

Reimagining the Airport as Classroom: Immediacy, Place, and Presence

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This paper discusses a post-conference experience involving attendees who utilized airport space to debrief through face-to-face (FtF) communication. Their temporary spatial proximity led to an idea generation process of recalling, rethinking, and getting ready for what's next. Literature about learning spaces, knowledge management, and the affordances and preferences of FtF communication are explored as they relate to using spaces for purposive conversation. The paper highlights a proposed debriefing model of immediacy, place, and presence. This framework allows organizations to leverage unique affordances of FtF communication and geography of the airport, or other similar spaces, to maximize engagement and benefit.

Professional conferences provide opportunities to communicate in temporary spatial proximity that lead to information sharing and idea generation. Face-to-face (FtF) interaction is a key component of productive conference exchanges, especially those involving tacit knowledge, which is sometimes referred to as hidden knowledge (Nonaka, 2008). Current research posits FtF exchanges lead to reproduction of knowing communities and knowledge circulation. Analysis of FtF interaction at international business conferences suggests that study findings may apply more broadly to alternate conference types (Henn & Bathelt, 2015). During a recent experience at the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) conference with ten undergraduate students, we repeatedly observed the two outcomes studied—knowing communities and knowledge circulation. This observation extended to the airport immediately following the conference, where we leveraged the unique affordances of FtF communication and the geography of the airport to conduct a rich post-conference debriefing. Reflecting on our conversation outside gate 18 at Boston Logan International Airport, we identified attributes of communication and geography that created an ideal environment for active and engaged sharing and learning.

Our model, which utilizes the framework of immediacy, place, and presence, can easily be replicated by other universities or organizations returning from a conference or other knowledge sharing experience.

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Immediacy

Decay theory of immediate memory asserts that memory fades over a brief time period until reaching some threshold and is deemed unreliable (Ricker, Vergauwe, & Cowan, 2014). Therefore, importance was assigned to collectively engage students about their conference experiences while their memories were fresh. Since travelers' schedules aligned, we identified mutual availability at the airport as the ideal time to debrief about the conference experience with all attendees. In lieu of using prepared questions as prompts, students were initially given opportunity for unstructured discussion to share their stories, something that Kenneth Jørgensen (2017) argues is more valuable than a procedural exchange of information.

During the presidential address at the 2011 NCHC conference in Phoenix, *We Are the Stories We Tell*, Bonnie Irwin (2012) spoke about the importance of sharing our narratives:

Year after year, our members report that the most valuable component of the conference is the opportunity to network with others, to share our stories and hear those of others, and I wager that, like me, you will return home with a host of stories. (p. 17)

We recorded notes during the debriefing session, reviewed what was discussed, and formulated a forward-thinking plan, all before leaving the airport.

Place

A growing body of scholarship exists that calls for the development of a subfield of communication geography, an interdisciplinary research area that brings together human geography with media studies and communication theory (Adams and Jansson, 2012). A conceptual framework proposed by Adams and Jansson (2012) describes what they refer to as a space communication nexus, where traditional disciplinary lines have become blurred. Building upon their model, we harnessed the energy at the conclusion of the conference to create our own space communication nexus. The airport served as the structure where our communication occurred, and the FtF discourse created an innovative learning space.

The physical setting of the airport was highly conducive to conversation. We sat in two rows of seats facing each other. Two of the ten students opted to stand between the rows, creating an enclosed oval. The configuration fits the description of what Jørgensen (2017) has established as a space of performance—a “collective, discursive, material and relational space, which frames the conditions of possibility for learning in organizations” (p. 410). The attributes of the airport space supported peak idea exchange and learning. NCHC describes the classroom environment as an open place where students are encouraged to share without fear. Waiting at the airport afforded our group time to create a nontraditional learning space, where knowledge obtained from various conference sessions was shared and generated new ideas and ways to critically assess our current university honors practices (NCHC Honors Course Design, n.d.).

A recent study explores student perceptions of a modern “flexible classroom” through the lens of those enrolled in an experimental cohort at the Purdue Polytechnic Institute (Adedokun, Parker, Henke, & Burgess, 2017). The program, which integrates humanities and technical studies, uses a learner-centered/faculty-facilitated approach and requires the ability to adjust the physical classroom space. The study suggests students in the program positively perceive the impact of the space on the learning climate, actual learning, and motivation (Adedokun et al, 2017). More than 90% of the students in the study believe the flexible classroom is better equipped than a traditional classroom to support collaborative learning, instructor-student interactions, and student comfort. Findings suggest students prefer innovative spaces to foster peak learning potential. Gate 18 served as both a flexible and innovative space for our students.

Presence

The airport experience maximized the physical presence of every conference attendee to ensure opportunity for full participation in the FtF debriefing. Media richness theory, which describes a communication medium's ability to reproduce information, ranks FtF communication as the richest way to interact because of the opportunity for synchronous exchange of nonverbal cues and trust building (Daft & Lengel, 1986). While some scholars have found individual perception may increase a media's richness to that person, most agree that none can supersede the possibilities afforded by FtF communication. “The full range of cues, the irreplaceability, and the need to be there in shared space and time with the other all contribute to the sense that face-to-face communication is authentic, putting the ‘communion’ in the communication,” (Baym, 2015, p. 12).

Research shows first-year students prefer FtF communication in the ten communication situations studied (Morreale, Staley, Stavrositu, & Krakowiak, 2015). A separate study of students enrolled in online communication courses found significantly higher satisfaction with their FtF courses, FtF instructors, and FtF communication, compared to their online courses (Cole, 2016).

Feedback from our students indicates positive attitudes towards the airport debriefing:

- *I believe that the experience was highly beneficial because it brought us all together. Throughout the trip, we were in different sessions/locations/hotel rooms, so it gave us a chance to bring our ideas together in a place where a) we had absolutely nothing better to do! And b) we all felt the same way: inspired but exhausted! Everything was fresh in our minds and I don't believe a debrief at home would have been quite as beneficial. (a senior honors college student)*
- *The debriefing at the airport was helpful in that we got to share what we learned, exchange ideas and opinions, and even come up with new ideas as we heard each other's experiences. I think that it was the perfect time to do so, especially because if we did it any later we might not have remembered everything and also because we were all there at once so it makes it easier rather than having to schedule a time to meet after we got back. (a junior honors college student)*

Replication and Future Directions

Any school or organization could develop ways to use the immediacy-place-presence framework presented to replicate this airport debriefing. By employing these key components, participants create opportunities for engagement and active learning through interactions with each other. Sharing stories was an important attribute of the

airport debriefing. Three stages/questions also helped frame the overall discussion:

1. Recall. What did we learn?
2. Rethink. What does this mean?
3. Ready for what's next. What do we do with this knowledge?

Though we view the airport experience as one isolated example of a successful debriefing exercise, room for improvement exists. Taking additional steps to confirm that all participants are comfortable with the communication setting and adjusting within physical location parameters may prove useful. Detailed advance instructions may maximize use of discussion time. Another approach could be utilizing airport waiting time while traveling to the conference under the immediacy-place-presence framework to better prepare students in advance. Key ideas that emerged from the debriefing are now being implemented. A future study could document the specific ideas presented in a debriefing and systematically track their progress. Functioning as a classroom, the airport allowed students to collaborate and learn in a nontraditional space.

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