accommodation facilitated the kind of life Yassim wanted, even as a student. Such a way of life inevitably cuts off a student from certain kinds of interactions with peers and can lead to distancing from what Thomas (2002 : 430ff), drawing on the work of Reay et al (2001), has called the institutional habitus of the university with potential practical implications in relation to understanding some of the subtleties of what the university – in its various activities – may value and reward . The term refers to the 'impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation' (Reay et al, 2001, para 1.3, as cited by Thomas (2002 : 431). It draws attention to the way that organisational norms and practices are inscribed with, and help preserve, the values, norms and privileges of certain social groups. How this plays out in learning behaviour and learning outcomes is another important and challenging area for further research.

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